

A Dvar Torah on Shabbat Chukat-Balak: Visions of Tents

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In our Torah portion this week, the Israelites have arrived at the plains of Moab, their final resting place before entering the Promised Land.

Balak, the King of Moab, and Balaam, the Moabite prophet, each see the same thing – hundreds of thousands of Israelite tents spread out over their land.

But they each see it differently.

The king's messengers go to the prophet to describe what the king sees and what he wants the prophet to do about it. The king sends the message that, "There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that those whom you bless are truly blessed indeed, and those whom you curse are cursed." (Numbers 22:5-6)

The prophet Balaam asks the king's messengers to wait overnight so that he might hear God's take on this. And God comes to Balaam that night in a dream and tells him not to curse that people, for they are blessed.

A difference of perspective – These tents might be those of strangers who are blessed and who, if we were to ally ourselves with them, might bring us blessing. Or they could be the tents of trespassers who are cursed and will only bring more curses.

Today, as in the time of Balak and Balaam, it seems that kings often take the short view, while prophets take the long view.

Kings see most easily what is right in front of them. They take a classic, time-tested route towards maintaining power and popularity – demonizing the outsiders in our midst. . . right around election season. There are hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants spread throughout our land today, they say, and the threat that they pose far outweighs any possible benefit we might imagine.

The prophets' vision, on the other hand, reaches back into the past and off into the future. As they gaze into the past, the prophets remember that their ancestors were immigrants too – and they see the blessings that their ancestors have brought to this place. The blessings of hard work, of contributing to the economy, the culture, and the brainpower of our country. As they look toward the future they can see that our new wave of immigrants bring with them their own gifts that will (and already!) enrich and strengthen this country.

King Balak looks out over the valley of tents and sees our people Israel as a plague. God forces the prophet Balaam to see our encampments as fertile palm-groves and gardens beside a river. The Israelites do have the power to make war against the people of Moab - they could truly

become a threat. However, a friendly relationship between the Moabites and the Israelites could eventually bring great blessing to the Moabites. Unfortunately, King Balak can't see that possibility.

We are witnessing this difference in perspective on outsiders in the United States right now, as the debate over immigration continues. You are probably aware that the House has passed an immigration bill which emphasizes border security and law enforcement, while the Senate has passed a bill which strives for comprehensive immigration reform, providing a route for illegal immigrants to gain legal status, and creating a guest worker program.

Instead of putting their heads together with the Senate to hammer out a final immigration bill, House members are currently traveling along the Mexican border holding "hearings" on immigration. Apparently a hearing this past Wednesday in San Diego didn't even allow time for public comments, which makes you wonder if these really are meant to be hearings, taking into account strengths and weaknesses of the proposed legislation.

The House bill is incredibly problematic. It frames the issue as one about security from the terrorist threat. It is not clear to me why, if we care so much about the threat of terrorist infiltration, we haven't managed to allocate sufficient funds for screening shipping containers at our ports. If this is about securing our borders from terrorists, then I don't understand why we're focusing on the Mexican border, when every terrorist to infiltrate the US came through a North-East airport or over the Canadian border. I'm not sure that the House bill is really about solving real immigration problems. Rather, it seems to have an underlying purpose of inspiring fear of a Mexican-American plague – a plague from which only our "kings" can save us.

Comprehensive immigration reform, on the other hand, seems to truly be about addressing immigration problems, and it more closely reflects our own Jewish values.

As Jews, we carry our own stories of stranger-hood with us wherever we go. We learn over and over again in Torah that we should empathize with the stranger, since we knew what it meant to be a stranger, in the land of Egypt. Most of us also have more recent personal and family stories of immigrating to this country. We understand how important a land of political, religious and economic refuge can be. Now that most Jews live inside the safe borders of countries that we doubt we will ever have to flee, we should never forget those root immigration experiences that make us who we are. Those experiences are now being relived by people who look very different from us, but the reasons why they come are the same. Legislation which keeps our borders secure and open and which treats immigrants as people who bring blessing along with the clothes on their backs – this is the kind of immigration reform which reflects Jewish values. Comprehensive immigration reform, which assumes that immigrants are human beings who want a better life for their families rather than assuming that every person who crosses our border is a suspected terrorist – that is the kind of immigration reform which reflects a progressive Jewish vision – the vision of what we call Prophetic Judaism.

King Balak tried three times to get the prophet Balaam to see the Israelite encampment the way he saw it. Three times, Balaam opened his mouth to curse them, but blessings flowed from his mouth instead. The king took the prophet to different plateaus overlooking the steppes of

Moab. Maybe from here they'll look more threatening – or maybe from over here! What King Balak didn't realize was that he could change Balaam's view, but he couldn't change his vision. The king and the prophet, each see the same thing – hundreds of thousands of Israelite tents spread out over the steppes of Moab.

But they each see it differently.

"Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field," curses the king. (Numbers 22:4)

"Mah Tovv Ohalecha, Ya'akov; mishkenotecha Yisrael," "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob; Your dwelling places, O Israel," blesses the prophet. (Numbers 24:5)