

Balak 5770 - Awareness
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

While sometimes it's nice to be on top of current trends, sometimes you can fall a bit behind. For example, I just started the first Harry Potter book. Why did I wait so long? Well, I did see the movie. Maybe I thought it was a passing fad or I suppose there were other more urgent or important books to read. But having a daughter and a wife who have read them all (some of them, numerous times), the time has come. And it is a great read.

There is one scene that I enjoyed in particular. Harry is dropped off at King's Cross Station in London for his train ride to Hogwarts (the academy for wizards, for those of you who are still Harry Potter-impaired). His step-father drops him off at the station for a train departing from Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ - something that none of them understand. While Harry can see platforms nine and platform ten, there is nothing between them.

A guard at the station is of no help and Harry starts to get anxious as he stands alone in the station with large trunk of things to take to school and no clue how to find the platform.

But, then a group of students also heading on the train to Hogwarts heads for Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ and they disappear.

He asks a mother of another new student how to get to this invisible platform and she replies: "not to worry. [...] All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between the platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now..."

"[Harry] (He) started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble – leaning forward on his cart, he broke into a heavy run – the barrier was coming nearer and nearer – he wouldn't be able to stop – the cart was out of control – he was a foot away – he closed his eyes ready for the crash –

"It didn't come... he kept running... he opened his eyes.

A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words *Platform Nine and Three-Quarters* on it. He had done it."

This is a wonderful moment in Harry Potter – about faith and belief, but also about seeing and not seeing. We find a similar vignette in this morning’s Torah reading: *Parashat Balak*.

Benjamin described the story of Bilaam and his donkey as comical and I think that’s pretty accurate. Bilaam who has an international reputation as a great prophet is hitting the donkey who is trying to avoid the angel with his sword drawn. The donkey speaks, complains and Bilaam responds. After the donkey plays Bilaam for a fool, the Torah states: “*Va’y’gal Adonai et einei Vilam* – Then Adonai uncovered Bilaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of Adonai standing in the way, his sword drawn in his hand.”

Suddenly, his eyes are opened and he appreciates what he could not sense before – a menacing angel in his way. Another similar moment occurs with Hagar, Abraham’s second wife and Ishmael’s mother. She is sent away from Abraham and finds herself in the wilderness without water, dehydrating, herself and her son near death. “God hears the cry of the boy [...] Then God opens her eyes and she saw a well of water.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner explains that “God performed a miracle, not by creating a well where none had been before, but by opening Hagar’s eyes so that she could see what she had been previously blind to, the existence of life-sustaining resources in her world.”

This theme of opening our eyes and becoming aware is central to Judaism. This is a tradition that helps us see in all senses of the word. It helps us understand and become more deeply aware of sacred moments, sacred places and the world as a whole.

In *Harry Potter*, it is an act of faith and skill on Harry’s part that allows him to enter what he could he could not see. In Bilaam’s case, it is God that opens up his eyes to the threat before him and for Hagar, God allows her to see something that was always present.

For most of us, we need to learn how to become more aware of what is around us – people, places and moments. While it’s fun to pretend, we will not spend much of our time searching for Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ nor for angels with swords drawn.

We need to learn how to connect more meaningfully with the world around us – even finding the well in the desert that might be right before us all along.

Judaism helps us become more aware and see more through *mitzvot*. Our commandments form a set of practices that help us see – in the fullest sense of the world. A few examples.

First, the Shabbat Candles are a mitzvah that many of us practice. By lighting the candles, covering our eyes, reciting the *brakhah* – the blessing, we enter into a state of heightened awareness. We make the next 25 hours more sacred – we make them distinct. Closing our eyes for the *brakhah* and then opening them – somehow transforms the moment and adds an extra layer of holiness to every Friday night.

{Hand out almonds and raisins.} Second is eating. Our tradition has many ways to make us more aware of what we eat – it wants to elevate the basic animalistic act of eating and infuse it with holiness and morality. That’s why we separate milk and meat and have a sophisticated set of approaches to eating. But the most profound aspect is filling ourselves with a sense of gratitude by slowing down our eating and reciting *brakhot* – blessings before and after we eat to appreciate the gift of the food.

So let’s try it. We are now going to eat an almond and/or raisin slowly. Don’t eat it yet. Spend some time holding it and smelling it – appreciate its texture. Feel the anticipation. In a minute, we will eat and chew it slowly and deliberately – my Saba, my grandfather used to tell me to chew each bite twenty times. Try that.

I will recite the *brakhah* for almonds and raisins (*borei pri haetz* – join in if you want) – Praised at You Adonai Our God ruler of the Universe who creates the fruit of the tree.

{Eating}

That is a simple way our tradition encourages us to slow down and appreciate the world, seeing and feeling new dimensions of experience.

Finally, one other practice: reciting Bilaam’s blessing *Ma Tov* when we enter a shul or the sanctuary. Not so easy. But what a wonderful notion – not only helps us enter into sacred time and space, preparing ourselves for spiritual practice, but also laden with values. In this case, reminding ourselves that as we prepare for a Jewish prayer experience, we remain connected to all on earth, reciting words that were first uttered by Bilaam, someone who was not Jewish!

While this might be challenging, it might be a nice new practice to help you enter into shul, into a sanctuary, into a time of prayer.

In our world, we are yearning to see space and time differently.

Sometimes the angel is right before us or platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ is right there, but it takes some cultivation, making ourselves more aware to appreciate what is right before us.

The same is true in life. We are blessed to have a tradition that helps us open our eyes and see what is there, making moments of meaning in time and space.

May we all be blessed to bring those practices into our lives and to find those meaningful moments.

Shabbat Shalom.