

Balak 5767  
Ma Tovv

Shabbat Shalom.

Full disclosure. I am about to discuss a movie that I have not seen. I think this is important for people to know. If you really want an expert, you're not getting one.

The movie is Shrek. I'm not exactly sure why this film about a large green ogre is so popular, but it clearly is and especially with children. My daughter can't get enough Shrek. Maybe I can't get past the person being green, which has more frog associations for me. And turning green also reminds me of a bad boating experience, but that's a topic for another time.

Nonetheless, Talya enjoyed this movie, and one day when we were in a doctor's office for a bit of time (that's not to say that one always waits for doctors for a long time, but once in a while it happens), we watched a good amount of the movie Shrek. The part that I thought was the cutest was the talking donkey with the voice of Eddie Murphy. There is something very captivating about talking animals and talking donkeys, but upon further reflection, I realized that Shrek was merely borrowing from an earlier source. The source is our Torah.

I'm not sure whether or not Hollywood paid any royalties to God, the Torah, or the Jewish people for the idea of the talking donkey, but it's clearly been a compelling one for thousands of years.

This week's parashah, Parashat Balak, contains the only humorous story or comedic passage in the five books of Moses. King Balak wants to put a curse on the Israelites, and he hires the great prophet wizard, Bilaam, to do the deed. Bilaam heads off on his donkey, but an angel of God with his sword drawn is blocking the path. It's a classic slapstick routine. While we and the donkey know that the angel is forcing the donkey to press Bilaam against the wall, Bilaam himself does not see the angel. Since he cannot see what the donkey sees, he beats the donkey to try to make her move. While it's very clear to us and even to the donkey, this great wizard and prophet seems to be unable to see what is right in front of him.

The donkey and the narrative mock this wizard and, perhaps, all who claim to have special powers. The humor continues when the donkey turns around and tells Bilaam to stop hitting her. "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Of course, Bilaam does not miss a beat, responding to the donkey as if it's the most normal thing to have your donkey turn around and start talking to you. The donkey says, "Hey – I don't do these kinds of things to you," and Bilaam has to acquiesce to the donkey's powerful logic.

Then God opens up Balaam's eyes, and he sees what is right before him. The Torah informs us that God is thwarting King Balak's plan. The text presents an interesting dichotomy about free will. Bilaam does go on his mission against a divine command, demonstrating his free will, but then there is also a fair amount of divine control – Bilaam can only speak the words that God tells him.

Beyond the humor and the issue of free will, there are a number of important lessons in this vignette. The first one is fairly clear. It is about the weaknesses of those who claim to be prophets. Bilaam is not such a great wizard after all, and perhaps all wizards and people should realize their own limitations.

Second, there is the encounter with the angel -- which even a donkey can see, but the greatest prophet and wizard of the ancient world cannot. The lesson is that we often do not see what is right in front of us. We must cultivate a deeper awareness so we do not miss what is before our eyes.

This idea is repeated in a number of places in the Torah. God opens Hagar's eyes to see the well that was perhaps, according to many commentators, there all along. Jacob declares that "God was in this place, but I did not know it." Judaism wants us to develop a sense of awareness and appreciation of our surroundings. Sometimes we look at something and we don't even see it.

This occurred to me this week in shul. I was outside my office in the old main entrance to the synagogue and realized that there is a sefer Torah, a Torah scroll that was saved from the Holocaust, right there. Although it has been there for years and I have looked at it and walked by it thousands of times, I did not *really* see it. Looking at it anew, I was reminded of my own personal obligation to remember the Shoah – that most difficult chapter of our people's history - and especially all those who have no one to recite the Mourner's Kaddish for them.

When Bilaam sees the angel, he finally has true awareness of his situation. What a great gift it would be for all of us to cultivate that sense of seeing and awareness in our own lives.

We find the third lesson after the donkey scene, when Bilaam arrives to curse the Israelites. He cannot help but bless them. When King Balak tells him that he is not cursing them but blessing them – and please curse them – again Bilaam cannot do anything but bless them. It is a very powerful blessing. It is one of our most famous prayers, the Ma Tovv: "Ma Tovv Ohalekha Ya'akov Mishkenotekha Yisrael - "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." This line is our opening prayer that we recite each Shabbat morning as we enter the sanctuary, and it is the traditional Jewish prayer that one recites whenever one enters a place of prayer.

The rabbis who wove together the Ma Tovv prayer were making a bold statement that there is wisdom to learn from all people. By deliberately choosing these words that were intended as a curse but came out a blessing, given by a non-Jewish prophet of the ancient world at whom the Torah poked fun, the rabbis remind us we should learn from everyone around us – from all people, all religions, all backgrounds. There is truth and wisdom in the world around us.

The fourth and deepest message of this Torah reading concerns the unexpectedness of the blessing. The Ma Tovv prayer is about unintended transformation. The moment that was supposed to be evil and negative becomes positive, and those are our opening prayer words of the day. What a profound spiritual message to initiate our time of wakefulness. The rabbis are reminding us that we do not know what each day will hold – curses, blessings, and everything in between, but we must open ourselves up to the hidden goodness – the blessing that can come even from something that is bad.

In unexpected moments and unexpected places there are blessings, sometimes unintended. We remind ourselves with Ma Tovv that if we can dig a little bit deeper, we can reveal the hidden sparks in almost anything.

As we come to shul to daven on any morning, we remind ourselves that the possibility of transformation and blessing can come from many moments or sources, even the least expected ones. There are so many things that will happen to us that we cannot control, but we can seek out the hidden beauty, the positive elements in them and bring them out into the world.

By having Bilaam give praise instead of a curse, and by having the rabbis highlight this as our opening morning spiritual ritual to help us focus during the day, this text reminds us that we can redeem each and every day and all of our actions.

Another element of the prayer Ma Tovv is that the Talmud teaches us that the reason Bilaam praised the Israelites about their tents is because they were arranged in a sensitive way. Each tent opened in a different direction so no one could see into the tent of the next family, preserving each family's privacy and modesty.

I find a parallel to this in Ma Tovv's liturgical setting. When we come into shul, we put on our tallit over our heads – if you think about it, it is similar to a tent – and for a few seconds we have a garment over our heads, as we experience God's presence. Since each of us places the tallit over our own head, we do not appreciate the beauty of the scene, and since it is a more private spiritual moment, we do not see others.

In order to do this, we place the tallit over our shoulders and then recite Ma Tovv – which is like stepping onto the balcony and seeing all the tallit-tents and appreciating the value of others and of community. Bilaam's words of praise

remind us of the sacredness and the power of building a strong community – one that allows each person and family their own private space, while building the bonds that create a cohesive whole.

So we can see that even talking donkeys have a lot to teach us about how we should live our lives, about how we should open our eyes to the mysteries of the world around us, and how we should always look for unexpected blessings in all moments and from all people.

May we always be able to begin our days with Ma Tovv, appreciating all the goodness around us.

Shabbat Shalom.