

## **Chukat/ Balak – 5783**

The pandemic changed everything. History has shown time and time again that great change follows after dramatic shifts in human history. One only has to look back at the almost identical events a hundred years ago. The Great Pandemic of the Spanish Flu was followed by the period referred to as the Roaring Twenties and then the Great Depression. As we live through events such as those ourselves, we have to come to grips with the world all over again. Many people take the opportunity to make dramatic shifts in their own lives as a result of the times that they find themselves living through.

I thought about this as I was preparing today's Davar Torah. The pandemic forced me personally to pull in the reins and come to a dead halt. Those who know me well will understand when I say that is not something that comes naturally to me. But I did reflect at the time about how easy it would have been to emerge from the years of the pandemic with a whole new set of priorities going forward. I mean, of course, primarily, rethinking the time and effort I have devoted my entire life to the affairs of this community and my yerusha, my heritage, this synagogue. After all, I am among the eldest of the baby boomers and what marks my generation so consistently is the focus on self, the belief that we can be anything we want and do anything we want. Our parents' generation was the first generation in history to have grown up and lived their entire working lives while economically, every year, things were better for them. They grew up with radios, then lived their married lives with T. V., and many of them ended their lives using the Internet. They thought that they'd died and gone to heaven with a two- or three-room apartment when they first got married and their

grandchildren think they absolutely must have nothing less than 2100 square feet of living space in their first homes. But while my friends were cultivating their lust for travel and talking about their golfing and skiing and fishing expeditions, I was following an entirely different path.

Where did this impulse to be a community builder come from, I ask myself? I determined I didn't have to look very far beyond my own family for answers. It's no closely held secret that I grew up in a very rowdy household dominated by five men and one woman. My parents were stretched thin coping with everything and as the eldest, I found solace in the company of my grandfathers, both of whom were very involved in their communities. My mother was on every executive going – Hadassah, Sisterhood, B'nai Brith. My aunt Adele forged an independent region of B'nai Brith from her base in St. Catharines. My grandmother Sarah was devoted to the synagogue and to Hadassah. She joined those others of her generation who made their way from Europe to make new lives in the hundreds of little towns like ours. But where did that urge to build anew communities like ours? Some of the explanation for this I believe is found in the lines of this week's double parsha or Chukat and Balak.

Rabbi Bex Stern Rosenblatt, in her Davar Torah published this week by the Fuchsberg Jerusalem Centre's Conservative Yeshiva points out that the Children of Israel are at the tail end of their 38 years since the Exodus from Egypt. We already know that the generation moving into the Holy Land will be at least one, if not two generations removed from slavery. We understand that the generation born in Egypt cannot continue into the promised land and yet we are not informed anywhere of when that generation actually died off. In today's parsha, we are informed of the death of both Aaron and Miriam, and we know that Moses will soon follow. Even

Moshe Rabbeinu cannot enter the Holy Land. Yet no real words of Torah mourn the loss of that generation aside from them.

At the end of Chukat, the Israelites had two notable victories over tribes they encountered en route to their destination. In both cases, it was obvious that they were being given cover and support by HaShem. Their power and determination in battle became a reputation that preceded them. As we begin Balak, they are readying for their encounter with the Moabites. Ruling over them is Balak, hence the name of the parsha. Balak is fearful that he will lose so he determines to call upon a local magician / prophet named Balaam, who he entreats to go and cast spells upon the Israelites so that the god of Moab will prove more powerful than the god of Israel. At first Balaam refuses to go but after two requests by the emissaries of Balak, on the third request, he is persuaded to make the effort in exchange for riches beyond imagination. However, Balaam has difficulty first of all, finding his way to his destination and then actually uttering the curses he was supposedly being paid to deliver. Instead, he praises Israel in poetic language, some of which we recite daily before we begin our prayers in the morning. Ma Tov. Ohalecha Yaakov. Mishketontecha Yisrael. How goodly are thy tents oh Jacob, thy dwelling places O Israel. Moab is destroyed. Balak ends with the demise of two more tribes, the Amalekites, and the Hittites. All these nations are destroyed, but not the nation of Israel.

Note that the words of Torah refer to Israel in the collective, not the singular. And thus, it has been ever since. One of the places where I know you as a congregation are praying with me is when we are davening the Musaf Amida and in the Kiddusha when I go Le Dor Va Dor you sing back loudly in one voice. It is not any one of you individually, but all of us collectively uttering the words. WE are passing along the faith, the

pedagogy, the liturgy, the theology that we inherited from our forefathers. Balaam would still have to say Ma Tovv.

It would have been so easy to stop the struggle to be Jewish in the face of the winds against us. Even now, we feel those winds in the anti-Semitic voices raised against us, in the voices of our children who don't want to be bored with a seder or joke about we were tortured, we survived, so now let's eat. But we can't give up. When I stand here and look down towards that corner over there, I see myself sitting with my Zaidi who puts his hands on my knees and tells me to stop swinging my legs. When I look up there, I see my Buby with her mink stole in September beside her friend Sadie Zet and with my mother and my Aunt Adelle beaming down on Kol Nidre night.

My friend Susan Jackson who has spent her entire professional life working in the Jewish world has always said we need to give the next generation fond Jewish memories to help them understand what being Jewish is all about. And I say we have to show the non-Jewish world that we are meant to cope and survive, and we do that with faith in the future and in HaShem as our protector. And help them understand how rich our heritage is and why it needs to survive. Both Ma Tovv and Le Dor Va Dor apply. Shabbat Shalom.