

Shabbat 07 19 19 Sermon

It's really simple, and yet profound. It's not difficult, and it's maybe even obvious, and yet it changes everything. It's a lesson that many of us have learned and continue to learn. We forget and then we remember. And many of us don't have to look very far to learn the lesson. In fact, we see it everywhere. I learned the lesson, of course, when I was much younger, but it's repeated over and over again, each and every night, in my home, when our three-year-old Orzy, or our eight-year-old, almost eight-year-old Tal, will tell me to leave the light on in the closet. And because they're afraid of the dark, and when pressed, I might engage them with what exactly is scary about the dark, but it's scary. And their fear moves them to ask me to alleviate their fear, intuitively, of course, knowing that their fear hurts, that fear creates discomfort. Fear is not a pleasant experience. And so they ask, like they would ask me to alleviate any other pain, please alleviate my fear. This simple realization that I haven't even named yet, but the simple realization that cuts to the heart of all of our religious and spiritual traditions, this insight may take years to settle in, or it can happen for you in a moment.

The perspective that I will now tell you can sometimes be overstated, and when it is overstated, it can lead to inflated notions of our own power. And when it is understated, it can lead instead to our disempowerment and a weakening of our own agency. In and of itself, this most important and fundamental spiritual perspective that needs to be cultivated is simply this. We build the world through our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions. And because they are ours, we can change them. Now, I'm not wading into an age-old or millennia-old debate on whether or not there's anything that exists outside of our minds. You know, I would probably say that cable TV and cars, hurricanes, those kinds of things are real. But we do create a world that we live in with our minds, our thoughts, our feelings, and ultimately, the words and the actions that are derived from those thoughts and those feelings are the very thing that build the world we see around us. T

his realization of the interiority of our own experience and how it impacts the world around us when it hits us in a deep way, hopefully, might lead us to investigate our own thoughts and feelings if we assume that much of what we see out in the world is directly or indirectly related to thoughts and feelings that we have or don't have. It might lead us to want to look at that. It might lead us to take a look and say, wow, on the inside, how's it going? And fear more than any other feeling. Fear more than any other experience. It operates to both help and hinder us. It limits and protects us from real danger and also can create, foment, and invite paranoia, anxiety, very unreal dangers. When we have fearless leaders that can be foolishly naive and lead us very bravely, we can have fearful leaders who selfishly and egoically take us down a road that we might never have ever had to go down.

When we play with illegitimate and unfounded fear, we invite hatred and hurt. When we allow fear to live in our minds, unfettered and unchallenged, fear grows, it metastasizes, it becomes an ugly and distorted self-fulfilling reality. No one knows that truth more than Parshat Balak.

Parshat Balak brings us into a new face of fear in the Torah that we had never seen before. You see, tomorrow morning, when we open up the book of Numbers chapter 22, known as

Parshat Balak, the Parshah of someone named Balak, I'll get to him in a moment, we have something altogether new that has never yet existed in the Torah, and that is this. Until this moment, all of the fear in the Torah belongs to, \$64,000 question, all of the fear in the Torah belongs to the Israelites, the Israelis. Who is afraid of what? The Israelites are afraid of, let's name their fears, name that fear. They're afraid to leave Egypt. They're afraid not to leave Egypt. They're afraid to go into the promised land. They're afraid they won't make it to the promised land. They're afraid that they don't have enough water. They're afraid that they're only gonna have to eat watermelons their whole life and not have, right? They're afraid of meat. They want meat. They're afraid that they won't, hmm? They are afraid that they will be seen as grasshoppers and be crushed if they enter the holy land.

No one is afraid of the Israelites. Who is afraid of the Israelites? Maybe Pharaoh, he says, *haba nichak malo, pen yir bad*, but that's not real fear when Pharaoh says maybe there'll be too numerous and multiply. No one's really scared. Who's scared of big bad Israel? Bayyar Balak ben Tzipor et kol ha'sha'asayis ra'el le'emori.

Tomorrow morning's reading, the wisdom of the week begins with someone named Balak. Turns out that he's the king of a place called Moab. And he saw, says the Torah, this Balak, son of Tzipor. We'll get back to his name in a moment. Anyway, son of Tzipor, Balak, saw all that the Israelites had done to the emori. They had just won a number of wars in the previous chapters. *Va'yagar mo'av mitnea'a me'od*. And Moab, now not just the king, but all of the people are scared out of their minds. *Ki rav hu*, they saw how numerous they were. *Va'yakatz mo'av*, and they threw up. They were viscerally terrified. *Mitnea'a benayis ra'el*.

Now what's strange about this, for many of you here who might not know biblical, I'm not gonna test you, but you might not know the biblical pieces here. Moab, in the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites will be told to not engage Moab. They were a nation that we weren't going to war with. There was an agreement that Moab wasn't our enemy. We weren't going to engage them. They had nothing to be afraid of. The great Spanish commentator, Maimonides, writes that Moab, the nation, was afraid of the people of Israel because they were numerous, and Moab was smaller. But Moab was not one of the original nations like the Canaanites or the Emorites. Moab became terrified of the people, but they didn't need to be. There was no reason for them to be afraid. Moab knew that B'nai Israel, the children of Israel, would not overtake their land, but they were nonetheless afraid.

Back to Balak. His name means destroyer. Balak is destroy. Balak is the destroyer, the son of the destroyer, Balak, destroyer, son of fleeing fear, whom our tradition says was actually related. He was an enklach. He was a great-grand, great-grand, great-grandson of Yitro, Jethro, of the great father-in-law of Moses, who also wasn't Jewish, but instead of being afraid of the Israelites, approached them with love and with connection. There is a Balakian mind, and we don't have to go far to see it. Fear that festers, fear that foment, fear that projects outwardly, destroying and fleeing. It isn't hard to see it out in the world.

It isn't hard to see it from the president of this country and from those who support him in the ways that they support him, refusing to name the rhetoric that is so absurd and ridiculous and so immoral and unethical and all of that. And we don't have to go far in our own person to see the way fear works with us when things have not yet happened, anticipatory fear, the way that we constrict and contract, imagining here they come walking

down the street. I better run the other way, make like a sparrow. This fearful mind, this Balakian mind. So since Balak is so heightened in this week's portion, and since his name means so much, destroyer, son of fleeing sparrow, his Native American name, if you will, I thought we should combat Balakian mind with using the leader of our country's name as well. And so here are my advice to you.

First of all, love must trump fear. Truth must trump lies. We must trump I. We must trump I. Outrage and protest must trump silence and complicity. And unity must trump division. But lest you think, and I'm sure I will receive a number of phone calls and emails that I'm being political here, for goodness sakes, what we think and what we say creates the world that we live in or destroy. What is most deeply moral and ethical is most deeply social, political.

And so me and you, you and me, we, one of the greatest acts of courage that we might undertake at this moment is not only these five basic principles of how to trump Trump, or how to trump fear, or how to trump hatred, how to trump xenophobia, but even within our own heart minds, how might we invite love? How might we invite love and most especially vulnerability at a time when instead of opening, we close?

This coming Sunday, meaning right two days from now, will be the beginning of the three weeks in the Jewish calendar, the three weeks known as the three weeks leading up to the saddest and most tragic and traumatic day of our calendar, the night of Av. And we are told that amongst many of the things that happened on the 17th day of the month of Tammuz, the tablets were broken, the first ones that is, the ones that were perfect, the ones that God got herself had written with her own hand, were destroyed and shattered. And that we picked up those broken pieces of the tablets and we carried them through the desert, reminding ourselves that when brokenness happens, when there is something that is broken, it is an invitation to fear or the courage to be vulnerable, the courage to be true, the courage to be real, the courage to repair.

We're also told that on the 17th day of Tammuz, the outer walls of Jerusalem were breached, another breaking of stone. And from that point on, it was inevitable that the city would be destroyed. And so we, each and every one of us, have a moment to remember that a breach might invite vulnerability, that vulnerability is an invitation, that we might open ourselves to love and to meet our own fears with gentleness, compassion, courage, and a quality that might build a world outside of us, that we might pause between fear and foment.

And most especially tonight, in case anybody might write to me and call me, I am absolutely unequivocally from this pulpit, and as long as I stand here at this pulpit saying that this is a moment where there has been a breach in our collective walls, that it is incumbent upon each and every one of us to move from the inside to the outside, from how our own thoughts and actions build the world to how others' thoughts and actions are creating and destroying with their fleeing and fear, a world that we would like to see for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, we must take this up. We must not be led into a false binary between spiritual work and the activism that builds a society that is full of courage, love, and hope, we must not be pulled in into having to say that a shul is a place where we only talk about the heart, but not about the children who are being separated from their parents, God forbid. We must hold both of those together, courageously.

Love, Trump, fear. Let's be courageous, everyone. It is upon us.

We're gonna do Aleinu, everybody, so please rise for this beautiful, special Aleinu from our amazing guest rabbi from another world, Rabbi Mark Labowitz from Florida. Aleinu, it is upon us.