



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Balak

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 7, 2012

Balak

The Secret of Co-Existence



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

How often do our pride and egos get caught up in arguments to the point that the quarrel becomes an end in itself and we cannot untangle ourselves from the dispute? A rather innocent exchange, which begins as a simple disagreement often escalates into a full-fledged war, with no end in sight.

They tell the story of two life-long friends who, after many years, once had a small spat with each other. Each of them dug in and obstinately would not budge from their positions. It only got worse when they each shared their respective opposing positions with their families and friends, who supported and encouraged them not to compromise. This, of course, added fuel to the fire, emboldening each of these fellows, so that each was thoroughly and absolutely convinced that he was right and the other one was wrong.

Is this story familiar? Have you seen it played out in your life or in the life of others around you? If you have – and we all have – you may be surprised to learn that this week’s Torah reading offers an antidote to this disease of discord. And it couldn’t come at a better time, as we enter today into the “Three Weeks,” which commemorate the destruction of the Temple due to baseless hatred and divisiveness among the Jews.

This week we read in the Torah about one of the most bizarre and extraordinary episodes you will ever hear: How none other than Balaam – an evil sorcerer who was hired to curse the Jews – sees that the openings of their tents are not opposite each other. Upon seeing this, Balaam blesses them instead of cursing them, and declares: “These people are worthy to have God’s Presence (the *Shechinah*) rest upon them.”

What impressed Balaam so?

A fascinating teaching about the beautiful tents of the Jews (“mah tovu ohelecho Yaakov”) illuminates for us the law then when building a home in a common courtyard, one should not position a door opposite a door and a window opposite a window. And it offers us a powerful lesson for today, how to resolve once and for all divisiveness, even when we disagree...

**THE SECRET OF CO-EXISTENCE:
CAN WE LOVE EACH OTHER EVEN IF WE DISAGREE?**

1. Disagreements

This week we shall speak about a disagreeable topic... That is, about disagreements.

Did you ever hear this word before?... It is unlikely to find anyone on earth that has not had a disagreement or two with another. We were, after all, created with different mindsets and perspectives, so it's quite inevitable that we will encounter from time to time conflicting opinions.

But differing opinions is one thing. The tragedy is when it turns into full blown arguments, which end up causing rifts and long term discord, to the point of hatred and war.

I want to address this topic for many reasons. Above all, because this is one of the most pressing and relevant challenges of our time – Jewish divisiveness.

It is also a theme addressed in this week's Torah portion, offering us powerful insight and guidance in dealing with this difficult issue. And it couldn't come at a better time, as we enter today, the 17th of Tammuz, into the “Three Weeks,” which commemorate the destruction of the Temple due to baseless hatred and divisiveness among the Jews.¹

¹ Talmud, Yoma 9b.

2. Marital Disagreements (3 Jokes)

Our sages teach us that to open the minds of their students our sages would begin with humor.² Before getting into the nitty gritty, let's lighten things up a bit and look at the humorous side of disagreement. Nothing provides fodder for comedic material like marital discord. Here are some samples:

A solicitor for the Jewish Home for the Aged called upon a well-to-do young couple for a donation. Hearing a commotion inside, he knocked extra-loudly on the door.

A somewhat disheveled man admitted him. "What can I do for you?" he growled, clearly upset about something.

I would like to speak to the master of the house," said the solicitor politely.

"Then you are just in time," barked the young man. "My wife and I are settling that very question right now."

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--"Izzie, wake up!"

--"Wha-Wha-What's the matter?"

--"You're talking in your sleep again. Why don't you control yourself?"

--"All right, let's make a bargain. You let me talk when I'm awake, and I'll try to control myself when I'm asleep."

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The wife snaps at the husband. "Stop beating around the bush already? If you have anything to say – shut up!"

Although we laugh the truth is that ...

² Talmud, Shabbat 30b. Pesachim 117a.

3. Balaam's Vision

This week we read in the Torah about one of the most bizarre and extraordinary episodes you will ever hear: How none other than Balaam – an evil sorcerer who was hired to curse the Jews – ended up blessing them with the greatest possible blessings!

Among the many intriguing elements of the Balaam story is a powerful realization that Balaam discovers about the nature and personality of the Jewish people. As the Torah relates: “Balaam raised his eyes and saw Israel encamped according to its tribes, and the spirit of God rested upon him.”³

The Talmud asks: “What did Baalam see?” And answers: “He saw that the openings of their tents were not opposite each other.” Upon seeing this, Balaam said: “These people are worthy to have God’s Presence (the *Shechinah*) rest upon them.”⁴

Balaam’s perceptive assessment was rewarded in that God’s presence rested on him as well, and he then proceeded to bless the Jews with powerful praises, including one we recite every morning: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!”

4. Jewish Law

An important Jewish law is derived from this story. It is the halachah that when building a home in a common courtyard, a person should not position a door opposite a door and a window opposite a window.⁵

But why? What exactly is the virtue of entrances not facing each other?

³ Numbers 24:2.

⁴ *Bava Basra* 60a, cited in Rashi on the above verse.

⁵ *Mishne Bava Basra* 60a. Rambam *Hilchos Shecheinim* 5:6. *Tur* and *Shulchan Oruch*, *Choshen Mishpat* 154:3.

Of course, on a basic level, it means that people do not peer into each others' home and meddle in each other's business. We are all familiar with the phenomenon of people living on top of each other to the point that they know what is cooking in their neighbor's kitchen at any given moment. When people peer into each other's homes, it leads to all types of unwanted behavior – gossip, envy, pettiness and often worse.

But is there anything more to Balaam's observation and blessing than simply the fact that the Jews were not nosy people?!

5. The Door Metaphor

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, offers us a fascinating explanation, which also serves as a powerful and relevant lesson for us today.⁶

The mouth is called an “opening/door,” through which speech exits. “The openings of their tents were not opposite each other” means that their mouths – the discussions and even debates that they had with each other – were never directed against one another. Even if they disagreed, they did not personalize their disagreements. Therefore, they were worthy to have God's Presence rest upon them.

6. Winning Debates

When two people – even highly educated scholars – are arguing with each other, there are times when they get so caught up in the argument that each one seeks only to disprove the other's point. Even though he knows that the other is right, he has become so entangled in the debate that his intention in arguing is now merely to be antagonistic. He no longer cares about what is right and true. All he cares about is “winning,” or ensuring that the other one does “not win.”

⁶ Baal Shem Tov al Ha'Torah Parshas Balak (from *Dudayim Ba'Sodeh*).

The main objective in any debate or discussion should be to search, embrace – and admit to – the truth, and to fulfill the words of our Sages: “If two people sit together and share words of Torah, the Divine Presence dwells among them.”⁷

7. Healthy Arguments

When gazing upon the way the Jewish people dwelled in their tents, Balaam recognized this higher truth about them – that despite their diversity and differences, their “openings/doors” – their mouths and voices – were not directed against each other. Even when they argued and disagreed, it was not personal or hostile, but only to discover the truth.

This, Balaam recognized, was the enduring strength of the Jews – they knew the secret of how to discover and live by the truth. Not by silencing each other, not by winning or vanquishing the other, but by allowing each of their individual strengths to inform the bigger picture.

Truth is discovered by allowing each individual to voice his or her opinion. To reach the best possible conclusion and arrive at the truth, it is vital to look at any given issue from all possible angles, to stretch the idea and challenge it, through arguments and counter-arguments.

Only once the idea has been through a strenuous examination, do we arrive at a crystallized conclusion. As long as the argument remains impersonal, non-partisan and non-parochial – with the humble search for truth as the only objective – the diversity becomes a catalyst for the greatest synergy and harmony.

⁷ *Pirkei Avot* 3:2.

8. The Jewish Secret

This was the secret Balaam recognized – the Jewish power of harmony within diversity.

Witnessing such power, Balaam realized that as long as the Jews camped and coexisted in this fashion, nothing could hurt or destroy them, for the Divine Presence would rest upon them. And so he proceeded to bless the Jews: “How goodly are your tents....”

At the same time Balaam also understood that if the Jews could be provoked to turn against each other, they would become vulnerable and open to attack. Therefore, he suggested, after seeing the failure of all the outside conspiracies directed against the Jews, that the only way to conquer them is by tricking them to self-destruct from within – by turning them against each other.

9. A Lesson for Our Times

This episode offers us many powerful lessons in dealing with the divisiveness in our own times.

How often do our pride and egos get caught up in arguments to the point that the quarrel becomes an end in itself, and we cannot untangle ourselves from the dispute? A rather innocent exchange, which begins as a simple disagreement often escalates into a full-fledged war, with no end in sight.

They tell the story of two life-long friends who, after many years, once had a small spat with each other. Each of them dug in and obstinately would not budge from their positions. It only got worse when they each shared their respective opposing positions with their families and friends, who supported and encouraged them not to compromise. This of course added fuel to the fire, emboldening each of these fellows, so that each was thoroughly and absolutely convinced that he was right and the other one was wrong.

Is this story familiar? Have you seen it played out in your life or in the life of others around you?

Too many of our communities have built “doors” and “windows” that are against each other. Indeed, some even identify themselves not by standing for something, but by *opposing* someone else!

When we try communicating, our mouths (doors) often become aggressive forces that confront and oppose each other. Simple arguments can escalate into major battles, with each side becoming more entrenched ... until all communication breaks down. Without trust people are unable to find common ground to speak with each other.

Witness the current battles between different Jewish denominations, between the religious and the secular, the *dati'im* or *charedim* and the *chilonim* (as they are called in Israel). Instead of a family of harmonious Jewish tribes, they stand against and opposite each other, hostile and combative.

10. The Story of Two Hills (Humor)

Back in the days when harmony still reigned among the Jewish people, there lived two brothers, each with a farm on the opposite side of the same hill. The first had a family; the second lived alone.

During harvest, the first brother said to himself, “I have a wife, sons, and daughters to help during the harvest while my brother has no one to help.” So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother’s farm and leave bags of grain.

Now, at about the same time, the second brother said to himself, “I live by myself whereas my brother has so many mouths to feed.” So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother’s farm and leave bags of grain.

One night, they happened to run into each other and each saw what the other was doing. They instantly realized what was happening, and hugged and kissed each other. And it is on that hill that the Temple was built.

Time passed. Jewish people forgot how to live in harmony and love each other.

During this time, there lived two brothers, each with a farm on the opposite side of the same hill. The first had a family; the second lived alone.

It came to be that, during the harvest, the first brother said to himself, "We have so many mouths to feed whereas my brother has only but himself." So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother's farm and take bags of grain.

Now, at about the same time, the second brother said to himself, "My brother has a wife, sons, and daughters to help during the harvest while I have no one to help." So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother's farm and take bags of grain.

One night, they happened to run into each other and each saw what the other was doing. They instantly realized what was happening, and yelled at each other and beat each other up. And it is on that hill that the Knesset was built.

We still live in that latter time...

As we are taught: "Every generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt, is considered to be one in which it was destroyed."⁸ How can we be blamed for the destruction of the temple almost 2000 years ago? Because its destruction was due to baseless hatred, as long as we do not correct that we are part of the problem. When we cease having baseless hatred and instead baseless love the reason the temple's destruction will be eliminated, and we will thus merit to have it rebuilt in our time!

⁸Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:10.

11. The Solution

Is there a solution to this impasse? Can people and communities learn to coexist even if they may disagree? Can they both voice their positions without it turning into a war? Can they live in harmony, without silencing or compromising each other?

Yes. We need only look to ... Balaam, of all people ... for our answer.

Our enemies make us wise. And the evil Balaam reminds us of our core strength, of our true and beautiful nature. Balaam, our enemy, teaches us the secret of unity.

So, let us look through the eyes of Balaam. Looking through his eyes what do we see? We see the nation of "Israel encamped according to its tribes, and God's Presence resting upon them."

We see the Jewish people not getting trapped in their arguments and positions ... not personalizing their differences ... not driven by insecurity and defensiveness, which dictates that the only way you can be right, is if the others are wrong.

12. Waging War Against Divisiveness

As we enter the "Three Weeks," we have addition strength from this year's schedule, when the 17th of Tammuz is on this Shabbat, thus delaying the fast until tomorrow.

With this week's message and power in mind - let us mobilize and take on this disease called divisiveness that is plaguing and ripping apart our communities, our families and our people. Let us resolve never to allow ourselves to delegitimize each other even when we may not agree. Let us see the beauty in our diversity and transcend petty feelings in our search for truth. Let us distinguish between our positions and our persons, so that we criticize other people's viewpoints, without invalidating the people themselves.

Let us never allow our differences to be used as weapons against each other, only as ways to discover and embrace the truth.

And let us personalize and take to heart the words of Balaam: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!”

By increasing in our unconditional love for one another, and eliminating any baseless hatred, we have the power to have thee temple rebuilt in our times! May we live up to our potential and indeed merit to the building of the Third and permanent Temple, with the coming of Moshiach, when these days will be transformed from sadness to joy and celebration.⁹ Amen.

⁹Zechariah 8:19. *Mishneh Torah*, the conclusion of *Hilchos Taanios*.