

Avi L.'s Bar Mitzvah "Dvar" (Teaching) – July 8, 2006

The Torah portion I have read is called "Balak." It is from the book of Numbers. This story is about Balak, the king of Moab, hiring a sorcerer, a prophet by the name of Bilaam. Bilaam is asked to curse the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. Balak had heard all about the Israelites and how they had conquered many nations and peoples in their journey and he was not going to let them take his kingdom down. Bilaam's curse would make it possible for Balak to defeat the numerous Israelites by force.

Although this may seem like a simple plot, the story has a twist. Bilaam intended to curse them, but instead his curse came out as a blessing.

When Bilaam was on his journey to curse the Israelites, he and his donkey were stopped by one of God's angels. God gave the donkey the power to see the angel, but Bilaam could not. The donkey then stopped because he saw that the angel had a sword. Bilaam didn't know why the donkey stopped so he beat him. Then, God gave the donkey the power to speak. And the donkey begins to reason with Bilaam. The donkey was using the power that Bilaam had, the power of words, and the donkey out smarted him. The donkey showed him reason, using words to explain why he had to stop.

God then gave Bilaam the power to see the angel, and Bilaam realized that the donkey was not playing games at all. The angel told Bilaam that what he was planning to do, to curse the Israelites was a bad and distasteful act. Bilaam decided it was better to go home than to go on with his mission to curse the Israelites for Balak.

Balak was furious when he found out that Bilaam was unsuccessful. Balak sent Bilaam again to curse the Israelites. Before Bilaam left, God spoke to him, telling him that he would have no control over what came out of his mouth. That meant that Bilaam wouldn't have control over his own words and since words were his power, his power was taken from him.

The sorcerer Bilaam was hired by King Balak because Bilaam had the knowledge and power to curse. Curses do not seem that serious now, but back then, many people believed that curses were very powerful. In our days we don't have people who are hired by other people to put curses on other nations; unless you think that is what the Bush administration is doing to the countries in the Middle East.

The Mahtovu was the blessing that Bilaam spoke when he was overlooking the encampment of the Israelites. Now, Mahtovu is said as we enter a synagogue/temple/shul or the place that you use for worship. The Mahtovu begins a daily service for all the different branches of Judaism; Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. These words must be powerful, since they are still said today, over 3500 years later.

You most likely will remember that the Mahtovu is the first song we all sang together at the beginning of today's service.

The blessing means, "How good are your tents, Jacob, your tabernacles, Israel."

Rashi, the great 11th century Talmudic commentator interprets the blessing to mean: Bilaam was very impressed by the good manner in which each Israelite pitched his or her own tent in their assigned area. Also, Rashi says Bilaam noticed how they positioned their tents in such a way that no families' doors faced another door. He said this was a reflection of their modesty.

I also think that Bilaam was recognizing that the Israelites were making the most of what they had as nomads, and they were somewhat modest about it.

As I was reading commentaries on the power of words, I began to think even more about how powerful words can actually be. A contemporary scholar Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes about the power of words. He reminds us that the one of the Hebrew words for "words" is "devarim," which also means "things". Rabbi Telushkin explains that this is because the Jewish tradition views words as tangible, as concrete. And then he gives an example of how tangible words can be.

In the beginning, God created the world and the heavens with words. Many people are familiar with the biblical phrase: "Let there be light, and then there was light." Rabbi Telushkin uses this as an example to illustrate that God created the world with words. Now that is very powerful!

Words can influence people in many ways. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the most powerful civil rights leaders. His strength was in his words and his personality and the cause that he fought for. His words were so powerful, he eventually got killed because he spoke out so powerfully against injustice, and he helped inspire a mass movement, fighting against racism, poverty, and war.

Listening and speaking are necessary for getting along with others. At school, you will never make good friends with violence or with words that "curse". Although guns and bombs are very powerful and destructive, words can be as powerful if they are understood and used wisely.

On the front of my house, there are many signs and posters. One of these posters says: "Bring our troops home". Another says: "Racism, poverty, war: Iraq, Katrina no more". It takes some courage to put these signs up. Not everyone agrees with these messages. So putting strong messages on the front of your own house really shows that you support those messages. And like MLK, you can get hurt and harassed because of your beliefs and ideas.

I realized that if everyone started putting those kinds of signs on their houses or apartments or wherever you live, the government will begin to see that the people really do have ideas and a voice. If everyone believed in a single thought, like equality, they should show it. They can do this by speaking up against the people who mean to deny our equality. If we don't speak up, then the government will think that we don't care.

Words can be destructive. This is why we are given the Jewish teaching to never use Lashon Harah, the evil tongue, speaking badly about others, and spreading gossip. There is a famous Talmudic story that illustrates Lashon Harah.

Once there was a man who had said awful things about someone. Realizing that he had done something awful, he goes to his rabbi and asks, "Rabbi, what can I do?"

The rabbi thinks a bit and tells the man to bring him a feather pillow.

The man brings the pillow, and the rabbi tells him to go outside, rip open the pillow and shake out the feathers.

The man does this. He comes back to the rabbi and says, "I did what you said, now what?"

The rabbi says, "Now go back outside and pick up all the feathers."

The man looks startled and says, "How can I? The wind took them! I don't even know where they are now."

The rabbi says, "Exactly, just like your words. Once they're out, it's impossible to get them back."

The story of Bilaam and Balak has helped me think a lot about the words I use and how I speak to others. I hope everyone thinks more about whether the words you speak to others are heard as curses - or as blessings.

I would like to thank everyone for coming to my service today. Thank you to all of my friends and family that could make it today. Thank you to my relatives that came all the way from Bellevue, Newcastle, Edmonds and Kent. Most importantly, I would like to thank all of my teachers: Cheri McCoubrey, Mark Sands, Andy Benjamin, Sooze Bloom Deleon, Joel Rothschild, Vered, D'vorah Kost, and especially Sharron Lerner. They have taught me countless things over these past 10 years. With out them, none of this would have happened. I would like to announce that we will be having live music today during lunch from my brother Aaron and his group called Big World Breaks. Also, I will be donating part of my gift money to Save the Children. Thanks again and have a nice day.