

A Case for Freedom
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Temple B'nai Torah
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This week's Torah Portion, Balak, can be among the most troubling to understand. We have Balak, the King of Moab, summoning Bilam, a well known prophet in the area, to curse the Israelites. The twists and turns of the argument are debated at length in many scholarly commentaries. Why did Bilam the prophet receive apparently mixed messages...? "...Don't go to the Israelite..." Then God tells him "... go to the Israelites..." Is Bilam good in that he eventually utters the famous blessing, Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishk'notecha Yisrael – How lovely are your tents, oh Jacob; your dwelling places oh Israel...” or is his name to be looked at with skepticism in that he was such an unwilling participant for most of the story?

I suggest you consider some of those questions the next time you open this chapter or better, come tomorrow morning to our Temple Torah Study sessions at 9 AM and enjoy a vigorous conversation with other Temple members who love to debate these issues each Shabbat. What I had missed in reading this text is the respect and honor that the Torah pays to a prophet who does not come from any of the Israelite tribes. Yet, in the end, the Torah sees him as quite a favorable character, doing sacred work with a vision (that's what prophets do) of a better way.

It caused me to pause and consider how I as a Jew in America relate to the others around me, mostly not Jews, where I am part of only one small sub-group

within the American fabric of life. Am I a Jew living in America? Am I an American who is a Jew? A Jewish American? A Jew? An American?

And, does it really matter the precise words I use to describe my relationship with the larger world? I came to the conclusion that the words were not as important to me as looking at my conduct and figuring out what that tells me about my identity, as I live in what may be, arguably, one of the freest residencies for any group of Jews in history. Explicitly said, I see my good fortune of having been born in the United States as a blessing given to me by my parents and all those who chose to get on some very rickety, old boats and make their way across the Atlantic, looking for a better place for the next generation. I experience this as a blessing in that, as the result of their choices, I received life-giving opportunities of which most of my ancestors could only dream: a college education, a home, family and plenty of food on our table (not to forget a two-car garage). I live with my family in relative peace and comfort, free from daily worry about government terror or scrutiny with which many of my relatives had to cope on a daily basis. Prima-facie, the blessings in my life are expressed every day. For that I give thanks to God that I can experience this nearly idyllic life of freedom.

So, what's my problem with connecting the dots and saying that my gratitude for such a good life here in America should include a thank you to God for America – or as some might say, God Bless America? Is our freedom here so sacred that we can make such a statement and not cross some line of arrogance – like we know which country and which political system God will or does bless. My commitment to a pluralistic America

gives me pause before making such auspicious statements.

As I approach the upcoming Independence Day Observance this July 4th, I also pause to consider the whole notion of *patriotism*. From the Greek, *patris* refers to The Fatherland and is generally defined as a love of and a zealous supporter of one's country. Still, it requires me to define better what it means to love my country. In fact, I don't think I love this country or any civil entity very much, if at all. That is not to say I don't love the ideals for which America stands. I love those ideals that are rooted in a morality that values life, ideals based upon justice for all, and ideals that help the human condition. Putting it another way, *The Declaration of Independence...* our country's foundational document, calls these values "*Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...*" These three powerful ideals shape my identity as a Jew, growing up in America. Yet, they are only ideals – not yet accomplishments.

The first time I saw one of the copies of the *United States Constitution* was in 1985. Michael and I were gathering with several hundred thousand others in Washington D.C. for a March on The Capitol for Gay Rights. It was a grand march, in the tradition of other great marches on Washington and the vibrancy and energy in the city were astonishing. Needless to say, it was an exhilarating experience to be standing with thousands and thousands of people; finally standing with the person I love, feeling truly safe in a huge crowd. At that profound moment, I got a taste of the ideals that my parents, very proud naturalized citizens, had shown me since before school age when they taught me the *Pledge*

of Allegiance (when it was still a civil statement and did not require a religious commitment). For the first time, the guarantees of *Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness* were within my reach, too.

At the March, we heard numerous speeches from community and national leaders, each reminding me of the hard work that remains to ensure that all citizens of this country will someday enjoy equality. The Reverend Dr. Luther King Jr. had taught all of us how to speak words of freedom and justice. And we, standing on the shoulders of so many before us who had bravely expanded liberty, had a chance to contribute to an America that is proud of so much of where we have been – but even more proud of where we are going.

Let me return to my earlier reference to *The Constitution*. After the March, we took some tours around our nation's capitol. When I saw the words that begin our Constitution, "*In order to form a more perfect union...*" I froze. I gasped in awe because, all of sudden, a voice inside was saying to me, "Now I get it..." "*In order to form a more perfect union...*" although elegantly pithy, is a profoundly humble and humbling declaration. It assumes a human *imperfection* that requires ongoing effort. "Aha!" I thought, "a place to put the zest for patriotism that my parents taught me." Certainly, I have held deeply disappointing feelings about how so many in our country have been (and continue to be) treated: the slaves we brought over and all the tzuress (serious troubles) that have followed since; the native tribes whose land our ancestors took without much ethical reservation as long as *Manifest Destiny* was the mantra; women who have only been exercising the right

to vote for less than a century; the modern day concerns of equal rights for all, regardless of sexual orientation.

Finally, I had a vessel to hold my angst as an American and as a Jew. I wanted to live my civil life in harmony with the faith of my ancestors who used the wisdom of the prophets to always look for a better way, to build a better world and to bring the greatest blessing of all to our planet – peace. Those few words restored my hope in an ongoing blessing that comes upon all who pursue peace. As the foreign prophet, Bilam, compelled to speak words of peace, helped create a moment of tranquility for all those in his day, I too want to accept that responsibility to be a part of *forming “...a more perfect union...”* in my civil and personal life. I have come to see patriotism not as something static (do you recall those bumper stickers in the early 70’s, “America, love it or leave it” which implies patriotism is an absolute ideological position with which you either agreed or you’re not part of **my** group...).

Rather, those words suggest to me that if my patriotism stands for anything, it is for my willingness to be a part of the process of creating a *“more perfect union.”* And, to end, I can stand proudly as a Jewish American, committed to supporting this endeavor to let freedom ring louder and longer than all the sounds of hate, narrow-mindedness, and bigotry. It is the notion of *“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...”* for all, coupled with the ongoing commitment to form a *more perfect union...* that defines my patriotism.

Have you noticed that whenever you type the phrase, *“God bless America”* – if you have the grammar program enabled, computers will try to correct the language to

God blesses America? To make it right, I suggest we quietly put in a comma, after the word God. Thus, it suggests a plea or humble request rather than some self serving, arrogant statement that God blesses America and nobody else.

I would suggest, God, please bless America, so that we can fulfill our commitment to bringing more freedom to our country and our world.

With honor, I invite you to join in the prayer for our country which can be found on page 86 in our Siddur Mishkan T'filah, and we'll end with America the Beautiful – may all others who look upon us, be able to say the blessed words of the prophet Bilam, Ma Tovu – How beautiful...

So may it be God's will, please. Amen.