



D'var Torah: Parshat Balak, 7/15/05
Jane Marcus
President, Beth Am Women
Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, California
650-493-4661

In Parshat Balak, this week's Torah portion, a sorcerer named Balaam is on his way to Moab to curse the Israelites for Balak. Balak, the king of Moab has seen the victories of the Israelites. Fearing the Israelites will conquer his land next, Balak has sent his messengers to summon the prophet Balaam. He persuades Balaam to curse the Israelites so that he can defeat them on the battlefield.

As Balaam is on his way to Moab, his donkey sees an angel of God in the road with his sword drawn, blocking the way. Each time the donkey protects Balaam by refusing to move forward, Balaam beats and curses her, until finally, God gives her a voice with which to rebuke Balaam. Even as she speaks, Balaam verbally abuses her. Only when God allows Balaam to see the angel for himself, does Balaam stop abusing the donkey.

Though Balaam does go to Moab to curse the Israelites, God frustrates Balak's plan. Balaam can only utter what God tells him to. As it turns out, Balaam blesses the Israelites instead, and prophesies that Israel's enemies will be defeated.

The story has aspects of a fairy tale, almost a cartoon fantasy with a light-infused, sword-carrying angel, a respected but misguided prophet who becomes agitated, stubborn and angry when his journey is detoured, and a talking animal whose intercession shows the prophet the error of his ways. The happy ending is that the prophet becomes the vehicle through which God blesses the Israelites, offering words that have become part of our standard liturgy.

For me, the story offers a more serious lesson about not being able to see what's real and how we sometimes need the understanding and involvement of others to help us see clearly again.

When the angel stands in Balaam's way to prevent him from going to curse the Israelites, Balaam doesn't see the angel. It's like he has a veil covering his sight that prevents him from seeing what's in front of him. This is not unlike having the dark veil of depression cloud your judgment and distort your perception of reality. I know what that's like, all too well.

Sixteen years ago I suffered a major depression. It wasn't an overnight thing but the lowest point of a gradual, at times imperceptible but inexorable three-year spiral into darkness, into madness.

At the time I didn't know what was happening to me. I was, I thought, a well-adjusted person - an upper-middle-class, successful Jewish professional, happily married, the mother of an 8-year-old son and a 3-year old daughter. I didn't seek treatment for long time and when I did, it was "around the edges" of real medical help. I sought counseling but avoided contacting a psychiatrist -- that was an indulgence for someone who was self-centered or for someone who was crazy, and that wasn't me!

In hindsight, I probably should have known better. We always joked about how members of the Marcus family were "worriers". But it wasn't a laughing matter when I learned, as a young adult, that

my grandfather had committed suicide when my father was 13. We hadn't talked about it before then -- it was the family secret that only came out when my own father, in his early fifties, was hospitalized for depression.

Through my own recovery process I came to realize that I had been cycling in and out of depression my whole life. I had always suffered from anxiety and extreme mood swings related to PMS. But I managed to build a successful, productive life anyway. For me, always having something to worry about was normal – people even called me “calamity Jane”.

So when this spiral began, perhaps triggered by the birth of my second child, the dark place I moved into was very familiar. I was like a fish swimming in water, with no conception of the air above. I had no experience living without worry and fear. And with the grey veil covering my view, I, like Balaam, could not see the light of God's angel.

As the shadow of untreated depression settled over me, I became increasingly overwhelmed by sadness, hopelessness and the inability to cope with my life. I was wracked with confusion, anxiety, guilt and self-loathing. I quit my job.

I couldn't sleep and lost my appetite. I lost 30 pounds in a matter of months -- not a way I'd recommend to lose weight! I looked terrific, but I was empty inside and remember telling people that I felt like a ghost. I had written and defended a doctoral dissertation -- and I couldn't think clearly enough to write a shopping list.

I'll pause in my story to guess what you might be thinking. "Here she is, seemingly healthy and happy, once again a productive professional, wife and mother, and President of Beth Am Women! How was she able to climb out of that darkness, to get well?" Here's where the talking donkey comes in.

When Balaam couldn't see the truth the angel represented, he was fortunate to have a faithful friend who could. Three times the donkey turned off the path to take Balaam out of harm's way, and three times Balaam verbally and physically abused the animal. Finally God gave the donkey the power of speech, and the donkey told Balaam about the angel. Only then did God allow Balaam to see the angel himself.

Balaam's donkey had trouble convincing its master that his perception of the road ahead was not correct. Similarly, it's very difficult convincing someone who is depressed that his or her view of the world is not correct. But, like the steadfast donkey, it's imperative that the depressed person's loved ones stay involved and engaged and help with critical decision making since depression robs you of your ability to think clearly.

Once it became clear to them that I was ill, my friends and family were my lifeline. I wasn't easy to reach – the insidious part of this illness, caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, is that it's your mind and behavior that are affected. When people tried to tell me that my perception of the way things were was inaccurate, I, like Balaam, often struck out in anger, belligerence and agitation.

I rebuffed them, but they were persistent. My devoted husband managed to keep house, home and family together while his formerly capable wife was falling apart. My friends and family from near and far called me, came to visit, told me about the other person that they knew me to be, and urged me to seek help.



Eventually, with the help of a compassionate, skilled, and dedicated physician, and the effective medication he prescribed, I was able to find my way back. And, I came back much better, attaining a new perspective and an inner peace that I had never known existed.

Since my recovery, I've taken on as a personal commitment the mitzvah of helping others climb their way out of the dark grey pit in which this disease drops you. It's a blessing to see those with whom I've shared my experience once again at peace, productive, and enjoying life.

But, my connections with others have been limited and private. This story is not something that's comfortable to share, and those I've shared it with have been close friends or colleagues whose illnesses I learned about in closed door conversations. Tonight is the first time I've "gone public" with my story. So, why now?

A recent study, the University of Michigan National Comorbidity Survey, reports that the United States ranks #1 globally for mental illness. This study polled almost 10,000 households in 34 states, and the data was analyzed by psychiatrists and other health professionals at Harvard Medical School. The study looked at anxiety disorders (such as panic disorder and post-traumatic stress), mood disorders (such as major depression and bipolar disorder), impulse control disorders (like attention-deficit hyperactivity), and substance abuse. It did not include schizophrenia and other more serious disorders. Some key findings were that one-fourth of Americans meet the criteria for some sort of mental illness, that only 30% of people with significant mental illness receive any form of treatment, and that those who seek treatment usually do so after 10 years of delays.

Mental illness is prevalent in our communities and manifests itself in many ways and in all ages groups: from kids who suffer from eating disorders, depression, stress, and drug addiction, to new mothers experiencing post-partum depression, and adults with various episodic and chronic conditions, and to the elderly coping with life changes, physical changes, and various forms of dementia. And our Beth Am community is not immune. Our clergy talk to congregants all the time about their mental health problems and their need for help and support.

But, like Balaam and the angel, we, as a community, do not to see the extent of the problem nor do we talk about what is admittedly a difficult topic. Part of our blindness is a result of the stigma associated with mental illness; another part is our lack of understanding of the causes of and treatments for mental illness.

That is why, like the donkey, when given the chance to speak, I've chosen to do so. I hope that by telling my story I can be an opinion leader, a change agent, someone whose message can be heard and responded to.

I'm extremely thankful that Beth Am Women has chosen to focus its attention this year on the topic of mental illness. Many of our activities will address different aspects of the topic, but the key event will be a conference to be held on Sunday, December 11 here at Beth Am. The title of the conference is, "Building a Caring Community: Beth Am Talks about Mental Illness/Mental Health." The conference is being co-sponsored by Jewish Family and Children's Services, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, and the Department of Jewish Family Concerns of the Union of Reform Judaism.

Our hope is that our community -- and not just the women! - will attend the conference to learn about mental illness, to talk to and share with each other, and to begin a process of change that moves us

from stigma to recognition and on to acceptance; from secrecy to openness; from ignorance to education; and from blindness to compassion.

While the story of Balaam is not one of the most well-known from the Torah, the words of Balaam's blessing of the Israelites are very familiar. They are said each time we enter the sanctuary: "Mah tovu o-ha-leh-cha Ya'akov mish-k'no-teh-cha, Yisrael!" "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwelling places, O Israel"

In our Beth Am prayer book, the text and translation of Mah Tov, which traditionally begins communal worship, are prefaced by this explanation: "the Israelites' tents were arranged in close proximity, displaying communal solidarity. But what prompted the blessing, mah tovu, "how good" was the fact that the doorways of their dwelling places did not directly face one another, thus retaining the integrity of the individual within the framework of the community."

Individuals who struggle with mental illness and the larger community who seek loving and respectful ways to help them cope, can find strength in the closing words of Mah Tov, spoken out to God: "Out of your great love, let me perceive Your truth, and find Your help."

It is my hope that these familiar words will take on new meaning for you, reminding you of Balaam's story and of mine. When it comes to the reality of mental illness in our community, may we be encouraged to see and address the truth. And, may we be moved to seek and provide help for ourselves and for those we care about. Kein yehi ratzon, may it be God's will.