



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

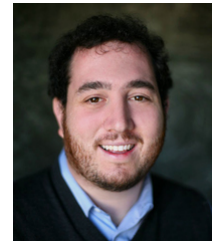
OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Today's Torah

Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.

Shabbat Parashat Balak

June 30, 2018 – 17 Tammuz 5778



By: Rabbi Adam Greenwald

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Alone or Together

Torah Reading: [Numbers 22:2 - 25:9](#)

Haftarah Reading: [Micah 5:6 - 6:8](#)

"Then Balaam said to Balak: "Stay here beside your offerings while I am gone. Perhaps Adonai will grant me a manifestation, and whatever God reveals to me I will tell you.' And he went off alone." (Numbers 23:3)

Balaam, the pagan prophet, was hired by King Balak of the Moabites to curse the Israelites as they make their way across the wilderness. Balaam agrees to the mission, and take his fee, but first he tells the King that he needs some time alone in order to receive a "manifestation" of God and to ascertain the exact content of his message of doom. What happens next is stunning. In his solitude, Balaam finds a completely different message than the one he was seeking. He discovers that -- try as he might -- he cannot speak a curse, but rather can only offer blessing upon blessing to the Israelites.

I am both intrigued and challenged by the idea of solitude as a means of attaining this sort of insight.

Solitary pursuit of spiritual truth is well-attested in the Jewish tradition. The great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, retreats to a cave to study and meditate and there attains such an intense level of spiritual development that when he emerges everything he looks upon is engulfed in flames. A less violent

version of this type of retreat for the sake of enlightenment is found in the stories of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, whose long walks in the forest prepare him to lead a spiritual revolution that would transform Ashkenazi Judaism over the next two centuries. In the Hasidic literature of the movement he started this practice gained a name: hitbodedut.

Indeed, hitbodedut predates any of these figures. Many of our most prominent Biblical personalities are recorded to have had their most profound revelations of God in moments of solitude. Jacob dreamed of a ladder to heaven while sleeping alone in a rocky field. Moses encountered a burning bush "beyond the wilderness" herding sheep for his father in law Jethro. Elijah heard the Divine voice while hunkered down in a lonesome desert cave. Of course, the Jewish tradition is by no means alone in holding up examples of this type of solitary spirituality as a path of connection with Divine -- Jesus and Mohammed each retreat to the desert, and the Buddha sits alone beneath his bodhi tree.

More unique, perhaps, to the Jewish tradition are the strong voices arguing against isolating oneself from others. Prayer, an activity that might seem best suited for moments of rapturous solitude, can generally only be done as part of a minyan-- a gathering of ten adult Jews. Torah cannot be read aloud except in a community. Weddings cannot be celebrated, nor can the dead be memorialized without the presence of companions and witnesses. Even study is not a solitary pursuit in traditional Jewish communities—rather, study almost always takes place in hevruta, a pair that seeks to unlock the essence of a text through vigorous debate and exchange. The Talmud compares the learning of study partners to the battle of gladiators, as their iron swords clang and clash with one another and provide showers of sparks, so too do the arguments of hevruta partners give forth sparks of holy meaning (Ta'anit 7a).

Balaam's isolation gave him the opportunity to perceive God and to transform his message of destruction into one of blessing. However, we learn from our tradition that isolation from the community can deprive one of the spiritual opportunities presented by deep relationship with other human beings. We are left with a tension: Should one seek the still, small voice of God, in the silence of the desert or the cacophony of the world?

It seems to me that as with most questions of spirituality, the answer to this question is probably yes and yes. Spirituality requires both stillness and relationship. Insight comes from both peaceful, solitary reflection and from boisterous, holy debate. Without the quiet that Balaam sought out, he might not have found his words of blessing. Without the presence of sacred community encouraging, bolstering, and challenging us, we might not find ours.

Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. Before coming to AJU, he served as Revson Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR, a Los Angeles congregation often recognized as one of the nation's most creative and fastest-growing spiritual communities. Prior to ordination, he served two years as Rabbinic Intern at Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, CA and as Director of Education of the PANIM Institute's IMPACT: DC program. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011.



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