

On Hate Speech: Parashat Balak

Rabbi Aaron Starr

With good justification, we spend much time these days worrying about words. We listen for antisemitic, racist, homophobic, or otherwise discriminatory language, with a desire to root it out. We also worry about the words others tell us not to use: the so-called “cancel-culture” and challenging ideas of “safe space” pose threats even to remarks that could make life better.

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords,” offers the Book of Proverbs (12:18), “but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Indeed, as our High Holyday liturgy will remind us in just a couple months, improper speech is among the mistakes most often committed by the average person, but not just in the form of discriminatory language or the efforts to silence others. Rather, the most common form of speech that we are commanded to avoid includes gossip, rumors, and slander. Like hate speech and cancel culture, this type of speech, *Lashon HaRa*, is among the most harmful and destructive activities in which we engage. We know we ought to do better, yet, somehow we continue to do it.

The power of words is a central theme in this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Balak*. Our ancestors were journeying through the wilderness (currently southern Jordan) on their way to the Promised Land. Rather than allow our ancestors simply to pass through their land as the Israelites would have desired, Balak, the King of Moab, called upon the evil prophet Balaam and begged Balaam to curse the Israelites.

In what is probably the only instance of comedy in the Torah, Balaam tries and tries again to reach the Israelites in order to curse them, but fails each time. Then, thanks to an act of divine intervention, Balaam finally encounters our ancestors and, instead of cursing them, could utter only praise: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov; mishk’notecha Yisrael: How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your dwelling places, O Israel*. Israel’s enemies were, once again, thwarted. Though the wicked prophet set out on a mission to use his words for evil, God forced him to use the words for good.

On Shabbat mornings we often conclude the Mussaf Amidah with the prayer that begins, “*Elohai n’tzur l’shoni mei-ra*, O God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceit.” We are obligated to be very careful in the words we choose and the speech we use. We are to avoid rumors, gossip and hurtful speech at all times. Moreover, we are to give the benefit of the doubt to others when we do not possess all the facts ourselves, or when we cannot walk in their shoes. The *Mishnah* teaches, “Do not judge your fellow human being until you stand in his/her situation” (Pirke Avot 1:8).

Our words and our actions are at all times to be for the benefit of God and the world God created. We are to seek the good in everything and in everyone. In this week of *Parashat Balak*, then, let us choose our words and our actions carefully. As Proverbs teaches, may our tongues not become swords of the reckless, but rather instruments of the wise One who engages in healing.

This week and every week, may we continue to seek to root out the words that destroy: not just from the mouths of others, but from our own mouths as well ... or even more so. Hate speech must not be tolerated in any of the forms in which it exists.

From my family to yours, Shabbat shalom!