



Our Unique Paths through Illness Torah Reflections on Parashat Balak

**Numbers 22:2-25:9
July 8, 2017 14 Tamuz 5777**

A Jewish folktale tells the story of a great teacher named Reb Zusya. When Zusya knew that he was dying his students gathered to learn from him and they noticed that he was white and shaking. "Reb Zusya," they said to him, "What is wrong? Are you cold?" "No," answered Zusya, "I am frightened." His students were surprised to hear this: "But teacher, what do you have to fear?" Zusya sighed and answered: "I am afraid to die and come before God to be judged."

"Reb Zusya," one pupil asked, "are you worried that God will say to you 'Why were you not more like Moses who stood up to the Pharaoh and led the whole people out of Egypt?'" "No," answered Zusya. "What then master? Tell us what you could possibly be afraid of!" "I am not frightened that God will ask me why were you not more like Moses or Abraham, but that God will ask me: 'Why weren't you more like Zusya?'"

Zusya's question is as relevant today as it was generations ago. Are we the fullest most authentic version of our selves? When I come towards the end of my life, will I be able to say with confidence that I brought into the world an individuality that only I could express?

Judaism is not a tradition of conformity. The Bal Shem Tov, the 17th century mystic founder of hasidic Judaism, taught that every person that is born into this world represents something wholly new that has never existed before and a new way of understanding the Torah. Only when each of us offers our own distinctive talents and perspectives will the Torah be fully revealed.

In this week's Torah portion, Balak, the Israelites' are on the verge of entering the Promised Land. They had reached this border once before nearly four decades earlier and then were condemned to wander through the desert. As they approach their destination a rival king seeks to delay their entry one more time and he pays the powerful prophet Bilaam to curse the Israelites and keep them from moving forward. However, when Bilaam gazes out over the Israelite's camp, he is unable to curse them and instead blesses them with these words which have become a part of daily prayer: "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishkenotehca Yisrael! How goodly are your tents O Jacob! Your dwelling places O Israel!" (Numbers 24:5)

What did Bilaam glimpse that made him unable to curse the people and instead led him to bless them and speed their journey? According to the medieval commentator Rashi, Bilaam saw that although the people were all camped together, each tent opening was facing a different direction. The Israelites' homes were open to welcome guests and yet also private, unique and distinctive. I believe that this is a key to why we were finally ready to enter the Promised Land after nearly 40 years of wandering. In that moment Bilaam saw

that we had learned how to stay together as a community, at the same time as knowing that each of us can and must pitch his or her own tent in a unique direction.

When we are struggling with illness it may feel like we have lost our individuality – we might increasingly feel like a faceless diagnosis instead of a unique person. Furthermore, the idea of having a private tent may feel hard to attain. When we are ill we are often poked and prodded, our room is entered at all times of day and night and the privacy of our “tents” – both our home and body – is violated. For many of us healing, in the fullest sense of the word, begins when we are able to reclaim our uniqueness and see ourselves as whole persons, just as we were when we were well.

There is not a set path to the Promised Land. It took years of wandering to find our way. Likewise, there is no one clear pathway through illness. We do not experience physical or emotional pain in the same way. Each of us has different sensitivities and unique ways of expressing our pain. Nor do we heal in the same way. Some of us benefit from “talking it out”, while others need silence and meditation; some of us crave the presence of family and friends, others long for solitude; some of us pray quietly in gratitude in order to heal, while for many of us nothing is as beneficial as shouting and showing our anger and frustration.

There is no one “right” way to be sick, there is only the potential to be like Zusya and constantly ask ourselves “Am I truly being me?” There is no straight road to the Promised Land or towards healing, but we continue on the journey when we forge our own circuitous pathways.

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