



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Balak 5774

By Jordan Soffer

July 5, 2014

Last year, I traveled to El Salvador with AJWS's Rabbinical Students' Delegation and spent a week assisting local farmers with different agricultural projects. While on a water break, I struck up a conversation with Juan Carlos. We had been working in his field for three days now, yet I had failed to engage him in any semblance of an intimate conversation. Rarely did our interactions go beyond "Buenos dias. Como estas?" before we parted with a shared smile and an implicit understanding that we had fulfilled our obligations of cordiality. This time, however, we spoke more personally. We discussed life and the successes and challenges he experienced as a farmer.

He kept reiterating one message: "good land is not good enough." I eventually understood what he was saying: the soil in his field was rich and fertile, particularly suited to yield a good crop. But hurricanes, inadequate funds and various other factors had, until this point, prevented him from yielding a substantial harvest. While the potential of the land was great, it wasn't sufficient to ensure sustenance for Juan Carlos and his family. I began to wonder what, if anything, can ensure that potential—whether that of land or of people—can be realized.

Later, as I reflected on this conversation, I was reminded of Bilam Harasha (the evil Bilam), the non-Jewish prophet who plays a leading role in *Parashat Balak*.¹ Rabbinic tradition lists Bilam among the great prophets of Jewish history: Joseph, Moshe, David and others, who were born with the potential to hear God's message.² And yet, rather than using his wondrous gift of prophecy to bring blessing into the world, Bilam repeatedly tries to use it to curse the Israelites. Bilam's land—as it were—was fertile, yet something was causing his apples to turn sour.

If Bilam had the unique gift it took to become one of the great prophets, why did he fail to reach his potential? Our rabbis teach that Bilam's name alludes to the words "*b'lo am*—without a nation."³ Bilam lacked the strong communal support that would have been necessary to guide him to use his prophetic powers for good. Instead, he was influenced by the wicked scheming of King Balak to use his prophetic powers for destructive purposes. Thwarted by this lack of support, Bilam's gift did not come to fruition.

Reflecting on my experience in El Salvador, I realize that Juan Carlos, too, suffered from a lack of strong communal structures that would have enabled him to realize the good in his land and overcome the obstacles that got in his way. Rectifying this gap is precisely what several organizations, backed by AJWS support, are seeking to accomplish. They steadily create an infrastructure that supports grassroots efforts, encouraging members of the community to work together to manage their land and other resources, mitigate the effects of natural disasters, advocate for their rights and build a strong collective future.

¹ Bilam is described as "evil" in Berachot 7a and Avot 5:21.

² While the literal linkage in Avot deRebbe Natan 2:5 is regarding being born aposthich (without a foreskin), it is apparent from context that it is discussing men born free of blemish.

³ Sanhedrin 106b. While in the original context of the Talmud this seems to refer to the idea that Bilam will lack the community of the World to Come, the message applies equally in this world.

Indeed, as I spoke to Juan Carlos, I began to understand that the role of our group was a further extension of this idea of building a strong, supportive community. In spite of our lack of expertise in farming, our presence in El Salvador communicated that we too were part of the larger global community that was committed to supporting the local residents in achieving their potential.

Bilam, too, eventually recognizes the importance of community and ultimately uses his prophetic abilities to bless the Jewish people with the famous words that we utter today when we enter the communal space of the synagogue: “*Mah tovu ohalecha Ya’akov*—How good are your tents, O Jacob.”⁴ How beautiful, Bilam notices, is a community that dwells together and cares for each other. Let us work to support communities around the world that are building their collective power to achieve their potential, so that all may enjoy the blessings of peace and prosperity that can come of the gifts in our lives.



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⁴ Numbers 24:5.

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