

Shabbat Hukat/Balak 4 July 2020, Rabbi Ma'ayan Sands

We live in a world of “Not yet”¹

Last time we were together I spoke about racism in America. I asked the question עד מתי “until when” will this devastating disease be a part of the essence of life in America? I ended with a charge to myself and to all of us: עד כאן “until now”. I expressed my hope that the determination of this generation will be able to bring justice and equality to our 21st century lives.

For me עד כאן “until now”, was a deeply felt and powerful expression of what my heart craves. It includes my commitment to the work of accomplishing our mutual goal.

This week a different phrase, one of hope and possibility, came to my mind: עדין לא “not yet”. I use it not only with reference to racism; a systemic, nationwide, generational disease, but also to our own spiritual readiness to progress with what Rabbi Shefa Gold calls “our evolution as [contemporary] prophets”.²

I’ll explain.

I spoke about parshat Balak, briefly. You probably remember the basics-they’re hard to forget: a talking donkey, a seer who cannot see and an angel, spear in hand-which the donkey sees but the seer riding him, does not.

Having seen the Israelites conquer so many nations in his neighborhood, Balak, the king of Moab, is frightened. He hires Bil’am, a non-Israelite prophet, to take a journey to curse the Israelites, so they would not devastate his kingdom. Bil’am looked to God for guidance. Eventually God allowed him to go reminding him he must listen and speak only what God tells him.

¹ The Heart of Torah, Vol. 2, Rabbi Shai Held, p.163

² Torah Journeys , the inner path to the promised land, Balak p. 157, Rabbi Shefa Gold

Things do not go smoothly. The Divine angel, sword in hand, appears to Bil'am's donkey, who appropriately changes her course in response. Bil'am loses his temper and beats the donkey with a stick. Finally, the donkey speaks up. "What have I done to you that you should treat me this way?" At which point, Bil'am's eyes become open and he begins to really pay attention. He sees the angel his donkey has seen all along. He bows to the ground and is allowed [by the angel of God] to continue his journey. This seer opened his eyes and his heart to see and feel the presence of God in his life. This is what Rabbi Shefa Gold envisions God saying to Bil'am: "You must pay attention to my word in each step of your journey. My word comes to you through the wisdom of your body (represented by the donkey that has carried you so loyally all these years). You will hear my words ... through all your worldly senses."³ Rabbi Gold is suggesting that God does not come to the prophets only in dreams or in visions. The flow of prophecy begins, even within each of us, when we pay attention to (rather than ignore) the Divine wisdom of all parts of our bodies and souls.

Many of us, unknowingly, believe our bodies and our souls are separate from each other; exist in two different realms. That belief, in Rabbi Gold's words "is a lie that exacts a steep price and bars us from touching the fullness of what it means to be human-which is to be a holy animal."⁴ Only when Bil'am was truly paying attention, with all his senses, did the words of blessing flow through him. We *can* learn to honor and pay heed to our physical bodies as much as we honor our spiritual life. In that process, we will evolve into our own version of a contemporary prophet. The words of God may come to us, *when we pay attention*, in the voice of a friend, in the wind, from the natural world or through our body, which has supported our spirits for all our lives. Through all our senses, the message of God will become clear. Then together and with God's help, our visions of kindness and justice in the world, can, step by step, evolve into our reality.

³ Ibid p. 157

⁴ Ibid p. 158

For now, we live in a world of עדין לא “not yet”.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the greatest theological thinkers of the 20th century. He said of prophecy it “is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor [and] to the profaned riches of the world.”⁵ I’m suggesting *we* must be that voice, now. “The purpose of prophecy” Heschel wrote, “is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history;”⁶ to which I would say: אִם לֹא עַכְשָׁו אֵי מַתִּי, if not now, when? Heschel continues: “The prophet wants to intensify a sense of responsibility among the people⁷. His intention is to make audible the invisible God.” I suggest that “[the voices] of the plundered poor”, of the overlooked, the beaten down, and the murdered, have spoken loudly. Now, is the time for us to listen, to HEAR and respond; to “pray with our feet” as Heschel said when on a march with Martin Luther King, Jr. We can speak with our votes; with peaceful protests, with our voices including our songs. The beauty of what I see happening, is the imagination and creativity with which so many people are taking on the job of the prophet. Again in the words of Heschel about the moral state of people: “few are guilty, but all are responsible.....”

We live in a world of עדין לא “not yet”

Finally, I want to point out a subtle but striking contrast between the message of Bil’am and that of Micah, in this week’s haftarah. When his eyes were open and he was able to bless, Bil’am’s words, spoke of Israel as worthy of praise because of exemplary respect for privacy, modesty and respect for each individual. Nechama Leibowitz, a modern interpreter takes it one step further. She says the *pshat*, the plain meaning of the world “*tovu*” insinuates perfection in all respects. Accordingly, Bil’am looks out and sees the Israelites as complete perfection.⁸ In contrast, during the time of the prophet Micah, the Israelites are accused of having breached their contract with God. They have

⁵ The Prophets, p. 5

⁶ Ibid p. 17

⁷ Ibid p. 7

⁸ Nechama Leibowitz, Studies in Bamidbar, Numbers, p.293

forgotten God's kindness and God's outstretched arm which extricated them from slavery in Egypt. God's anger and disappointment is heard through the voice of Micah. The Israelites do not challenge God's charges or defend themselves in any way. Almost frantically, they approach the prophet and ask how they can bring restitution; what can they offer to appease God? Their collective minds focus exclusively on what sacrificial offerings they should bring and not at all on their ethical behavior or the ways God has commanded them to be with each other. They seem stunned by Micah's response: God desires only obedience to the covenant, acting on what should be their concern for the weak and vulnerable.

When Bil'am utters the phrase "*mah tovu*" he declares that the Israelites are already good; perfect even. Micah using the same words, tells the people "it has been told O man what is good, *ma tov*, and what the Lord does require of you; only to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." These Israelites are not perfect or even very good. **They live in a world of עדין לא "not yet"**

As do we. Our task is to trust and grow with the innate but probably rusty, connection between the Divine wisdom of our bodies and our hearts. We can learn to open our eyes and really listen to messages from God, from the natural world, in the voices of family, friends and maybe from the snuggles of "man's best friend", our pets. And, in the process of living, we must maintain a healthy sense of the "me" we are now and the "me" we have yet to become. "Not yet" is a perfect posture for each of us. It provides the purpose and the meaning we all need, as we strive through the world to discover who we are intended to be.

Amen, May it be so.