

Right in front of us - Parshat Balak – June 25, 2021

Ever wander around the house, or search for something in the car, or yard, only to find *eventually*, that it had been in front of you the whole time? We wonder, and maybe even say it out loud - I was even looking for it – why didn’t I see it? It was right there! I walked by it three times! Augh.

Balak is a Moabite king who sees Israel encamped at the outskirts of Moab. Aware that the Israelites have defeated the Amorites on their trek towards the Promised Land, he is alarmed and fearful of them. Balak sends messengers to hire Bilaam, a prophet, to put a curse on the Israelites. Bilaam delays responding as he wants to consult God. And so God comes to Bilaam and says, “What do these people want of you?” And Bilaam tells God he is being asked to curse the Israelites. God responds: Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed.

Another set of messengers appeal to Bilaam and offer even greater reward from the king, and Bilaam says let me check with God again. This time God says, okay, if you must, go. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.

So Bilaam saddles his donkey and gets going. But God is not so pleased that Bilaam is going. And here we get to the talking donkey. A sword wielding angel of the Lord places himself in the donkey’s way, and the donkey, she turns off the road, and then she is presses herself (and Bilaam’s foot) against a wall, and finally, continuing to be blocked by the sword wielding angel, lays down under Bilaam. Bilaam, beats her at each turn. He never sees the cause of her turning from the path – the sword wielding angel. Some prophet! After being beaten by Bilaam three times, the Lord “opened the donkey’s mouth” and she says to Bilaam, “What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?”

Bilaam says to her, “You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I’d kill you.”

The donkey says to Bilaam, “Look, I am the donkey that you have been riding, all along until this day – have I been in the habit of doing this to you?” And Bilaam replies, “No.”

God uncovers Bilaam’s eyes, and finally sees the angel of the Lord. Bilaam didn’t realize that the donkey’s swerving from the path was due to the angel. – He just didn’t see.

So if you’re really wanting to ask me – and people have asked – Rabbi Lisa, what’s up with the talking donkey, am I really supposed to believe that? I say, I’m so glad you asked. I think that the talking donkey is a metaphor. A metaphor for when something is

right in front of us, but we just cannot see it. Bilaam is so distracted by his assignment and the reward of lots of money in exchange for cursing the Israelites, that he cannot see the sword wielding angel blocking the donkey's path. Unpack the metaphor, and perhaps we can see an aspect of the challenge of being human: we often cannot see what it is that blocks us in our own lives.

I think there are times when we finally see things, have insights into our own life, or see something in another that we had never realized was there before. It can be a wonderful but also humbling experience. It does not have to be as dramatic as a talking donkey or a sword wielding angel, but it can be impactful, nonetheless.

In my work, I hear people's stories. A man once shared with me, "I never realized how much my father really loved us and wanted to be home when we were growing up, but I was too angry at him for working all the time. I miss him so much, and I only just realized it."

When we can finally see past what has been blocking us we realize that the circumstances of life are not what is so important. Rather it is how we see life and how we respond.

In a November 2018 episode of *On Being*, Krista Tippett interviewed Stanford brain surgeon James Doty and leading convener of research on compassion and altruism, and author of *Into the Magic Shop*. In the summer of 1968, in the throes of a hardscrabble, perilous childhood, James Doty wandered into a magic shop and met a woman named Ruth who taught him what she called "another kind of magic" that freed him from being a victim of circumstances of his life, and that he now investigates through science: practices like relaxing the body to calm the mind, of self-control and setting intentions, and compassion towards oneself and others. In the wonderful miracle of the meeting James Doty and Ruth, an elderly muumuu-wearing earth-woman person who was just sitting in her son's magic shop, James learned, in a pivotal point in his adolescence, to a new way of experiencing himself, calming himself in the midst of his chaotic childhood, and began to reimagine and shape his life. Though none of the circumstances had changed in his parent's home, he saw himself not as his circumstances, and the limits of what he could accomplish were transformed.

This is the part of his story that I think is so amazing:

We were talking about traditional magic tricks. Ruth said, "The brain, as busy as it can be, is actually very lazy" – that this is why magic tricks work. "And, yes, magic works because people are so easily distracted." But she said, "they're not distracted by hand

gestures. Most people who are watching a magic show aren't really there watching the magic show. They are regretting something they did yesterday, or worrying about something that might happen tomorrow, so they're not really at the magic show to begin with. So how could they see the plastic thumb at all?" – which is such a fascinating diagnosis of Buddhist psychology and all these things we're learning to understand even better now through science. Yes, a study showed that the average person, almost 80 percent of the time, are not focused on the present, they're focused on regret about the past or anxiety about the future. When your attention is in those places, you can't give your full attention to even what's happening to you at that moment. It limits what you can accomplish in that moment. Unfortunately, it's a horrible distraction, and it limits us to the connections we are able to make and actually even who we are. What she taught me, the techniques, and my own experience since then have shown me the difference, because it's like suddenly you realize that you have been wearing glasses that have been fogged up. You take them off, and there's a vibrancy. The colors are different, the interaction is different. That's what being present offers you.¹

We all have the challenge of seeing ourselves in this story of Bilaam and the donkey, so distracted that we cannot see the sword wielding angel.

It is not just from Buddhism but also in Judaism that we have practices available to us, including Jewish Meditation, Mussar and its contemplative practices, that enable us to "see" what is really out there, and in here, and live our lives in a way that our lives are more fully our own. Practices which enable us to awaken to what is right in front of us: the ability to fashion our lives, lives lived from our own path and creation rather than pushed, swayed, and directed by the randomness of circumstance.

The author Karen Armstrong wrote, "The religious quest is not about discovering 'the truth' or the 'meaning of life' but about living as intensely as possible here and now... to discover how to be fully human."

May our human experience be a blessing, in all its form, in all its frailty, in all its beauty. May we be blessed to see what is right in front of us.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Lisa Bock

¹ Podcast On Being by Krista Tippett, interview with Dr. James Doty, November, 2018.