

## Balak Sermon 5778

How do we know what we know? What are the roles of facts, culture, and our personal biases in determining what is true? President John Adams wrote: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." And the novelist and Civil War historian Shelby Foote asserted that "A fact is not a truth until you love it."

When American Jews talk about Israel, for example, their attitudes are very much influenced by where and when they grew up, and what their personal experience of Israel is. Study after study has shown that when college age Jews visit Israel on a Birthright trip, they return changed people: first hand knowledge of Israel's land, people, and culture sensitize them to Israel's strengths and its challenges. The trips bind young people to Israel and, not coincidentally, to Jews here at home. We now know that over the course of their adult lives, these college age Jewish kids become more involved Jewish adults. But it is not only Birthright participants. We know from our own experiences that an Israel trip deepens our sense of connection to the country and its people, and to Judaism and community generally. Like Bilaam, who is sent to curse Israel but seeing the people can only praise it, those who go there today are typically wonderfully enthusiastic about what they have seen: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." In the opposite direction, Jews who have little or no direct experience of Israel, who learn about it only second hand through the news, tend to have little or no connection to the place, and actually have increasingly growing negative attitudes. The same facts about Israel are available to all of us, but the way we weight each fact relative to others, the

amount of trust we put in those facts, and as a result our views of Israel, vary. And as we read in parshat Balak this morning, the fact of the Israelites' presence at Moab's doorstep provoked fear that about the meaning of the fact of their presence there.

One reason the Balak story resonates today is its parallel with modern Israel. Balak is a neighboring king who views the Israelites proximity as a threat. In his case, we can understand his anxiety. Last week's parsha ended with the fact of the Israelites destroying and taking over the land of the Amorites, the next kingdom over. Balak fears that he is next. The people already living in the area see the Israelites come to the land and take control of it. This is eerily similar to the creation of the modern state: While small numbers of Jews had been living in what was then called Palestine continuously since antiquity, from the point of view of the Arabs who were in the majority, the fact of massive waves of Jewish immigrants beginning in the late 19th century was perceived as a kind of invasion. Jews were the inhabitants, and the owners, of that land 1900 years before, and throughout those centuries many Jews yearned to return to that place. The fact is that Jews were a stateless people since the first century, and that they returned to their ancestral home. Like Balak, the Arab inhabitants of the land saw the facts changing on the ground and felt aggrieved.

Even among Jews, the questions abound: What does it mean to be a supporter of Israel? How do we read the news that comes out each day about Israel? To what extent do we permit our own pro-Israel bias to color our response to the news and to those who have opposed Israel's statehood? The fact is that Israel is now 70 years old, with the strongest military in the Middle East, an economy which is the region's envy, and a history of democratic institutions. Those facts fill most of us with pride, but only deepen the despair of those who see themselves as

Israel's victims. We also see the fact of Israel defending itself against attack from Iran and its emissaries, but how that fact is understood by those predisposed against it, or by those who are agnostic about Israel, differs greatly from those already in love with Israel. When Iran sends weapons and supports violence against Israel, there is broad support for Israeli retaliation. But when Palestinians complain about unequal treatment, about appropriations of their land that Israel's own Supreme deems illegal but are not remedied, about land grabs that begin illegally according to Israel's own laws and are then retroactively legalized, we feel less sure of our support. When Gazans attempt to breach Israel's international boundary, among them admitted Hamas members whose intent is to harm Israeli citizens, many Jews feel torn between the fact of Israel's right to defend itself and the fact of obvious suffering in Gaza. Navigating between those facts is difficult, but detailed knowledge of the situation can help us understand how to interpret them. In Gaza, for example, no one denies that life is miserable, with poverty and hunger leading to near-famine conditions. Those are facts. But even though the partial, immediate cause of those facts is an Israeli blockade, additional facts include an Egyptian blockade of Gaza, by land and sea, the refusal of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to pay salaries in Gaza, and the continued stated goal of Hamas, which controls Gaza, to inflict harm on Israel, with the ultimate goal of destroying it, a goal which is itself an obvious fantasy. The Hamas that calls for Israel's destruction is the same Hamas that insists Israel provide it water and electricity. Partial truths can turn into lies; lies can lead to death.

One of the reasons I have not spoken more about Israel this year is that the region's history and current status are so very contentious; the facts themselves are in dispute. It's so easy to be misunderstood, or branded as anti-Israel, that I prefer to stick to the easy stuff in public:

Love for Israel and its people; political and philanthropic support for the country; congregational visits, and so on. How Israel responds to non-Israeli Jews, to Masorti and Reform Jews within Israel, the status of the Western Wall, the constant building of new neighborhoods in lands that are not, in fact, part of Israel, are all conflicting issues that I prefer not to debate publicly, for fear of appearing in any way anti-Israel, and because of my own internal conflicts about them. I know the facts, but even I sometimes don't know what to make of them.

At a time when all of Israel's past intelligence leaders agree, and have publicly stated, that the current government's approach to dealing with the Palestinians is broken and dangerously out of line with Israel's own interests, it's hard to know what to say as an American Jew, no less than as an American rabbi. When those men, leaders of the Shin Beit and the Mossad, all say that some of what Israel's government is doing undermines the safety of the country, I don't feel qualified to disagree. It makes me very anxious. Looking at Israel, I want to praise its tents as Bilaam did, but fear doing so will mask Israel's many internal challenges. Like a visiting cousin, I want Israel to be strong and safe, but wonder how long I can go on wishing away its faults.

Israel needs America's Jews, and we need it. We have to find ways to continue to advocate for Israel, in spite of a particular government's lapses of judgment, because the country is larger than political parties or politicians. Israel represents a thousand years of Jewish living, two thousand years of Jewish yearning, and 70 years of Jewish renewal. In addition to the other ways of supporting it I have already mentioned, we should feel enough kinship with Israelis to insist that Israel live up to its biblical promise as a nation of righteousness, and to insist that it act righteously when it veers from that path. That is not anti-Israeli; it is a call to be a light unto the

nations, a nation of priests, a model for all humanity. Calling for peace is not equivalent to capitulation. Working for peace does not mean giving up on Israel. Jews should feel comfortable acting from a position of strength in order to preserve Israel as a permanent homeland for the Jews and a democratic center of justice in the Middle East. Facts matter, but the courage to turn facts into a positive force for peace is the great challenge of our age, in Israel and around the world.

Shabbat shalom.