

Dear Chavraya,

The way that we view the world says much about our way of being in the world. Whether we see people as inherently good or inherently evil inevitably determines our way of response to people. In our ordinary interactions, do we respond out of trust or suspicion, compassion or bitterness, do we give people the benefit of the doubt or assume the worst? Seeing beauty in the world, for all that would deny it, we come to see the Source of all that is, and in the faces of those we encounter along the day to day of life, we come to recognize God's image.

A thread of seeing runs through this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Balak*. From the very first word, *vayar Balak/and Balak saw*, ways of perceiving the world and others becomes a powerfully subtle teaching, an unstated undercurrent waiting to be seen. I have counted twenty-eight references in the portion to eyes or seeing, seeing/not seeing, eyes open/eyes closed. Balak, the Moabite king, looks out and sees the multitudes of Israel along the way of their desert journey. Afraid for their number, Balak sends emissaries to the Midianite seer, Bilaam, that he come and curse Israel for him. Each time that Bilaam goes up to the high places and looks down upon Israel to curse the people, only words of blessing coming from his mouth.

How we see others and how we see ourselves comes to be the tension in the *parasha*. In a strange midrash on the way of Balak's perceiving Israel, the rabbis say, *it would be better if the wicked were blind, for their eyes bring evil to the world/she'eineyhem m'vi'in ra'ah la'olam*. The point is made, in the hopes that we understand the obverse of the teaching, that the nature of our seeing has an impact on the world around us, and on the earth itself. The intimate interplay between eyes and earth is expressed through a beautiful phrase by which the Torah conveys the scope of Israel's numbers, so great that the earth is entirely covered beneath their feet, *hinei chisah et ayn ha'aretz/for it has covered the eye of the earth*. Through a beautiful interpretation of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, we realize that it is not about the earth being covered, but about the covering of our own eyes and whether or not we are able to see the earth we walk upon and those with whom we walk. Playing on the double meaning of the word *ayin*, which means both eye and wellspring or source, Hirsch teaches, "It is through the eye that the world flows into a person. The eye of a person is therefore literally *ayn ha'aretz/the source of the world*."

That the way of our seeing and being in the world are one is expressed ultimately in the realm of human relationships. Also speaking to the jaundiced nature of Balak's seeing, the Gerer Rebbe draws on a mishna that teaches, "whoever has these three things is of the students of Avraham Avinu / Abraham our father; *ayin tovah, ru'ach n'mucha, nefesh sh'fayla/a good eye, a modest spirit, a humble disposition*. When Bilam looks out upon Israel for the third time, he sees the flowering of Israel's ideal, seeing us as we would like to see ourselves if we are indeed the children and students of Abraham. Unable to curse, "his eye unveiled," Bilaam speaks the classic words that describe and ascribe wholeness in all of our relationships, personal and collective, in home and synagogue, *mah*

tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mish'k'notecha Yisra'el/how good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!

The words of Bilaam, the Midianite prophet, offer an ideal vision of who we might be. Seeing ourselves through the unveiled eyes of another, the way toward our own becoming is set forth as a precious life path in the haftorah from the prophet Micah, *higid l'cha adam, mah tov u'mah Hashem doresh mimcha...*/It has been told to you, O mortal, what is good and what God seeks of you, only to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. Seeing what is good in the world and in our selves, may our way of seeing become our way of being, walking humbly with God and each other.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor