



Removing Blinders

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Throughout my life I have been taught – *Lifnei iver lo titten michshol*, in front of a blind person, do not put a stumbling block (Lev. 19:14). As a child this was very difficult to understand. I had never met a blind person and I certainly wouldn't leave my blocks out for someone to trip over them.

As I grew into a young adult and understood more about what education is all about, this saying became much clearer to me.

I have never been a fan of horse racing, but I have found that through it we can learn a lot. When horses are prepared for their race they have blinders put on. These blinders cut off the peripheral vision of the horse, so that s/he can only see what is right in front, not becoming distracted by the horses and fans to their side.

This is true of human beings as well. We are often so set in our ways that we do not see what is on the side. We do not see other possible paths.

In education the same concept applies. There are many laws, customs and facts that we are not aware of. Without knowing these, we set forth on our journey thinking that there is only one path on which to travel. Ignorance is blindness.

Keeping someone in the dark by not teaching them information that they are lacking is tantamount to putting a stumbling block in front of a blind person.

In this week's parsha, Balak, the prophet Balaam is such a blind person. Balaam is hired by Balak, the king of Moabites to curse the Jewish people. Balaam struggles with the decision to curse the Jewish people and after a sleepless night where God tells him that he cannot curse the Jewish people, he can only relay what God tells him; he sets out on his donkey.

As he was traveling on the road, an angel of God stood in the middle of the road in order to impede him. Balaam had his blinders on. He only saw the road in front of him and the journey that he was on. He did not see the angel. The donkey, however, did.

The donkey turned away from the road and was hit by Balaam in order to get it back on the path.

Again, the donkey saw the angel and the fences that were on either side of him and pushed Balaam's leg against the fence. Balaam again struck the donkey.

The angel then stood in a very narrow place which would not allow the donkey to pass (a block/obstacle in front of Balaam). The donkey crouched down and refused to move.

Again, Balaam struck the donkey with his staff, the entire time not seeing the angel in front of him.

Balaam had a mission and nothing was going to deter him from his course, until, God caused the donkey to speak. "Why did you hit me?" asked the donkey. "I would have killed you, had I a sword," responded Balaam.

As do many of us, Balaam only saw one path. He saw that he had a job to do and it did not matter who or what he hurt to get to the end.

It is the donkey's response that I find to be the essence of this story. The donkey says, "Haven't I been your donkey your entire life? Haven't I done your bidding? So if this time I do not, don't you think that something must be the cause?"

We are often so focused on the task at hand that we do not take into account all of the little things that can inform our decisions.

We live in an age in which information is at our fingertips. None of us can claim that we don't have access to a variety of opinions, suggestions, articles and other resources. We have our talking donkeys; we just need to listen to them. We need to recognize the signs when something is out of the ordinary (as opposed to waiting for a donkey to speak to us)

These outside resources are there in order to remove the stumbling blocks that are in front of us. They are there to help us see all of the forks in the road and realize that there is more than one path that we can take.

The purpose of education is to remove the blinders from our eyes. It gives us the opportunity to see what is around us and to make informed decisions.

Had Balaam not taken off his blinders he might never have changed his curse into a blessing. It was his third blessing that we have inserted into our daily Shacharit service – Mah Tov.

For many of us, prayer is yet another time that we put on our blinders. Many people put their Tallitot over their heads when reciting certain prayers, as a way to focus their concentration on being encompassed by God rather than their neighbors (many commentaries feel that what Balaam saw when he recited this prayer was B'nai Yisrael putting their tallitot over their heads to begin their morning prayers).

I have often had difficulty with this concept. I firmly believe that our prayers are set up in a way to guarantee that we are not alone (in fact many are written with plural verbs). A room filled with Ruach (spirit) by its participants is often more enjoyable and allows for a deeper connection than a big room with silent prayer where no one interacts with people around them. Many of our prayers in fact can only be recited with a quorum (a group of 10 or more). We count on the people around us. The same is true when we mourn for the

loss of a family member. Our process for mourning does not allow us to be alone. We must be greeted by the community. They must support us in our time of need.

We cannot act alone. We need others to remove the stumbling blocks that are in front of us, to remove the blinders from our eyes and we need to do the same for them. When we act together, when we support each other, we create blessings.

As both an administrator and parent, I am confident that by sending our children to Jewish Day Schools, like Gross Schechter, we are part of the process of removing the blinders, removing the stumbling blocks, and ultimately showing our children that there are many things to learn which can impact our opinions and the paths on which we travel.

AS A FAMILY:

Look at the words of the Mah Tovv. There are numerous words that translate as a home or a place. Which best describes your home? your school? How can you bring holiness to each of them?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Balak want to curse the Jewish people?
2. What warning does God give to Balaam?
3. What does Balaam say in each of his prophesies about the Jewish people?
4. Why does a plague hit the Jewish people? How many people died in the plague?
5. Who is Pinchas?
6. What does Pinchas do to try and warn the Jewish people? Was he just in what he did?