

## BALAK DRASH

The parsha today is called Balak, named after the Midianite King who is watching the Israelites march through the desert with some trepidation. This is no longer the mixed multitude of former slaves, these Israelites are the next generation, born in the desert, tough, free, and pretty determined to get to the Promised Land. Our parsha includes one of the most famous stories in the Bible, as well as the opening line of our service.

King Balak sends for Balaam, a local non-Israelite prophet, and asks him to curse the Israelites. Balaam consults with God who tells him not to do it. Balak is insistent and wealthy and offers Balaam a lot of money if he will do what he wants. When his messengers ask a second time, Balaam asks God again and is told to go with them. On his way to Midian, Balaam is confronted by an angel he cannot see. Only his donkey, his female donkey (this is specified in the text) can see the fiery angel. She tries to avoid this spirit creature three times and three times Balaam beats her for going off the path. Finally the donkey talks back and tells Balaam off for beating her. The angel finally appears to Balaam and tells him off too, saying the donkey has saved his life. Balaam continues to do what he's being paid to do and finds himself unable to curse the Israelite – he opens his mouth and blessings come out instead.

The Rabbis considered this story so extraordinary and so miraculous, that they included the talking donkey in a list of then things that were created at the end of the sixth day of creation, just before the very first Shabbat. The talking donkey is part a group that includes Miriam's well of water, Noah's rainbow, manna, Moses' staff, a magical worm that cut the stones for Solomon's Temple, the tablets of the ten commandments and the knife that carved them in stone.

So while the donkey may have been put in for comic relief, to show that Balaam is not as aware as he thinks he is, perhaps she represents something deeper. Perhaps she represents Balaam's intuition, the part of him that knows he really can't curse the Israelites.

This Hebrew month of Tammuz is associated with the gift of sight and with our kishkes, our guts. Balaam's donkey is perhaps reminding us that we should trust our deepest intuition, our gut feeling when we are searching for the truth.

Which brings me to Pride Month. Usually Reform communities have a Pride Shabbat on a particular day in June. This year, because the parades have been postponed, different communities are holding theirs on different days, but I think there is some resonance in thinking about diversity and difference when reading this parsha.

The story is about the power of perception - what do we see and what don't we see. This is a world in which identity is not what it

seems. The angel doesn't reveal itself to Balaam. The donkey talks. Balaam is sent to curse the Israelites but blesses them instead.

We might look at each other and think we are all the same but we don't always know until someone discloses their identity to us, who they are. Some of you may have met my youngest child, now aged 12, who we had named Jacob. Jacob came out as gay towards the end of primary school – not a huge surprise to us. But about six months ago, they also came out as non-binary, which means they don't consider themselves to be a boy or a girl, but something in-between, they changed their name to Winter, and yes, they use the pronouns they and them, rather than he and him. This is now the name they go by at school. We are enormously proud of their courage and resilience – being the only out non-binary child in Year 7 is not that easy, but it is made infinitely easier when they are accepted and acknowledged by everyone.

So Kol Chai has at least one young member of the LGBTQ community among its members, and it is critical to me that every part of the Jewish community be inclusive and welcoming because it is our home and it is only in an inclusive community that my family can feel safe and whole. If you catch Winter at the weekend, you will find them in jogging bottoms and a hoodie, looking much like any other 12-year-old of any gender. You can't always make assumptions

about who we all are and we have to be open to difference and diversity, not just for us, but also for our children.

There is a huge amount of ambiguity in this story. We're not sure if Balaam is a friend or enemy to the Israelites. Sometimes the identities we are assigned at birth, be that gender or sexuality, are not the identities that we end up with. And there's nothing anyone can do about it – not even King Balak with all his wealth and power. Love goes where love goes. Angels and donkeys may disrupt the neat life plans of kings and prophets. We can be whoever we want to be – as long as we continue to love our neighbour as ourself. May our tents and our dwelling places be places where the divine spark in everyone can find a home.