



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Balak 5772

By Sarah Mulhern

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We are pleased to welcome guest writer, Sarah Mulhern, program associate at American Jewish World Service.

“God has told you, human, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God. Then will your name achieve wisdom.”¹

These beautiful and tantalizing words from the prophet Michah close the *haftarah* portion that accompanies this week’s *parasha*, *Balak*. Beautiful, because they lay out a powerful vision of an ideal Jewish life that will please God and bring us wisdom—a life of doing justice, loving goodness and walking modestly with God. Tantalizing, because it’s not at all clear what particular behaviors, attitudes or beliefs are being mandated.

The Talmud in *Masechet Makkot* interprets this passage as encapsulating *all* of the laws of the Torah, saying “Michah came and reduced [the 613 *mitzvot*] to three [principles].”² Thus, the goal of a life structured by the myriad laws and regulations of the Torah is pursuing justice, goodness and humility. The Rabbis go on, however, to associate one of the three principles with a specific *mitzvah*— “‘Walking modestly with your God,’ means walking in funeral and bridal processions.”³

This beautiful interpretation makes a dramatic claim—participating in weddings and funerals is so important that the Rabbis identify it as the human embodiment of “walking with God.” In the last month—in the same week—I did both: I got married and had the painful opportunity to comfort a dear friend at the *shiva* for her father. During this time, the sense of the holiness and deep psychological importance of being surrounded by a community of people who love you in these critical moments of transition was very clear to me. The Talmud here teaches us that walking alongside another human being who is experiencing supreme joy or pain *is* walking with God.

The Rabbis also add that we learn something about *how* to behave in these moments from Michah—saying that “[in these] matters that are not performed in private, the Torah enjoins ‘walking modestly.’”⁴ Life cycle celebrations and mourning are deeply important and religiously significant moments, which certainly justify some pomp. But we must not let the importance and public nature of these events lead us away from maintaining modesty.

This crucial lesson has, unfortunately, been lost on our society, especially when it comes to weddings. Excess, rather than modesty, has been the norm in our community for at least many hundreds of years. Around the turn of the century, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, an eastern European ultra-Orthodox Rabbi known as the Chafetz Chayim, wrote:

Father and Mother cry out and there is none to help them [afford the cost of weddings,] even as other similar troubles fall upon the heads of the poor. What causes all this, if not the excessive expenditures and

¹ Michah 6:8-9

² Makkot 24b

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid

the luxurious spending, which have become common as a result of our sins, behaviors which cause evil to those who practice it, and to the entire world?⁵

Clearly, this problem continues today. The social norms around what is expected at weddings— as well as Bnei Mitzvah and other life cycle events — have led to an explosion of expense for hosts and guests that, for many, has become a serious financial burden. In addition to the ballooning costs, luxurious events often cause “evil” to our community and the broader world in other ways. The environmental impact—from unsustainably grown flowers to international shipping of gifts—of large events can be dramatic. The frequently unfairly low wages and poor working conditions of kitchen staff and others who do the behind-the-scenes work is certainly not an example of ‘doing justice’. And while many admirably give *tzedakah* on these occasions, they usually do so in amounts that pale in comparison to even the cost of the band. Far from the spirit of “walking modestly with our God,” the extreme excess of today’s celebrations perpetuates a culture of conspicuous consumption and waste.

In the process of planning my own recent wedding, I found that although my fiancé and I had the best of intentions, bucking social and familial pressure around the scope and cost of the event was extremely difficult. And doing the research to hire environmentally preferable wedding vendors and those with ethical labor practices somehow fell off our ever-expanding to-do list. Although my wedding was a beautiful and holy day in many ways, I do not feel good about these impacts, and the ways in which we perpetuated norms that are unsustainable and unjust. And while I am deeply grateful for the ability to throw a beautiful party to celebrate my partnership, I am uncomfortable with the knowledge that what we spent would have paid for at least one of the annual grants AJWS gives to grassroots organizations pursuing human rights and fighting poverty in developing countries.

In light of this experience, I’m both proud and excited that AJWS, through its Neta Fellowship program, is mentoring and funding the work of Rabbi Elizabeth Richman and Rabbi Ari Weiss, who are developing resources for families, like mine, who want to host celebrations in line with their values and need guidance and support in doing so. Their “Just Celebration” guides will help families planning *simchas* to “align the many spending decisions that go into planning a lifecycle celebration with Jewish values such as the fair treatment of workers, protecting the environment and decreasing waste and excess consumption.”⁶

May we all be blessed with many more opportunities to celebrate and— in the spirit of the prophet Michah— may we be blessed with the wisdom to plan celebrations that are in line with doing justice, loving goodness, and walking modestly with God and with each other.



Sarah Mulhern works at AJWS as a Program Associate in the Department of Education and Community Engagement. In that role, she contributes to the creation of educational resources including curricula, prayers and text studies. She also manages On1Foot.org, the online portal for Jewish texts and social justice. Prior to joining AJWS, Sarah taught at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin and in the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies’ Social Justice Track, and studied at the Pardes Institute and at Yeshivat Hadar. Sarah can be reached at smulhern@ajws.org.

⁵ Sefat Tamim Chapter 5, Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan, translation by Rabbi Steven Exler

⁶ For more information about the Neta Fellowship and this project, visit http://ajws.org/what_we_do/service_and_travel_opportunities/delegation_programs/neta_fellowship.html

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