

July 3, 2020 Parshat Chukat - Balak 5780

Dvar Torah by Rabbi Baum

*Just What We Needed: a Dinner of Enormous Participation and Laughter*

The number that resonated with me at our unprecedented, exceptional and successful shul dinner was 70. While the contributions of the shul community far surpassed those we expected to raise at this unprecedented event, the most joyous moment at the dinner was when our president, Yossi Katz, announced that 70% of our membership had participated in this campaign. The honorees at this unique occasion were the shul membership, who, even with our beautiful edifice shuttered, have been more active than ever, reaching out to each other and grasping onto the programs we have provided to connect to our Creator and Sustainer.

Even the evil Billam, in our second Parsha this Shabbat, could not ignore the strength of the Jewish community, when it acts with dignity to each other. His *praise*, “How goodly are your tents”, found its way into our siddurim (Siddur Rashi 417), to the chagrin of some commentators (e.g. Maharshal 64), who did not want what was intended as a curse from a malevolent person to be embedded in our liturgy. Yet as we know, it is commonly included at our entry to a Beit Knesset (Mateh Moshe 29). This message, despite its being from a bad messenger, is too powerful to ignore. “How goodly are your tents” in the context of the coronavirus, and as symbolized by the persistent and passionate participation of our membership in adult and youth programming at our shul, indicates that our private homes, in partnership with our shul, are physical and virtual places, in which we can find some of our sources of success and spiritual resilience.

The dinner itself was an evening of necessary laughter. The comments from so many were, “that is just what we needed.” I recently completed a biography of Rav Noah Weinberger, z”l, the charismatic Torah leader and founder of Aish HaTorah. The book, *Rav Noah Weinberg: Torah Revolutionary*, is filled with details about his sophisticated approach to kiruv and his methodology for systematic Torah learning, as well as anecdotes about his personal victories and challenges. Yet the part of the book that was most compelling for me was the advice that he gave to students who revealed their insecurities to him. He provided one couple, who were confronting a terrible illness, three pieces of advice (p 210). He suggested that that they see Divine Providence in what was happening to them, work on gratitude by finding five additional things to thank Hashem for daily and tell each other a joke every day. Just in case they came up short, he would regularly send them jokes. Rav Noach understood our Talmudic tradition (Taanit 22a) and human psychology, that humor is not only a diversion but an instrument to awaken the soul. Humor can show us that we all have inner joy, which may be suppressed by the ongoing pain of uncertainty and the traumas of life. Thank you all for a great evening of laughing together. It is what we wanted and what we needed.

Shabbat Shalom