

What is true greatness?

I know we have a lot of New Yorkers here who can claim some ownership of the great story of The Babe. (And maybe some Red Sox fans who can take some comfort in having the curse broken!) The story of Babe Ruth is of course a story of great skill and dominance in the game of baseball, but measuring Babe's human character reveals a mixed bag. He was known for a reckless lifestyle of drinking and womanizing but yet during his career he also became known to do good work by visiting children at hospitals and orphanages He eventually showed passion for this good work which gave meaning to his personal life. This is an example of our theme today which is skill vs. character.

There are those that use their skills, their God given abilities and developed talents for good and others, well, that bring me to this week's Torah portion. It's not usual to have a portion named after a wicked person in the Torah, but remember that the beauty of Torah is often found in its tales of flawed characters from which we learn many lessons. This week's portion, Balak is named after the king Balak who hatched a plan to curse the Israelites in the desert. News of the strength of the Israelites and the idea that they possessed a type of divine protection had made its way around the ancient world, so King Balak decided that the only way to carry out his plan to defeat

the Israelites, who were camped near his land, was to find a way to curse them, thereby weakening their God given protection. So king Balak sought out another shady character in the Torah, Balaam the prophet. Balaam was known to be very skilled and powerful. King Balak believed that a curse bestowed upon the Israelites by the prophet Balaam could be powerful enough to counteract God's protection of the people Israel. Balaam was asked to use his powers and go up on a hill above where the Israelites were camped, and curse them. It's curious that Balaam feels he must approach God to ask permission to accept this offer from the king, but God will not give Balaam permission to accept this assignment and to curse the Israelites. In response Balak then sends his most influential messengers back to Balaam offering great rewards to carry out this plan to curse the Israelites. Tempted by this generous offer, Balaam asks for God's permission again and this time he is given the option to go if he desires. But still, God becomes angry with Balaam when he does choose to go. As he rides his donkey toward the place from which he is to curse the people Israel, God, in his anger, places an angel with sword in hand to block Balaam on his way. At first, only the donkey can see the angel with sword in hand and so he swerves three times to avoid the angel and protect his master from being killed. After Balaam beats his trusty donkey three times, that's when we get a whimsical Disney like addition to our narrative. Balaam's donkey talks and complains about this

unfair treatment, at which point God finally reveals the angel to Balaam, who addresses the angel of God. “I have sinned. I did not know that you stood in the way against me. If you want me to go back I will.” But the angel of God says, “Go to Balak but say only what I tell you.

The Torah is teaching here that we all have a choice of how we use our power. That's why God ultimately gives permission for Balaam to make his own choice. Balaam's fame in this ancient story comes from the great power he developed as a prophet. But the tragedy is how he chooses to use his power. We are encouraged from an early age to develop skills, to excel in our chosen field. We want our children to excel, to bring home “A”s on their report card, to hit the home run and win the competition in sports, academics and even in the arts. We prize great skill and there is nothing wrong with that, but when we praise them for these achievements, are we also asking other questions like: Were you kind to someone today? Who have you helped today? How can we work together to make the world a better place? What does it mean to be a mentch?

In the world of secular wisdom I value the work of Stephen Covey, who has something good to say about this topic. Mr. Covey talks about how there are two kinds of greatness that an individual can achieve. He calls them primary and secondary greatness. He says that our culture

today is obsessed with secondary greatness, greatness achieved through developing skills and using them for fame and wealth, rather than primary greatness which focuses on personal character and contribution to society. Covey refers to the story of Babe Ruth I mentioned earlier as an illustration of this dichotomy. Babe certainly had secondary greatness - a high level of skill in his chosen sport, but it took some personal growth during his life to turn from his reckless lifestyle and come to do good work in his life's dedication to the children he visited and uplifted. Balaam was known as a prophet with great skill but he was intent on using his talents for personal gain against the greater good and the will of God. There are many people in the limelight today that are held up as heroes and revered for great skill in sports or fame as stars in the media. They possess Covey's secondary greatness. This doesn't guarantee that they have achieved primary greatness - a high moral character with concern for the greater good.

The true irony of the story of Balaam is revealed in the next wonderful twist of the Torah portion. When Balaam finally opens his mouth to try and curse Israel all that will come out of his mouth are words of praise. And these words of praise contain some beautiful language that we find today in our prayer books. As Balaam looks out from a high place upon the people of Israel camped below,

these are words that come out as he tries to curse the people...

*Ma Tovu Ohalecha Ya'akov, Mishk'notecha Yisra-el...*

¶How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! ¶Like palm-groves that stretch out, Like gardens beside a river, Like aloes planted by the LORD, Like cedars beside the water; ¶Their boughs drip with moisture, Their roots have abundant water. Their kingdom shall be exalted."

So Balaam's curse is turned into a blessing by God. Our skills and power will only be a blessing if we walk the path of godliness. If we follow God's ways and do what Torah demands of us, but it's our choice. What do we teach our children to value more, the "A" on the report card and the Gold medal in sports, or to live with integrity and be a blessing to others?

Stephen Covey explains this choice as he talks about the disease of a society focused on secondary and not primary greatness.

*"people are being raised in a comparison-based culture, so they focus more on secondary greatness, to become rich and famous, rather than primary greatness, which deals with character and contribution. This switch to secondary greatness is alluring and occurs throughout cultures of the world—secondary greatness has replaced*

*primary greatness, and, as a result, trust has deteriorated, confidence has gone down, and we're living with its consequences...*

*we have to take an inside-out approach in learning to be humble, to focus on integrity and character and on making a contribution, to serve other people, and serve worthwhile causes.*

*Are you focusing your efforts on strengthening your primary greatness—your character and ability for contribution? Set a goal to make a difference for someone else at work, at home, in your neighborhood, or community. The more you focus on serving others, the more authentic you will feel; your character strength will grow, you will be build trust, and you will build your worth based on principles versus, on the need to gratify our cultural values, which often center on instant gratification and becoming an enviable figure in public."*

The prophet Micah said it succinctly:

What does God require of you: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

I would say that it's wonderful and important to develop the greatest skills that you can. Hard work, dedication and tenacity are enviable traits that are needed to excel, but

balance is required when developing ourselves and teaching our children. Don't behave like Balak and Balaam. Be a mentch and teach our children that being a mentch is even more important than winning the game.

Shabbat shalom!