**[The Vast Waters – Parshat Balak](http://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-vast-waters-parshat-balak%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

…כְּגַנֹּ֖ת עֲלֵ֣י נָהָ֑ר… כַּאֲרָזִ֖ים עֲלֵי־מָֽיִם׃ יִֽזַּל־מַ֙יִם֙ מִדָּ֣לְיָ֔ו וְזַרְע֖וֹ בְּמַ֣יִם רַבִּ֑ים
*Like gardens by a river… like cedars by water, their boughs drip with moisture, their roots have abundant water…* (Numbers 24:6)

Water is such a powerful metaphor for consciousness because it is so fundamental – not only is it an essential nutrient that makes up about 70% of our bodies, but it is also the medium through which we are cleansed of both inner and outer*schmutz.*

Similarly, just as our bodies are made primarily out of water, on the level of consciousness, we are fundamentally made out of awareness. And just as our physical bodies become polluted and must be regularly purified with the help of water, so too we are affected by every experience – everything that happens to us, every emotion we feel, every thought that arises. We are, in a sense, like sponges, absorbing the energies of all that we experience, constantly.

Fortunately, just like a sponge that is cleansed through water, so too we can get clean from experience with the help of awareness. Whatever we experience, no matter how intense, traumatic, or disappointing, is ultimately not who we really are; it is like *schmutz*that leaves our consciousness if we know how to rinse, squeeze, and rinse again.

And, if we don’t immerse frequently in the waters of awareness, then just like a sponge,*we can dry out.*The dried-out sponge can neither absorb anything new nor can it be distinguished from all the dried-on *schmutz*within it. Similarly, when we become “dried out,” our belief systems are frozen; we can’t see anything new, but rather we perceive everything through the screen of our preconceptions. The inner pollution of negativity becomes indistinguishable from who we are.

But no matter how dried out and encrusted we might become, just like the sponge, soak it in the water of awareness and the life comes back. If you’re *really* dried out, it might take some time for the water to penetrate. But once it does, you will know, because all that stuff you thought was you will start rinsing away.

מַה־טֹּ֥בוּ אֹהָלֶ֖יךָ יַעֲקֹ֑ב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶ֖יךָ יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃
*Mah tovu – How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!*(Numbers 24:5)

“Jacob” and “Israel” are the “before” and “after.” At first you may be practicing – meditating, davening, learning – but you still feel like a dried-out sponge, because the waters of awareness haven’t penetrated yet. That’s *ohalekha Ya’akov –*the “tents of Jacob” – because you’re sitting and working in the “tent” of goal-oriented practice.

But eventually, the water breaks through and you get soaked. At that point, just like a sponge you still can get dirty again and again, but you know the dirt isn’t you; you know how to get clean. Then, you can bring that “moisture” of consciousness out of the tent and into more and more of life – that’s *mishklanotekha Yisrael –*the “dwellings of Israel,” because wherever you are, you can bring that Presence, that *Shekhinah,*with you.

How do you do it? The *haftora*tells us:

הִגִּ֥יד לְךָ֛ אָדָ֖ם מַה־טּ֑וֹב וּמָֽה־יְהוָ֞ה דּוֹרֵ֣שׁ מִמְּךָ֗
*You have been told, O human, what is good!*

Actually, you already know the answer intuitively, but then it tells us again just in case:

כִּ֣י אִם־עֲשׂ֤וֹת מִשְׁפָּט֙ וְאַ֣הֲבַת חֶ֔סֶד וְהַצְנֵ֥עַ לֶ֖כֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶֽיךָ׃
*Only to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your Divinity…*

On the inner level, *asot mishpat – doing justice*– means giving your attention fully to all of this moment, not “favoring” some experiences over others, just as a judge would hear all testimonies and not take any bribes.

*Ahavat hesed – love of kindness*means giving your awareness from the heart, not in a cold, mechanical way, but as an expression of generosity and benevolence.

*Hatzneia lekhet im Eloheikha – walking humbly with your Divinity*means being aware of the Mystery, of the limits of your own understanding, and living through your faith in That Mystery, knowing the Divine as the underlying Reality behind all experience…

***More on Parshat Balak...***

[**Open Eye – Parshat Balak**](http://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/open-eye-parshat-balak)
6/27/2018  [1 Comment](http://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/open-eye-parshat-balak#comments)

***What is the pupil of an eye? The pupil is actually the opening through which pours the light that creates the images we see. The pupil is essentially a hole.***

The third line of the mystical prayer, *Ana B'khoakh,* says:

“Please, Divine Strength, those who foster Your Oneness, like the pupil of an eye, guard them.”

This line is unusual. If we’re asking God to guard us, to keep us safe, why are we likening ourselves to a *bavat-* a pupil of an eye? It seems like it would make more sense to say, please guard us like a baby, or guard us like a city, but guard us like a pupil? It’s a strange idiom.

So let’s go into this a little bit.

What is the pupil of an eye? The pupil is actually the opening through which pours the light that creates the images we see. The pupil is essentially a hole.

And yet, if you make eye contact with a person, it’s really the pupil of the eye that gives you the sense of eye contact being made. That’s why in all those zombie movies, when they want to make a person seem like they’re dead, they somehow take away the pupils from the actors’ eyes. Maybe they do with special contact lenses, maybe they use CGI, but however they do it, the effect of an eye with no pupil is the effect of there being nobody home.

​It’s a disturbing image to see a person’s eye with no pupil, because we somehow know intuitively that the pupil indicates consciousness- it indicates that there’s someone there.

Which is interesting, because everyone’s pupils look more or less the same. The color of people’s eyes are different, the shape of people’s eyes are different, the face in which the eyes are set is completely unique for each person. You can’t tell the identity of someone by their pupils; you need to see their face. And yet, it’s the pupil that tells you there’s consciousness, that there’s someone home.

This fact of the pupil indicating consciousness, on one hand, yet also being nothing but an opening, on the other, is also a great symbol for who we really are. Are we our bodies? No. Are we our faces? No. Are we our feelings? Our thoughts? Our personalities? All of these things are part of us, but none of them are essentially us. The only essential ingredient is consciousness; and like the pupil of your eye, your consciousness is simply an opening. It’s not unique, it’s more or less the same for everyone, and yet it’s the most miraculous and precious thing. Without consciousness, everything else is just a shell; just a bundle of patterns.

So this prayer is crying out, in the first line, *tatir tzerura- untie the bundle!* Meaning, uncover and reveal this essential openness that we are, beneath the bundle of patterns of our bodies, our thoughts and our feelings, so that we can know ourselves as this simple openness, *k’vavat-* like a pupil.

Now there’s a certain paradox of consciousness which is also reflected in the pupil.

On one hand, the pupil is a simple openness, taking in the whole image of whatever is being seen. Similarly, consciousness is also the simple openness of experience. So in this moment, you may notice, there’s a richness to your experience- there’s your sensations, your senses, the movement of your breathing, any feelings or emotions that may be vibrating in your body, as well as thoughts that arise, persist for some time, and then dissipate. And all this richness is part of one unfolding experience in the present.

And yet, at the same time, when you’re aware of the full richness of experience that’s arising in this moment, there also arises the choice to entertain some things within your experience and to not to entertain other things. For example, some anger arises, or the impulse to judge or complain – and you can notice that it’s there, but not act on it. So on the deepest level, you’re saying “Yes” to it, you’re recognizing that this negative impulse exists in this moment, and that’s perfectly okay, but on the level of choice you can say “No” to it by choosing not to act on it; you just let it be there and then to let it dissipate.

On the other hand, an impulse may arise to really listen to the person talking to you, or to be generous in some way, and you may choose to say “Yes” to that impulse on both levels; you say “Yes” first to its existence, just as you would to anything that arises when you’re being present, but you might also say “Yes” to act on it. So on the deepest level of awareness, there’s a single “Yes” to everything that arises in the moment. That’s the *akhdut-* the Oneness, or non-duality of experience. But on the level of choice, there’s a “Yes” to some things and a “No” to other things; that’s the duality of discernment or wisdom.

This truth is also reflected in the metaphor of the pupil, in that we generally have two pupils. So on one hand the pupil is a simple openness to light which creates a single image, a single experience- that’s the *akhdut,* or Oneness level. And yet, there are two pupils, hinting at the yes and the no, the duality of choice that arises within the *akhdut* of the present.

There’s also a hint of this in the Torah story of *Bilam* the sorcerer.

In *Parshat Balak,* the king of *Moav,* whose name is *Balak,* becomes frightened of all these Israelites who are camping in a nearby valley. So, he sends messengers out to the mysterious, reclusive sorcerer *Bilam* to request that he put a curse on the Israelites. At first, *Bilam* refuses. But after several requests, he concedes and rides out on his donkey. Next, there’s a strange and unique passage- one of only two instances in the Torah of talking animals. (The other one is the talking snake in the Garden of Eden).

In this passage, *Bilam* rides out on his donkey through a vineyard, when suddenly an angel appears and blocks his path with sword drawn. But, only the donkey can see the angel; *Bilam* is oblivious to it. The donkey veers off the path to avoid the sword-wielding angel, and accidentally presses *Bilam’s*foot into a wall. *Bilam* gets angry and hits donkey with a stick, at which point the animal opens her mouth and speaks:

*“Ma asiti l’kha-*
*“What have I done to you?”*

*Bilam* yells back-

“Because you mocked me! If I had a sword I’d kill you right now!”

Says the donkey-

“Am I not your donkey that you’ve ridden until this day? Have I ever done anything like this before?”

“No,” says *Bilam.*

Suddenly, *Bilam’s* eyes are magically “uncovered” and he too sees the angel with the sword. *Bilam*bows, apologizes and offers to turn back. The angel tells him not to turn back, but he should be careful only say the words that the Divine will place in his mouth to say.

So, *Bilam* goes on his way, and meets up with King *Balak,* who pleads with *Bilam* to curse the Israelites. But, every time *Bilam* opens his mouth, he pronounces blessings instead. King *Balak* tries again and again to get *Bilam* to curse, bringing him to different places on a mountain overlooking the Israelite camp, as if that would change something. But every time, it just comes out more blessings. In *Bilam’s* final blessing, he says,

*“N’um Bilam, b’no v’or un’um hagever sh’tum ha’ayin-*
*“The words of Bilam son of Beor, the words of the man with an open eye…”*

*“N’um shomea imrei El, asher makhazeh Shaddai, yekhezeh nofel ug’lui einayim-*
*“The words of the one who hears the sayings of God, who sees the vision of Shaddai, while fallen and with uncovered eyes-*

*“Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkenotekha Yisrael-*
*“How wonderful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel…”*
*-*and the blessings flow on from there.

So what’s going on here? Why is it that *Bilam’s* donkey perceives the angel before he does, and why do his eyes become “uncovered” as a result of the donkey speaking to him? And, once his eyes are uncovered, how does that allow him to “hear” the Divine voice, transforming curses into blessings?

So one way to grasp this passage is to understand that the donkey is your own body. There’s a tendency to take the body for granted, as if it’s just a vehicle to achieve your intentions- like a car, or a donkey that you ride on. But the spiritual potential of your body is to be a temple of Presence – a vessel for the light of your awareness.

So at first, *Bilam* is just hitting his donkey, trying to control it. That’s the ego- selfish, angry, and entitled. But when he starts listening to what the donkey is telling him, then suddenly he can see the angel and hear it speak. Meaning, when you become present with your body, anchoring your awareness in your breathing, then you can clearly see the nature of your impulses that arise, and hear the “angels of your better nature” so to speak. So rather than simply being taken over by yoru impulses, there’s space to really see which which ones are blessings and which are curses. That’s the “uncovering of the eyes” so to speak. There’s an impulse of anger, or an urge to put someone down- you can see that clearly and not be taken over by it. Or, there’s an impulse of love, of supportiveness, of listening- that’s a blessing, and you can choose that. That’s the Yes and the No of being conscious.

There’s a story that when Reb Yosef Yitzhak of Lubavitch was four years old, he asked his father, Reb Shalom Ber:

“Abba, why do we have two eyes, but only one mouth and one nose?”

“Do you know your Hebrew letters?” asked Reb Shalom Ber.

“Yes,” replied the boy.

“And what is the difference between the letter shin and the letter sin?” continued Reb Shalom.

“A shin has a dot on the right side, and the sin on the left.”

“Right!  Now, the letter shin represents fire, and fire makes the light that we see by. The dots on the right and left are like your two eyes.

“Accordingly, fire has two opposite qualities. On one hand, it can give us life by keeping us warm and cooking our food; that’s the right dot. On the other hand, it can burn us; that’s the left dot.

“Similarly, there are things you should look at with your right eye, and things you should look at with your left eye. You should see others with your right eye, being warm and loving, but see candy with your left eye, not being taken over by that urge to grab at it!”

But to maintain your Presence in your body so as to be aware of your freedom to choose blessing and not curse, you have to be ever-watchful; you have to be on guard constantly. Just as the pupil of an eye- *k’vavat-* is an open space of perception, so your awareness is also an open space through which you can watchfully guard- *shomreim-* the movements and sensations of your body with *gibor-* with strength. And, in so doing, we become *dorshei yikhudekha-* the ones who foster or tap into the Oneness of Reality, the Oneness of this moment.

So let’s chant these words: *K’vavat Shomreim.* As you sing *k’vavat, “*like a pupil,” open your hands palms upward, to express the openness and transcendence of awareness. And when you sing *Shomreim,* “Guard Them,” bring your hands in, palms together, intensifying presence in your body. So *k’vavat,* open hands and aware of the open spaciousness of awareness beyond the body, the space around your body, then *shomreim,* bringing in hands and intensifying awareness within the body...

​[**Who Is It That Blesses? Parshat Balak**
​](http://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/who-is-it-that-blesses-parshat-balak)7/6/2017  [1 Comment](http://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/who-is-it-that-blesses-parshat-balak#comments)

*“Ma asiti l’kha-*
*“What have I done to you?”*

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“Right!  Now, the letter shin represents fire, and fire makes the light that we see by. The dots on the right and left are like your two eyes.

“Accordingly, fire has two opposite qualities. On one hand, it can give us life by keeping us warm and cooking our food; that’s the right dot. On the other hand, it can burn us; that’s the left dot.

“Similarly, there are things you should look at with your right eye, and things you should look at with your left eye. You should see others with your right eye, being warm and loving, but see candy with your left eye, not being taken over by that urge to grab at it!”

So on this *Shabbat Balak,* the Sabbath of Seeing, may we return our awareness ever more deeply into our bodies so that can *see* clearly the nature of our impulses and *hear*the “angels of our better nature” so that we can *choose* paths of blessing and peace.

​Good Shabbos!

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[**The Eyes of a Donkey- Parshat Balak**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-eyes-of-a-donkey-parshat-balak5011071)

Once, during a monthly commute back to the Bay Area, I took an Uber from the airport to my car which was parked near our old house in Oakland. When I arrived, I got out of the Uber, unloaded my suitcases from the trunk onto the street, unlocked my dirty car that had been sitting for a month, loaded the suitcases into the car, got into the driver’s seat and reached for my cell phone to plug into the car charger.

But… no cell phone! I had left it in the Uber.
Immediately I looked- the Uber was half way down the street! I took off running like my pants were on fire. The car started to slow down- yes! He sees me! But then he went over a speed bump and… started accelerating again!

Adrenaline pumping, I ran even faster. I yelled for him to stop. He approached a second speed bump, slowed down, and… yes! He stopped!

As I reached his car, he handed me the phone out of the driver’s side window. “You’re a fast runner!” he said.

“Not usually,” I replied.

The body has tremendous potential, usually untapped. But in the moment of emergency, that potential can be unleashed. When I was little I remember hearing a story of a woman who lifted a car to save her child who had become trapped.

But there’s another potential of the body besides its physical potential- the potential to save you by lifting the weight of ego, under which you may have become trapped. Have you ever been motivated by negativity or craving to do something that would have terrible consequences, and in that emergency your body gave you the message to stop and turn back?

In this week’s reading, Balak king of Moab becomes frightened of the Israelites who are camping in a nearby valley, so he petitions the prophet/sorcerer Bilam to curse the Israelites. As Bilam rides out on his donkey to the Israelite camp, there is a strange and unique passage- one of only two instances in the Torah of talking animals (the other one being the talking serpent in the Garden of Eden).

Bilam rides his donkey through a vineyard, when an angel blocks the path with sword drawn. But only the donkey can see the angel; Bilam is oblivious to it. The donkey veers off the path to avoid the sword-wielding angel, and accidentally presses Bilam’s foot into a wall. Bilam gets mad and hits donkey with a stick, at which point the animal opens her mouth and speaks:

*“Ma asiti l’kha-*
*“What have I done to you that you hit me?”*

*Bilam*yells back-

*“Because you mocked me! If I had a sword I’d kill you right now!”*

Says the donkey-

*“Am I not your donkey that you’ve ridden until this day? Have I ever done anything like this before?”*

*“No.”*

Then Bilam’s eyes are “uncovered” and he too sees the angel with the sword. Bilam bows, prostrates, apologizes, and goes up the mountain to view the Israelite camps.

When Bilam opens his mouth to pronounce the curse, his mouth utters a blessing instead:

*“Lo hibit avein b’Ya’akov-*
*“(The Divine) sees nothing bad in Jacob...*

*“Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkenotekha Yisrael-*
*“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel…”*

The donkey is your body- the beast you live in. You may think you want to say something, but your words will be a curse if you can’t “see the angel.” But the donkey sees it- and the donkey can talk!

What is the blessing that God “wants” you to say?

Your body is the gateway to this awareness, if you become present. Connect with your body, open your mouth and let the blessing come through.

But, the question may arise:

Isn’t the body also a hindrance to consciousness and wisdom? Isn’t your body the source of negativity and cravings?

In Kabbalah, one of the symbols for wisdom is fire- as in the fire that Moses saw at the burning bush. This is the fire of Reality becoming conscious- the fire that looks through your eyes, reading these words, right now.

But fire is also a symbol of destruction- of craving and negativity- as in the plague of hail and fire that rained down on the Egyptians. This is the fire of anger and craving, seducing you to satisfy its every impulse, then leaving you unsatisfied, with a trail of unwanted consequences.

Both of these manifestations of fire, however, are teachers of wisdom- if only you learn to discern whether it’s the fire of “yes” or the fire of “no.”

“Yes” to love, “no” to reaching- to seeing fulfillment outside yourself. “Yes” to blessing, “no” to the impulses that keep you stuck.

There’s a story that when Reb Yosef Yitzhak of Lubavitch was four years old, he asked his father, Reb Shalom Ber:

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“Similarly, there are things you should look at with your right eye, and things you should look at with your left eye. You should see others with your right eye, and candy with your left eye!”

On this *Shabbat Balak,* the Sabbath of Body-Blessing, may we keep our awareness deeply connected to our senses and our breathing, so that the fire of Presence burns brightly with wisdom and with love. May we not identify with the urgencies of craving and negativity, and know that through the power of Presence, we are totally free from their power. And may the warmth and light of that freedom deepen more and more…​