



Parshat Chukat-Balak
July 4, 2020 — 12 Tamuz 5780
Pivot
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In honor of the Fourth of July, I want to tell you a true story about our beloved nation in a hard season on its finest day.

Our story begins in Aleppos, Syria, where a young boy named Abdulkader Hayani left school at the age of 9 to learn the craft of tailoring. He got to be a master tailor and came to own his own tailor shop in Aleppo, overseeing six employees and ten sewing machines. But when the Syrian civil war began, Aleppo was reduced to ruins, and his tailoring business was no more.

Together with his family, Abdulkader Hayani fled to Jordan. They applied for refugee status to come to America. They wait and wait, in limbo, *for five years*. Finally they are given papers. They arrive—husband, wife, four young children—in 2017. Volunteers from Temple Beth Elohim help them settle into their new life: rented home in Framingham, child care, clothing, technology, job interviews, transportation, and navigating a whole new language and culture.

The family is getting into its new groove. The children are young and resilient and thriving. They are playing soccer, imbibing American culture, speaking English as natives—so much so that their parents were worried about their losing their Arabic. Abdulkader Hayani gets a job at a menswear store where he does in-house tailoring.

And then the pandemic hit.

Abdulkader Hayani lost his job. The kids were home from school. Their thriving new life stopped in its tracks. After all they had been through—the Syrian civil war, years of

immigration limbo, starting over as immigrants—they finally create something beautiful and joyful and stable, and all is upturned by Covid-19.

Brokenness. In his opening Hartman lecture, Donniel Hartman spoke about brokenness. We are all broken. What happens, he asked, when somebody says to you, in the course of making small talk, “everything okay?” The socially expected answer is “yeah, everything is great.” But we are living in a period when we cannot say that. We cannot say everything is great. We cannot even say everything is okay. The truth is, nothing is okay.

How do we think about our life when nothing is okay? Everybody feels their own brokenness. I feel this brokenness every day. Every morning I come to the Gann Chapel and daven in an empty chapel, just me and Dan, hearing a holy cacophony on Zoom, people who are there, but not there. There virtually, but virtually is not the same as in person. Every evening we daven maariv in the Gann Chapel, we trust somebody out there is listening, but we can’t see you. This is the 14th Shabbat where we are in an empty sanctuary. As this lockdown has progressed, we are hearing from members: Zoom doesn’t work for me. Livestream doesn’t work for me. I feel disconnected. Just this week one woman, a member of Temple Emanuel, shared that she is going to in person services at a Catholic Church. That is how much she misses services. She said don’t worry, I won’t take communion. I won’t kneel. I just need to pray with people in real time.

How might we think about our own brokenness?

Donniel offered an evocative image from the world of basketball—the pivot.

When you have the ball, and you are stuck in a not great situation, and you are not sure what to do, should you pass, should you shoot, you kind of need help, there is a rule in basketball

that one foot has to be firmly planted in the ground. But the other foot is free to move, to find a new direction.

So too, Donniel suggests, we need to plant one foot firmly in our core principles. The other foot we are free to move to find another direction that will enable us to grow.

In our reading today Moses learns to pivot. He loses *both* of his siblings, Miriam *and* Aaron, in the *same* period. Miriam, who watched baby Moses in the wicker basket until he was picked up by the daughter of Pharaoh, Miriam who danced after the Sea of Reeds was split, Miriam dies. And Aaron, who walked with Moses into all those confrontations with the Pharaoh, Aaron who helped orchestrate the ten plagues, Aaron his help-mate, Aaron dies. Losing one sibling is unspeakably painful. Losing two siblings? There are no words. Everything okay Moses? No. Nothing is okay.

What does he do?

He pivots. He keeps one foot planted firmly where it has always been—committed to the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel.

With the other foot, he pivoted in some new directions. At one point he was the liberator, the one who confronted Pharaoh. At another point he was the lawgiver, bringing down the tablets from Sinai. But now, feeling his own mortality, after burying his brother and his sister, he does something he never thought he could do. When God had summoned him at the burning bush, Moses had said: *loh ish dvarim anochi*, I am not a man of words. But after the deaths of his siblings, he pivots. He becomes a man of words. In his speeches in Deuteronomy, Moses, with his last strength, implores the Israelites to follow God's Torah in order to stay in the land of Israel and build a beautiful life there. Moses' world had changed. He lost his brother. He lost his

sister. He faced his own mortality. His world had changed. But his mission did not. He would accomplish that timeless mission in a new way, by pivoting to giving speeches.

Here we are, on the Fourth of July, in a perfectly dreadful season. You know all the problems. You don't need me to mention them. The question is: how do we grow from them? How do we become a better version of ourselves? How do we fill our life with meaning even now?

All of us have to pivot.

Where is your one foot firmly planted? What makes you you?

Where will your other foot pivot? What new direction can it take you so that you can find new ways to accomplish your eternal purposes?

Which brings us back to Abdulkader Hayani. He survived the destruction of his tailor shop in Aleppo, he survived the Syrian Civil War, he survived 5 years in limbo in Syria, he was a new immigrant to America trying to get used to a new language and a new culture. And somehow despite all that he managed to create a new life for himself, his wife, and their four young children, just when the Coronavirus hit, leaving his kids at home and him unemployed.

He planted one foot firmly in his core principles. He was a gifted tailor. He could make magic with needles and threads and sewing. He loved America, his new home. He possessed a fundamental decency and desire to be helpful. He was determined to pay forward the grace that had been extended to him and his family by so many volunteers who had helped them settle in.

With his other foot, he pivoted. What does the world need now? Masks. Abdulkader Hayani, his wife Asmaa, and their four young children spent the pandemic together making 50 to 60 masks a day. His oldest child, Mustafa, age 12, runs the sewing machines, the younger children trim extra threads from the fabric with their scissors. But that's not all. He reached out

to his Beth Elohim team of volunteers and taught *them* how to make masks. He would do Zoom calls empowering Jews in Wellesley to create the masks that our society so desperately needs.

One foot he planted where it has always been: decency, humanity, gratitude, desire to be helpful. The other foot pivoted to new things he had never done before. He had never before made masks. He had never before taught others how to make masks. He had never before taught anybody anything on Zoom. But his new pivot accomplished his unchanging purposes.

Moses became a speechmaker to advance the love of God and Israel.

Abdulkader Hayani became a mask maker and mask teacher to add to the health of his new adopted country.

What is *your* unchanging purpose? What is the core that you care about so deeply? You always have. You always will. That never changes.

What is your pivot, what are your new moves that will help you accomplish your timeless purposes now? Happy Birthday America, and Shabbat shalom.