Balak 2020

*Gilui Anayim* (Uncovered eyes)

"The words of one..who sees..with *uncovered eyes*." Numbers 24:4

Shabbat Shalom everyone. I am excited to be celebrating my first shabbat with you.

Not too far from here, near Camp Eisner is one of my favorite places. It is called Monument Mountain. I imagine that some of you have been there. When we were hiking to the top of the mountain it was hard to see the view because of the thick covering of trees, but when we finally got to the summit, suddenly we could see what we could not see before. From there, were above the trees and could see in 360 degrees the incredible beauty of the Berkshire Mountains mile after mile – in a way that I was unable to see or imagine until we got to that place at that moment.

Have you ever had an experience like this in which it was hard to see what was all around you, and then suddenly you came to a moment in which it all became clear and you could see and understand in a way that a few moments before, you could not have imagined.

This is exactly what happens in our Torah portion to a man named Bilam. Bilam had an unusual career, even in Biblical times. He was a prophet for hire who made a living selling blessings and curses. The children of Israel having escaped slavery from Egypt were making their way back to the promised land. When they arrive at the border of Moab, which lay on the way, they send a message to the King, Balak, saying please let us pass through your land. We will stick to the road and will not let our animals eat any grass nor let them drink any water from your wells. Please, let us pass quickly through your territory. King Balak did not like strangers crossing his borders. To stop them he hires Bilam (that prophet for hire) to go and curse the Israelites and to make them go away. So Bilam climbs to the top of a mountain across from Jericho and looks down at the Israelite camp and sees the people. Bilam opens his mouth ready to give a juicy curse and then something unexpected happens. He pronounces a beautiful blessing that has been a treasure of the Jewish people ever since.

Bilam suddenly could see with *"Gilui Aynayim*" with uncovered eyes. His eyes were uncovered from the lenses of his preconceived notions, his prejudices. His eyes could see beyond the people's foreign appearance, the style of their clothes, their tents. What Bilam saw was the good deeds of the people.

And then with his eyes uncovered Bilam says "*Ma Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishkanotecha Yisrael" How lovely are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel."*

This sentence is a description of stages. First the tents of Jacob and then the dwelling places of Israel. Jacob and Israel are two names for the same person. When he was young, and a bit of a trickster, he was called Jacob. Later he matures and gets a new name Israel, Yishar-El (one who has straightened himself out and now lives with integrity.) The Tents of Jacob, become the *mishkan*, the sacred space where the *schina* dwells–a spark of the divine in our midst.

The Talmud teaches that whenever a person enters a synagogue, we should say the words of "*Mah Tovu*". Why? I think it is to remind us to be like Bilam. To see things as they really are. Not just to see through the lenses of our conditioning. But to see with uncovered eyes (*Gilui Aynayim*). To see who others really are, their good deeds, and to let that inspire us that we too are capable of growth and transformation, like Jacob who grew into Israel, and the tents that become the sacred sanctuaries that help us to feel the presence of God in our lives.

*Ma Tovu*  How lovely is *this* community. I have seen over the past few days countless acts of kindness, love and goodness as you have embraced my family, my wife and children, whom you had never met before. You have aided us with meals, games, toys, even a few plants to help my children put down roots in the community.

My prayer is that together we might continue to nurture this community this "*Mishkenotecha Yisrael,"* in which we feel the presence of God through our deeds of loving kindness.

In this spirit I would like to invite you to sing along with Alli as she leads us in the words of our Torah portion, the words of *Ma Tovu*.