

CHIZUK & IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

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Bilam's prophetic words continue to resound in our ears to the present day: HEIN AM L'VADAD YISHKON U'VAGOYIM LO YITCHASHAV - "Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Bamidbar 23:9).

What are the practical ramifications of these words? In a famous vort, the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, claimed that: "When we are alone (L'VADAD) then we are allowed to live peacefully - YISHKON. However, when we do not separate ourselves and attempt to intermingle with the nations, they don't even consider us to be human (LO YITCHASHAV).

The Ridbaz, in many of his drashot, emphasized that our continued survival is dependent on our complete and utter separation. In Sefer Ovadiya, the Jewish people are likened to fire, while in Yeshayahu (10:12), the nations are likened to water. The lesson is clear: If the water is contained in a vessel thus being separate from the fire, it will cook and not extinguish the fire, however,

when the water is allowed to mix together with the fire it will douse it. He likened those who advocate for a positive, mutually enriching, cultural exchange with the nations to one who would naively suggest to comingle fire and water.

(To soften this somber picture we must remember that in truth we are never totally alone. As we separate ourselves from others we come closer to He who is also alone - V'NISGAV HASHEM L'VADO...)

Surprisingly, though, this isolationist sentiment is not held only by Ultra-Orthodox preachers, it has been closely echoed by secular Israeli diplomats as well. I have already once mentioned Yehuda Avner's description of the weekly Torah sessions hosted by Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In his book "The Prime Ministers", Avner describes how Begin opened one such meeting quoting the verse: "This is a People that shall dwell alone..." commenting on the fact that this is a "startlingly accurate prophecy of our Jewish experience throughout history". Begin followed this with a comment he quoted from Dr. Yaakov Herzog's book based on this same verse: "If one asks how the ingathering of exiles, which no one could have imagined in their wildest dreams, came about", Herzog writes, "How the state of Israel could endure such

severe security challenges... how the unity of the Jewish people through the Diaspora has been preserved - one must come back to the primary idea that this is 'A people that dwells alone'.

"Cease dwelling alone and we cease to exist", concluded Begin.

As convincing as this may seem coming from Begin's mouth, not all have agreed with this message. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has proposed we adopt a radically different perspective (from his website, Balak 5771) He describes a conversation he once had with an Israeli diplomat where they discussed an upcoming UN Conference where everyone expected there to be a heavy assault on the legitimacy of the State of Israel. In the course of their discussion the Israeli diplomat noted that there was nothing surprising in this, as "It was always like this - we are a "People that dwells alone", AM L'VADAD YISHKON.

Rabbi Sacks disagreed, pointing out that the Torah characterizes Bilam's utterance as a curse! Only the phrase MA TOVU was turned into a blessing. The expression AM L'VADAD should thus be seen as a curse and not be wrongly categorized as a desired blessing. His conclusion being that this expression should not mislead us to believe that "We are destined to be isolated without allies or friends as if

anti-Semitism were somehow written into the script."

Perhaps Rabbi Sacks's firsthand experiences as a Chief Rabbi welcomed and hailed by English aristocracy; on a 'first-name basis' with the Prime Minister, leads him to articulate this position painting a halcyon picture of Jewish destiny.

However one understands the ultimate message of AM L'VADAD, whether as part of a restrictive or inclusive picture of Jewish destiny, all would agree that in order to bring this destiny closer we must be willing to make the leap of the alone to the Alone.

There is no better way to begin than coming to G-d's Land to Eretz Yisrael!



These weekly words of Torah wisdom can be found in my recently published book "Eretz Yisrael and Aliyah in the weekly Parsha". It can be ordered by calling 052-336-0553 or by ordering it on Amazon