

לע"נ

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A People That Dwells Alone?

Balak

The dictionary defines epiphany as "a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realisation." This is the story of an epiphany I experienced one day in May 2001, and it changed my perception of the Jewish fate.

It was Shavuot and we were in Jerusalem. We had gone for lunch to a former lay leader of a major Diaspora community. Also present at the table was an Israeli diplomat, together with one of the leaders of the Canadian Jewish Community.

The conversation turned to the then forthcoming - now notorious - United Nations' Conference against Racism at Durban. Though the conference would not take place until August, we already knew that it, and the parallel gathering of NGOs, would turn into a diatribe against Israel, marking a new phase in the assault against its legitimacy.

The diplomat, noting that the conversation had taken a pessimistic turn, and being a religious man, sought to comfort us. "It was ever thus", he said, and then quoted a famous phrase: "We are AM

L'VADAD YISHKON, the people that dwells alone."

It comes from this week's parsha. Bilaam, hired to curse the Jewish people, instead repeatedly blesses them. In his first utterance he says to Balak, King of Moav:

How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? From the top of the rocks I see them, and from the hills I gaze down: a people that dwells alone; not reckoned among the nations. (Bamidbar 23:8-9)

Hearing these words in that context I experienced an explosion of light in the brain. I suddenly saw how dangerous this phrase is, and how close it runs the risk of being a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, you are likely to find yourself alone. That is not a safe place to be.

"Are you sure", I said to the diplomat, "that this was a blessing, not a curse? Remember who said it. It was Bilaam, and he is not known as a friend of the Jews." Bilaam is one of the people mentioned in the Mishna (Sanhedrin 10:2) as having no share in the world to come. Having failed to curse the Israelites, he eventually did them great harm (Bamidbar 31:16).

"Remember", I continued, "what the Talmud says in Sanhedrin (105b), that all the blessings with which Bilaam blessed the Jewish people turned into curses

with the sole exception of the phrase, 'How good are your tents, Yaakov, your homes, O Yisrael'" (24:5). The Rabbis suggest that Bilaam was deliberately ambiguous in what he said, so that his words could be understood as blessings but also had another and darker meaning.

"Nor", I said, "is BADAD, being alone, a good place to be according to the Torah. The first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah are in the phrase LO TOV HEYOT HA'ADAM L'VADO, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (B'reishit 2:18). About a leper the Torah says, BADAD YEISHEIV MICHUTZ LAMACHANEH MOSHAVO, 'He shall dwell alone, outside the camp' (Vayikra 13:46). When the book of Eicha seeks to describe the tragedy that has overtaken the Jewish people it says EICHA YASH'VA VADAD HA-IR RABATI AM, 'How alone is the city once filled with people' (1:1). Except in connection with God, being alone is rarely a blessing.

What I suddenly saw, when I heard the diplomat seeking to give us comfort, was how dangerous this Jewish self-definition had become. It seemed to sum up the Jewish condition in the light of antisemitism and the Holocaust. But that is not how the commentators understood the phrase. Rashi says it means that Jews are indestructible. Ibn Ezra says it means that they don't assimilate. Ramban says it means that they maintain their own integrity. It does not mean that they are destined to be

isolated, without allies or friends. That is not a blessing but a curse. That is not a destiny; still less is it an identity.

To be a Jew is to be loved by God; it is not to be hated by Gentiles. Our ancestors were called on to be "a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation." The word KADOSH, "holy", means set apart. But there is a profound difference between being apart and being alone.

Leaders are set apart, but they are not alone. If they really were alone, they could not be leaders. Athletes, writers, actors, singers, pianists may live apart when they are preparing for a major performance, but they are not alone. Their apartness is purposeful. It allows them to focus their energies, hone and refine their skills. It is not an existential condition, a chosen and willed isolation.

There is no suggestion in the Torah that Jews will live alone. God says to Avraham, "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Avraham was different from his neighbours, but he fought for them and prayed for them. He was apart but not alone.

For some time now - the Durban conference was one sign of it - Israel and Diaspora Jewry have faced growing isolation. Israel has been the object of a sustained campaign of delegitimation. Meanwhile, SH'CHITA is under attack in Holland, and BRIT MILA in San Francisco. Battles we thought we had won for the freedom to live as Jews, individually in the Diaspora, nationally and collectively

in the state of Israel, are now having to be fought all over again.

These are important fights, good fights, whose outcome will affect more than Jews. In ancient times, Israel was a small nation surrounded by large empires. In the Middle Ages, Jews were the most conspicuous minority in a Christian Europe. Today the State of Israel is a vulnerable enclave in a predominantly Muslim Middle East.

Jews have long been cast in the role of the 'Other', the one who does not fit into the dominant paradigm, the majority faith, the prevailing culture. One of Judaism's central themes is the dignity of dissent. Jews argue, challenge, question. Sometimes they do so even with God Himself. That is why the fate of Jews in any given time and place is often the best index of freedom in that time and place.

It is no accident that the story of Avraham begins immediately after the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, which opens with the words, "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech." Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) says that this means that there was no dissent. There was an enforced uniformity of opinion. Such a society leaves no room for dialogue, debate, disagreement and difference, the things essential for freedom.

When, therefore, Jews fight for the right

to be, whether as a nation in its historic home, or as a religious group in other societies, they fight not for themselves alone but for human freedom as a whole. It was the Catholic writer Paul Johnson who wrote that Jews are "exemplars and epitomisers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form... It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatise these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral."

As we prepare ourselves for the next battle in the long fight for freedom, it is vitally important not to believe in advance that we are destined to be alone, to find ourselves without friends and allies, confronting a world that neither understands us nor is willing to grant us a place to live our faith and shape our future in loyalty to our past. If we are convinced we will fail, we probably will. That is why the Rabbis were right to suggest that Bilaam's words were not necessarily well-meant.

To be different is not necessarily to be alone. Indeed, it is only by being what we uniquely are that we contribute to humankind what we alone can give. Singular, distinctive, countercultural - yes: these are part of the Jewish condition. But alone? No. That is not a blessing but a curse.

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) What is the difference between being set apart and being alone, according to Rabbi Sacks?**
- (2) What do you think we can learn about isolation, and facing challenges, from this piece?**
- (3) In your opinion, what makes the Jewish people unique?**

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH