



Parashat Balak **A Lonely Nation** **Rabbi Shai Finkelstein**

במדבר פרק כג פסוק ט

כִּי־מֵרֵאשׁ צָרִים אָרְאֵנוּ וּמַגְבְּעוֹת אֲשׁוּרֵנוּ הֵן־עִם לְבָדֵד יִשְׁכֵּן וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב.

שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשת בא פרשה טו סימן ז

הן עם לבדד ישכון, מהו הן כל האותיות מזדווגין חוץ מב' אותיות הללו כיצד א"ט הרי י' ב"ח הרי י' ג"ז הרי י' ד"ו הרי י' נמצא ה' לעצמה, וכן האות הנ' אין לה זוג י"צ הרי ק' כ"פ הרי ק' ל"ע הרי ק' מ"ס הרי ק' נמצא נ' לעצמה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא כשם ששני אותיות הללו אינן יכולין להזדווג עם כל האותיות אלא לעצמן כך ישראל אינן יכולין להדבק עם כל העובדי כוכבים ומזלות הקדמונים אלא לעצמן מפורשים שאפילו שונא גוזר עליהם לחלל השבת ומבטל את המילה או לעבוד עבודת כוכבים הן נהרגים ואין מתערבים בהם שנא' הן עם לבדד ישכון ובגוים לא יתחשב, ומה אני עושה כל שונא וכל אויב שיגזור עליהם גזרה אני הורגו שנאמר הן עם כלביא יקום.

רש"ר הירש פרק כג פסוק ט

הן עם לבדד ישכן וגו' • הוא יחיה בארצו הגדורה בגבולותיה ולא ירבה קשרים עם עמים אחרים. הוא יקיים את תפקידו "הפנימי" הלאומי כ"עם" בעל חברה לאומית, והוא לא יבקש את גדולתו כ"גוי" בין גוים, כ"גוף" לאומי המרשים בכוחו ובגבורתו.

שד"ל

לבדד ישכון • שאינו נחשב בכלל הגוים, כי אין לו אדמה. איזה דבר טוב יש באמרו כי אין ליעקב אדמה? א"כ אני אומר כי לבדד ישכון הכוונה נבדל מן הגוים, ועי"כ לא נוטה מן הדרך הטוב והישר, ולפיכך ה' אלהיו עמו להצליח. ועל הדרך הזה אני מפרש ובגוים לא יתחשב, כלומר לא שם עצמו בכלל הגוים.

Rav on Chumash 23:9 (Community, Covenant and Commitment, pp. 143-144)

Unity in Israel is a basic principle in Judaism. We have formulated this principle in one sentence: You are one, Your name is one, and who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth? (Minchah Amidah of Shabbos).

The principle of unity expresses itself in two ways. First, the unity of Jews as members of a spiritual community, as a congregation which was established through the conclusion of the covenant at Mount Sinai... The unity of the Jewish people as a community is based upon the uniqueness of the Jewish way of life—a Torah existence. What ties the Yemenite water carrier in the streets of Tel Aviv to the Jews of Boston?

A uniform Orach Chaim, the Shema Yisrael, Shabbos, Kol Nidrei night, the Seder night, kashrus, tefillin, the characteristic trait of kindness, the hope and yearning for redemption. The Hebrew word edah, congregation, is the same as ed, witness, and edus, testimony; thus a spiritual-religious entity is tied through a transcendental-ethical consciousness to a vast memory of a people about a divine law with a common past and a collective future. A collective testimony united us all into a Jewish community. The Jew who erases from his memory this great testimony, destroying the unique collective tradition, breaks the tie which joins him with the Jewish community as part of a congregation, as part of a spiritual Torah entity.

Unity also manifests itself in our unique political-historical lot as a nation. We are unique not only in our way of life, but also in our historical transigrations and in our paradoxical fate. Our history would not fit into a different historical framework, and our fate is incomprehensible. The enigma of our existence is primarily revealed through our loneliness and our affliction in all times, the current era included. It is a nation that will dwell alone and will not be reckoned among the nations. The State of Israel did not avoid this unique fate; quite the contrary, it has given expression to it in a more concrete fashion.

No Jew can renounce his part of the unity, which emerges from the fate of loneliness of the Jewish people as a nation. This political-historical unity is based upon the conclusion of the covenant in Egypt, which occurred even prior to the giving of the Torah at Sinai: And I shall take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you (Ex. 6:7). This covenant forced upon us all one uniform historical fate. The Hebrew word *am*, nation, is identical to the Hebrew word *im*, with. Our fate of unity manifests itself through a historical indispensable union.

Rav on Chumash 23:9 (Reflections, Vol. 1, pp. 171-172)

From its very inception, Judaism has been strikingly different from other faiths. It has embodied ideas, a way of life, and aspirations for the future which set the Jewish people apart from other groups. A rather unfriendly observer, Balaam still felt compelled to characterize the Jews as *a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations*.

There are three primary areas of distinctiveness without which Judaism would lose its essential character.

Commandments. These are the *mitzvos*, behavioral imperatives, which are derived from the divine will.

Doctrines. Judaism regards its dogmas and values as verities which are rooted in the Torah tradition and whose authority is ultimately divine.

Our theological and philosophical premises about God, man, and creation are uniquely Jewish and, through the course of centuries, have been preserved despite efforts at dissuasion, ridicule, and torture. We in

modern times have not been authorized by our millennia-old history to revise these historical attitudes or to trade the fundamentals of our faith for the illusory pursuit of interfaith goodwill. This would be a betrayal of our great tradition and would, furthermore, produce no practical benefits. A cringing readiness to barter away our identity will never evoke the respect of any who confront us. Only a staunch and unequivocal bearing, reflecting our firm commitment to God and a sense of pride and privilege in what we are, will impress other faith communities.

Future Expectations. Judaism foresees and eagerly awaits the coming of the Messiah, the vindication of Jewish singularity and chosenness, the ingathering of the dispersed in the Holy Land, the reestablishment of the Temple, the universal acknowledgment of ethical monotheism, and the realization of world peace. These beliefs have sustained us for countless centuries in periods of trial. They are called eschatological expectations, since they represent our vision of the future which we anticipate with exultant certainty. Other faiths define their eschatological expectations in other terms.

Adopting the religious practices of others, the dilution of dogmatic certitudes, and the waiving of eschatological expectations would spell the end of the vibrant and great faith experience of our four-thousand-year-old history.

Rebbe 23:9

The “sturdiness” referred here is the Jewish people’s abiding and unwavering selfless devotion to God, including their willingness to lay down their lives, if necessary, rather than betray this devotion. We inherit this quality from the patriarchs and matriarchs, who internalized this devotion so intensely that it became part of their being, which was in turn passed on to their progeny.