

Parashat Balak, 5770, 2010:

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A Nation That Dwells Alone

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The phrase, “Now it came to pass in the morning” (“*vayehi b’boker*”), appears a total of eight times in *Tanach* (the Hebrew canon of holy texts). Each instance portends a significant change either for an individual or for our nation, and on occasion, both. It appears in our *parasha* in the narrative of Balak and Bilam. Balak was the King of Moav, who both hated and feared the Jewish people. He hired Bilam, the world’s greatest sorcerer, to curse our nation and halt our seemingly unstoppable rise to glory. Little did Balak know, and even less could he comprehend, that our people’s grandeur was a direct result of G-d’s desire to have His divine plan fulfilled. Since he lacked this understanding, Balak was convinced that he could bring radical misfortune upon us through Bilam’s curses. In fact, Balak was so focused upon the destruction of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) that he refused to listen to Bilam’s multiple protestations that he could only say and do what G-d allowed him:

Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not send to you to call for you? Why did you not come to me? Am I indeed incapable of honoring you?” Balaam said to Balak, “Behold I have come to you, do I have any power to say anything? The word G-d puts into my mouth—that I will speak.” ... Now it came to pass in the morning that Balak took Balaam and led him up to Bamoth Baal, and from there he saw part of the people. (*Sefer Bamidbar 22:37-38, 41*, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, all underlining my own)

Like other megalomaniacal monarchs, Balak expected his evil desires to be fulfilled. Instead, what began with “*vayehi b’boker*,” eventuated in Bilam’s incomparable blessing

of the Jewish people:

How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the L-rd has not been angered? For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills; it is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations. Who counted the dust of Jacob or the number of a fourth of [or, of the seed of] Israel? May my soul die the death of the upright and let my end be like his.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 23:8-10)

Bilam’s blessing that we are “a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations,” ultimately from the Almighty Himself, may well be one of the major reasons for our survival - especially in the light of all the trials and tribulations of our storied history.

Given the import of Bilam’s *bracha* (blessing), it is logical to ask, “What did Bilam (i.e. the Torah) mean when he described our people as ‘a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations?’” A surface reading would seem to indicate that this refers to the manifest separation of the Jewish people from the other nations of the world. After all, we are proscribed from marrying non-Jews, prohibited from eating non-kosher food, and obligated to fulfill both the positive (*zachor*) and negative (*shamor*) aspects of the holy Shabbat – all mitzvot that functionally serve to differentiate us from our non-Jewish neighbors. Rashi (1040-1105), however, takes a much more conceptual approach in analyzing our phrase:

It is a nation that will dwell alone: This is [the legacy] their forefathers gained for them-to dwell alone, as the *Targum* [the Aramaic translation – interpretation of the Torah by Onkelos] renders it [it is a nation that is alone destined to inherit the world].

and will not be reckoned among the nations: As *Targum* paraphrases, they will not perish along with the other nations, for it says, “for I shall make an end of all the nations...” (*Sefer Yermiahu* 30:11); they will not be reckoned with the rest... [*Midrash Tanchuma* Balak 12]

According to Rashi, the expression “It is a nation that will dwell alone and will not be

reckoned among the nations,” is a statement squarely focused upon the unique eschatological vision of the Jewish people that was revealed to our forebears. This prophecy was first revealed to Avram (i.e. Avraham) in his mystical encounter with G-d, in the narrative of the *brit bein habetarim* (the Covenant of the Pieces):

And He said to him, “I am the L-rd, Who brought you forth from Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it.” And he [Avram] said, “O L-rd G-d, how will I know that I will inherit it?” And He said to him, “Take for Me three heifers and three goats and three rams, and a turtle dove and a young bird.” And he took for Him all these, and he divided them in the middle, and he placed each part opposite its mate, but he did not divide the bird. And the birds of prey descended upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. Now the sun was ready to set, and a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and behold, a fright, a great darkness was falling upon him. And He said to Abram, “You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years. And also the nation that they will serve will I judge, and afterwards they will go forth with great possessions. But you will come to your forefathers in peace; you will be buried in a good old age. And the fourth generation will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites will not be complete until then.” Now it came to pass that the sun had set, and it was dark, and behold, a smoking furnace and a fire brand, which passed between these parts. On that day, the L-rd formed a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt until the great river, the Euphrates river.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:7-18)

Allow me to ask two of the many questions that enter our minds regarding this mysterious passage:

1. Why did Avram withhold himself from dividing the birds?
2. What is the symbolism inherent in the expression: “And the birds of prey descended upon the carcasses and Abram drove them away?”

Once again, let us turn to Rashi in order to find answers to our questions. Why did Avram leave the birds whole and undivided? It is because they represented the eternity of the Jewish people:

... the Israelites are likened to young doves, as it is said (*Shir Hashirim* 2:14): “My dove, in the clefts of the rock.” Therefore, he divided the animals, as an allusion that the nations will gradually perish. “But he did not divide the birds,” as an allusion that Israel will exist forever. [from *Midrash Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 28; *Targum*. Psalm. 22: 13]

If we combine Rashi’s commentary on our original passage from *Sefer Bamidbar* with

his exposition regarding the undivided bird, we learn that the Jewish people is the sole nation that will exist forever, and, therefore, is “destined to inherit the world.”

Next, whom do the birds of prey represent – and what is the symbolism of Avram chasing them away? Once again, Rashi utilizes *Midrash Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* to shed light upon the messianic implications of Avram’s act: “This is an allusion that David the son of Jesse will come to destroy them, but they will not permit him from heaven [to do so] until the King Messiah arrives.” In other words, the birds of prey are none other than the enemies of the Jewish people that have risen in each and every generation. As the Haggadah so poignantly states: “*B’chol dor v’dor omdim aleinu l’kaloteinu*” (“In each and every generation someone stands over us and attempts to destroy us.”) Stated somewhat differently, Amalek, the quintessential nemesis of our nation, has been an incessant enemy of our people since the moment we left Egypt.

In our own time, one need only look to Iran and its leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or to Osama bin Laden, (*yemach shemamam*, may their names be obliterated) to see crystal clear examples of Amalek born anew. Nevertheless, when *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only true Messiah) arrives, Amalek and his heirs will be no more; for just as Avram drove the birds of prey away, so too, will the enemies of our people be driven away and be no more. We, however, as Rashi states, “will not perish along with the other nations.” Instead, we will survive as we have always survived, to bear witness to the greatness and glory of the one true G-d and His holy Torah. Thus, we truly are “a nation that will dwell alone and will not be reckoned among the nations.”

May Hashem bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* soon and in our days, rebuild the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple), and usher in the time of everlasting and universal peace.

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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