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DWELLING ALONE

THE SEDRA¹ TELLS OF BALAAM, THE PROPHET HIRED BY THE NATIONS SURROUNDING the Land of Israel to curse the Jews. The leading figure in this strange transaction was Balak, king of Moab. However, in a wonderful way, Balaam's intended curses were transformed into blessings, to the great annoyance of the king who had hired him. Balaam explained that he could only utter the words which G-d put in his mouth.

These blessings provide some important insights about the nature of the Jewish people. The last blessing, "How goodly are your tents, Israel"² has even entered our daily Prayer Book. However, let us consider a less famous passage, the first of Balaam's blessings.

The Jewish people were camped in the Plains of Moab, on the east side of the Jordan, facing the city of Jericho. Balak had taken Balaam to a high place in the nearby hills, so that he would have a good view of at least part of the Jewish camp.

Balaam lifted his oracle and said: "...From the heads of the rocks I see them, from the hilltops I gaze at them. This is a people which dwells alone, it is not counted among the nations..."³

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The idea that the Jewish people ‘dwells alone’ aptly characterises our past history and also our present situation among the nations of the world. The Jewish people often seem totally alone, in the disturbing sense of being criticised and attacked. Yet these words are intended as a blessing. The Jewish people are singular, differing from every other nation. The idea that we are “not counted among the nations” is explained to mean that we have never been absorbed into another nation, even while working to make the world better, and we have a unique, spiritual character which enables us to do this.⁴

Balaam’s blessing is that we remain a distinct people, through the generations. As explained by Rashi, he also comments on the source of that singularity. The “heads of the rocks” and “hilltops” which he mentions do not just refer to the lookout place where Balak had taken him. He is describing the Jewish people as being firm as rocks and as hilltops, through our sacred origins in our great ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Patriarchs, and the Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.

Each of these illustrious forebears was utterly dedicated to the Divine. This is the secret of our strength: our innermost being is dedicated to G-d. Our true power is expressed through spiritual, inward achievements and above all through a sense of total dedication to the Divine.

This makes us a singular people among the nations of the world. We have no lust to conquer vast territories. Our great national monuments are scholarly books rather than stately arches and grand buildings. True, at times we create financial empires. Yet even these are often characterised by their concern for charity and good deeds.

Jewish teachings from our own Prophets present an ideal of a unified world, in which all humanity enjoys abundance and lives a meaningful life. Our Jewish singularity is in order that we can help the world attain that goal.

1. Numbers 22:2-25:9. 2. Num.24:5 3. Num. 23:9. 4. See Ramban and Ibn Ezra on this verse and Ibn Ezra on Deut. 32:8. 5. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 28, pp.165-173.

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SEDRA BALAK

CHANGING BAD TO GOOD

"I am not going out" Leah snapped at her father. "Listen, Leah," he replied, "Mummy and I need to talk right now, and we need some privacy".

"Well, I don't care, this is my living room just the same as yours, so you can't kick me out" she answered forcefully.

For the past few days, Leah had been driving her parents crazy. She was getting into fights with them the whole time, and speaking to them in a very inappropriate way.

"We can't go on like this!" said Leah's mother to her father once they found a quiet place to speak. But they didn't realize that Leah was listening in behind the closed door.

"Yesterday she broke a plate 'by mistake', which I am sure was on purpose, and then she poured oil paint down the kitchen sink and made it get stopped up so that we had to call the plumber. Now this! We've got to put her in her place somehow. She's got to be punished!"

"I know you are right" replied her father, "but I just can't."

"What do you mean?" asked his wife.

"I don't have a heart to punish her, she is our daughter" he answered.

Behind the door, Leah was listening intently. "Wow! My father really loves me" she thought to herself. "He won't punish me even though...."

“You see” continued her father, “Balaam wanted to curse the Jews, but each time he tried to curse them, blessings came out of his mouth instead. Why? Our Sages tell us, this is because G-d loves the Jewish people very much. In fact, even though they might not be worthy of that love, and they often do bad things, G-d still loves them”.

“Okay” said Leah’s mother, half laughing, “you’ve got a point. It’s hard to punish her, so let’s shower upon her some blessings instead, maybe that will work”.

“You know what, I think you are right” said her father. “Let’s give her as many compliments as we can, starting from now. Let’s compliment her on being creative, she painted that lovely picture which is on the wall of her room.”

“Which meant we had to call the plumber!”, said her mother. “But never mind, let’s start this approach. Let’s see what happens.”

Leah’s parents were getting up leave the room where they had been talking, and Leah quickly tiptoed away from the door, so they wouldn’t realize that she had been listening.

The next time she saw her father, sure enough, he complimented her on her nice painting. Leah blushed. Then her mother suddenly thanked her for something she had done two weeks earlier.

The next evening, at supper, while her brother Michael had left the room for a minute, Leah blurted out: “You know, mom and dad, I am so sorry for acting the way I did for the past few days. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Don’t worry” said her father, “as we learn in Sedra Balak, curses can be changed to blessings, everything bad can be changed to good.”

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