

# Knesset Yisrael: Beyond the Zebra Effect

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## One Statement, Three Questions

*He has not seen iniquity in Jacob, nor has he seen impropriety in Israel; the Lord his God is with him, and the trumpet blast of a king is among them.*

**Bamidbar 23:21**

לא הביט און ביעקב ולא  
ראה עמל בישראל ה'  
אלהיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו:  
במדבר כג:כא

This statement is one of the phrases that Hashem placed in the mouth of Bilaam, the gentile prophet, as he attempted to curse the emerging Jewish nation in the desert. His proclamation became a divinely inspired blessing, as this highly laudatory comment implies. Rashbam (R. Shmuel ben Meir, c. 1080-1160, France) explains the intent of the verse to mean that although sometimes the Jews do commit iniquity or impropriety, Hashem does not want to punish them. Ibn Ezra (R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1089-1164, Spain) suggests that Bilaam observed the success of the Jewish people and attributed it to their spiritual prowess, but were they to sin then Hashem would punish them. Rashi (R. Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105, France) cites a more radical interpretation. He explains that Hashem does not care to witness flaws or shortcomings among his people. This, however, is difficult to comprehend in light of a statement in the Talmud:

*R. Hanina said: If a man says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is forgoing, his life shall be outlawed, for it is stated, He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are judgment.*

**Baba Kama 50a**

אמר ר' חנינא: כל האומר הקב"ה ותרן  
הוא - יותרו חייו, שנאמר: (דברים ל"ב)  
הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט.  
בבא קמא נ.

Another question can be raised in this context. Bilaam's statement plays an important role in the Rosh Hashana Musaf, in which we integrate three new themes that relate to the essence of Rosh Hashana. We refer to them as Malchuyot (coronation), Zichronot (remembrance) and Shofarot (shofar sounding). Each of these sections concludes with its own Beracha and contains ten verses that articulate its theme from Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim. The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 32b) notes that our verse from Bilaam contains references to both Malchuyot and Shofarot and the Tur (Orach Chayim 591) rules that it can be read twice during the Musaf, once in each section respectively. Is it just coincidental that this verse correlates to the rhythm of Rosh Hashana, or is there, perhaps, a thematic connection as well?

Finally, the Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel adds a dramatic note to the conclusion of the verse. He interprets "the trumpet blast of the king" as "ויבבות מלכא משיחא מיבבא ביניהון" "and the sounding of the messianic king sounds among them." What is the meaning of this reference to the Melech Hamashiach?

# The Zebra Effect

Perhaps we can enlighten these issues with a story from Sefer Melachim:

*And it happened one day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where there was a wealthy woman; and she urged him to eat bread. And so it was, that whenever he passed by, he turned in there to eat bread. And she said to her husband ... Let us make a little chamber, I beg you, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a lampstand; and it shall be, when he comes to us, that he shall turn in there. And it happened one day he came there, and he turned into the chamber, and lay there. And he said to Gehazi his servant, Call this Shunemmite. And when he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, Say now to her, Behold, you have been careful to take all this trouble for us. What is to be done for you? Would you be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the army? And she answered, I live among my own people.*

**Melachim 2 4:8-13**

ויהי היום ויעבר אלישע אל שונם ושם אשה גדולה ותחזק בו לאכל לחם ויהי מדי עברו יסר שמה לאכל לחם: ותאמר אל אישה ... נעשה נא עלית קיר קטנה ונשים לו שם מטה ושלחן וכסא ומנורה והיה בבאו אלינו יסור שמה: ויהי היום ויבא שמה ויסר אל העליה וישכב שמה: ויאמר אל גחזי נערו קרא לשונמית הזאת ויקרא לה ותעמד לפניו: ויאמר לו אמר נא אליה הנה חרדת אלינו את כל החרדה הזאת מה לעשות לך היש לדבר לך אל המלך או אל שר הצבא ותאמר בתוך עמי אנכי ישבת:  
**מלכים ב ד:ח-יג**

This tale has entirely different layer of meaning according to the Zohar:

*"One day he came there" – Which day was this? Well, as they have established: **this was the holiday of Rosh Hashana**, on which the barren of the world were remembered and on which inhabitants of the world are called to account. "He called to her, saying, You have gone to all this trouble for us" – for your sake, today I must inspect the judgments of the world, and since I secluded myself in this place, I must ponder the turmoil of the world. "What can be done for you? Can a word be spoken on your behalf to the king?" Now why is this statement relevant for a woman, who does not go out or enter the king's palace? However, the day was decisive, for all inhabitants of the world sit awaiting judgment, and during that time the blessed Holy One is called King of justice. He said to her, 'perhaps you are in need of the supernal King for deeds of yours?' **"She replied, Among my own people I dwell'** What was she saying? Well, when judgment impends upon the world, a person should not separate himself, thereby being designated above and noticed on his own. For at other times when judgment impends over the world, those who are noticed and designated - even if they are virtuous - are seized first of all.*

ויהי היום ויבוא שמה. ויהי היום מאן הוא יומא דא. אלא כמה דאוקמוה. ותא חזי ההוא יומא יומא טבא דראש השנה הוה דאתפקדו ביה עקרות דעלמא ואתפקדן ביה בני עלמא קרא לשונמית ואמר (שם ד) הנה חרדת אלינו את כל החרדה הזאת. בגיני כך אצטריכנא לעיינא יומא דא בדיני דעלמא דקודשא בריך הוא דאין ביומא דא לעלמא. ובגין דאתפרשנא בלחוד באתר דא אצטריכנא לאסתכלא ברגיזו דעלמא (מ"ב ד) ומה לעשות לך היש לדבר לך אל המלך או אל שר הצבא. וכי מלה דא למה אצטריכא לגבי אתתא דלא נפקת ולא אזלת ולא עאלת בהיכלא דמלכא. אלא יומא דא הוה גרים דכל בני עלמא יתבין (נ"א קיימין) בדינא. ובהווא יומא אקרי קודשא בריך הוא מלך המלך המשפט. אמר לה אי את אצטריך לך לגבי מלכא עלאה על עובדין די בידך. ותאמר בתוך עמי אנכי יושבת. מאי קאמרת. אלא בשעתא (נ"א בזמנא) דדינא תליא בעלמא לא יתפרש בר נש בלחודוי ולא יתרשים לעילא ולא ישתמודעון ביה בלודוי דהא בזמנא (אחרא) דדינא תליא בעלמא אינון דאשתמודעון ורשימין בלחודייהו אף על גב דזכאין אינון אינון אתפסן בקדמיתא. ועל דא

*Therefore, a person should not separate from the people; for the compassion of the blessed Holy one rests upon the entire people as one, so a person should never separate from the people. This is why she said Among my own people I dwell - and I do not want to separate from them, as I have acted until today.'*

**Zohar Shemot 2:44b (translation by D. Matt)**

לא לבעי ליה לאיניש לאתפרשא מבין עמא לעלם דבכל זמנא רחמי דקודשא בריך הוא על עמא כלהו כחד (ולא ליבעי ליה לאיניש לאתפרשא מן עמא לעלם). ובגיני כך אמרה בתוך עמי אנכי יושבת ולא בעינא לאתפרשא מנייהו כמה דעבדנא עד יומא דין.

**הזהר לספר שמות ח"ב דף מד ע"ב**

According to the Zohar, the Shunamite woman in this story teaches us an important religious concept that we may call “the zebra effect.” The zebras’ striped skin pattern provides protection from predators. Although the black and white pattern is vivid and stands out in the savannah, its effectiveness lies in the ability of multiple zebras to stand together as a herd and be indistinguishable as individuals. The lion, the zebra’s principal predator, has a difficult time focusing on a single animal to pursue and is most often unsuccessful in attacking and subduing one zebra. This is the spiritual secret of the Shunamite woman. She does not wish the prophet Elisha to pray and intercede on her behalf as it would identify her as an individual; she would stand out in the face of the looming, predatory middat hadin. She prefers to be among her people.

This fascinating notion, of anonymity during a time of Divine justice, is the import of the story according to the Zohar. Yet, this seems overly simplistic, perhaps even absurd. Is it possible to hide from Hashem, the Omniscient One? Can we imagine someone going unnoticed on this day of judgment, avoiding the scrutiny of the ultimate Judge, before whom we pass like sheep before the watchful eye of a shepherd? What is the meaning of this Zohar?

## Knesset Yisrael: A Transcendental Entity

The teaching of this Zohar relates to another level, the level of Knesset Yisrael. The Jewish nation is not merely a collection of individuals. It is a Tzibbur, a unique entity that comprises all Jews and transcends their specific individual qualities. Known as Knesset Yisrael, this transcendental body represents the Jewish people in its entirety and the collection of all of their Divine sparks, hence, it is qualitatively different than any group of individuals. The Maharal (R. Yehuda Loew, 1520-1609. Prague) in his commentary on Pirkei Avot (Derech Hachaim, 2:2, 4) explains that while the individual is a changing, transient being, the tzibbur is an eternal and unchanging entity. On the level of the community, the Klal, the flaws of individuals disappear.

This explains the approach of the Shunamite woman. She is not simply using the zebra effect to avoid being seen by the Divine judgment. That would be impossible. Instead she is blending in to the community to become a part of it. She identifies with the Tzibbur and casts her lot with its lot. On Rosh Hashana she endeavors that her individual identity becomes subsumed within the greater identity of Knesset Yisrael, which is sure to be successful in its bid for a favorable judgment as there is no prosecution against the whole.

Perhaps now we can understand the passage with which we began. The Netivot Shalom (R. Shalom Noach Berezovsky, 1911-2000, Israel) in Parshat Chukat suggests that the words Yaakov and Yisrael in our verse refer to the Jewish community as a whole. These two appellations respectively describe Knesset Yisrael in its full and glorious unity. Hence, it is completely accurate

to state that Hashem sees no errors or blemishes in the Jewish collective, be it as Yaakov, or its more exalted expression, Yisrael. Hashem's exacting judgment is only in the context of the individual; Knesset Yisrael has no iniquities. Now we can appreciate how meaningful this verse is on Rosh Hashana. This pasuk does not invoke any Zichronot, any specific memories of individuals, rather it is the collective sound of the coronation our national King through the Shofar, which are the themes of Malchuyot and Shofarot.

With this perspective we can appreciate the Targum Yonatan's allusion to the shofar of mashiach. We could wonder: how are we to anticipate the coming of the redemption every day? Do we see in ourselves significant change today that would merit the coming of the mashiach more than yesterday? Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap (1882- 1951, Jerusalem) explains:

*This is also part of anticipating the redemption: to recognize and believe that the Jewish people are worthy of being redeemed at all times, and even if there are abundant flaws on the outside, they are pure and clean on the inside.... The holiness of the whole Jewish people was never blemished, and it is in pristine holiness forever. All its sins are from individuals and not from the whole. Even were there to be a whole group that transgressed this is not the whole but rather an aggregate of individuals acting together. The holy wholeness of the Jewish people, in the real sense of the term wholeness, which only the holiest of people can fully appreciate its exalted level, has never sinned and was never blemished at all.... Only when the bonds of unity with the whole weakened did they sin and stray from Hashem and His Torah. As such when the time arrives for the revelation of the first footsteps of the redemption, it is incumbent upon us to renew the concept of the hidden whole of the Jewish people and to slowly remove ourselves from diversity, for through this the sins and iniquities will totally wither and will cease to be.*

**Lechem Abirim vol. 1, 15:2**

לזאת גם זה בכלל הצפיה לישועה: להכיר ולהאמין כי ראויים המה ישראל להגאל בכל שעה ושעה ושואף אם רבים הם הלקויים בו מצד החוץ – טהור ונקי הוא מצד הפנים... קדושתן של ישראל מצד הכלל שלהם לא נפגמה מעולם והיא בזיקוק טהרתה כמאז ומעולם. כל החטאים והעיוותים הם אך מצד הפרט ולא מצד הכלל. ואפילו אם מוצאים כלל שלם שכולם נסוגו אחור – אין זה מצד הכלל אלא שבהזדמנות נתכוונו הרבה פרטים יחד. אבל כלל הקדש של כנסת ישראל בהמובן והאמיתי של מושג הכלל של ישראל – אשר רק הקדושים שבארץ היותר נשגבים יכולים לעמוד על גובה הקדוש העליון של המושג הזה – מעולם לא חטא ומעולם לא נפגם במאומה ועל זה נאמר "גמלתהו טוב ולא רע כל ימי חייה" רק כשנחלשה התקשורת בהכלל במובנו האמיתי אז נכשלו בחטאים ועוונות וסרו מאחרי ה' ותורתו. ואמנם כשמגיע תור התגלות צעדי הגאולה ראשית התשובה היא: לשוב ולהקיץ מחדש את מושגי הכלל הנעלם של ישראל ולהתנצל לאט לאט מהפרטיות שממילא עפ"י זה כל החטאים והעוותים הזדונות והשגגות יחדלו כליל ולא יהיה עוד.

**לחם אבירים, חלק א, טז:ב**

Rav Charlap zt"l explains that because Knesset Yisrael is above scrutiny, as we have articulated, it is perpetually prepared for redemption. The ongoing process of redemption, he suggests, mirrors our ability to identify and connect with this transcendental entity of wholeness.

We now appreciate the role that Knesset Yisrael plays in our spiritual destiny and its critical relevance to the days of judgement. Hence, Rosh Hashana can become a time to focus on our relationship with Knesset Yisrael, the community, in our prayers, thoughts and actions. Our ability to connect and identify with Knesset Yisrael enables us to transcend the shortcomings of our individual identities. It is a key to emerging meritorious from our annual day of judgment, and an avenue to move closer to the ultimate redemption when we will hear the shofar of the mashiach.