

Geulas Yisrael #59: Balak

The Lonely People of Faith

Moshe Taragin

Bilam arrived with a plan. It would only take only quick glance at the Jewish camp to foment Bilam's anger and, like clockwork, his venomous curses would spew. The legendary wars between Sichon-Moab were decided after Bilam placed a supernatural spell upon the Moabites, assuring a Sichon victory. Just another day at the office for Bilam and his lethal tongue. Or so he thought.

Until he noticed something unusual about these desert-dwelling Jews. They appeared unusual, different, separate, *alone*. הן עם לבדד ישכון. Their historical arch was atypical and they didn't appear to be subject to general historical calculus ובגויים לא יתחשב. It quickly became apparent to Bilam that his supernatural jinxes would have no impact upon this *alone people*, with immunity against historical pressure. At that point, Bilam realized it would be a long and frustrating day at the office.

Bilam instinctively discerned our aloneness, but wasn't able to put his finger on *why* we were different. In his parting speech, Moshe completed the picture: השם בדרך ינחנו ואין עמו אל נכר - we are alone because we were chosen by Hashem, and we are expected to be different from other nations. As the children of God, our behavior and our national culture must be distinct from other nations.

But are we *really* alone? Do we completely disconnect from human history? We were selected to be different but to shape human consciousness *specifically* through our differences.

Avraham was the first Jew selected to be different. He came from a different place: from the other side of the river and from the other side of religious belief. But he crossed the river to inspire those who lived on the *other side*. After numerous rounds with kings, warriors, noblemen, and local residents, he is ultimately proclaimed to be נשיא אלקים אתה - a prince of God who resides among ancient civilization and began to shape it. He was alone but never apart.

We are a strange people. Our religion, culture, and traditions are different from the rest of humanity, yet we are meant to educate them. Bilam was only partially correct. We live alone but are very much a part of human calculus and of the arch of human history. Alone but not apart.

Exile and Redemption

During the past 2000 years we lived alone *and apart*. We lost the ability to directly influence human history. Relegated to the margins of history, we lived detached from the rest of humanity. This aloneness preserved our national identity against an onslaught of cultural pressure. Halacha- in particular dietary and marital laws- preserved Jewish identity in a sea of foreign influence. In addition to halacha, culture, language, customs and traditions all marked a Jew as *different*, less susceptible to assimilatory influence. Our survival was a great anthropological miracle: a nation could survive thousands of years of dispersal and wandering without a common homeland. We lived alone and apart and this preserved our destiny.

We have now returned to the front stage of history and are slowly starting to revive our ancient secret. We remain different and alone, but not disconnected. Events surrounding the State of Israel lie at the crossroads of history. We are challenged to reenter history while still retaining our aloneness. History is shifting and the recalibration of the Jewish spirit isn't easy.

Anti-Semitism

If Jews struggle to make sense of this riddle, our enemies are absolutely baffled. "Who are *these* Jews"? Are they separatists or are they part of the mainstream? Do they want to live apart from humanity or live amongst society and influence history"? This puzzle confounds our enemies, agitating their hostility toward a nation they can't decipher.

Haman was the first to notice this historical anomaly. Noticing our distinctive cultural mores and "abnormal" religious customs, Haman persuaded Achashverosh of genocide. ישנו עם אחד מפזר ומפרד..ודתיהם . שונות . Haman was disturbed and more than a bit confused. He had

witnessed the outsized influence which Daniel had wielded over the mighty Babylonian empire. Initially, having been exiled from Yerushalayim amongst the first wave of Jewish refugees, this young prophet refused to succumb to Babylonian culture and declined palace food. Yet he was soon promoted to be Nevuchadnezar's closest confidant. It didn't seem appropriate that these obstinate conformists were shaping the outline of human history.

Haman was determined not to allow this scene to unfold again. Witnessing Mordechai "sitting" in the palace courtyard, Haman determined to foil any Jewish attempt to impact Persian society. This Jewish "takeover" must be nipped in the bud. If you want to influence Persian society, join society at large. Little did he know that Esther had already been queened, and we would leave our mark upon Persia, just as we did upon the now-defunct empire of Babylonia.

The Jewish enigma, first noticed by Haman, is what riles so many antisemites. Our world is dotted with groups who disengage from mainstream culture. From aboriginal settlements in Western Canada, to Amish farms in Pennsylvania, to indigenous colonies in Amazon rainforests, to aboriginal villages across Australia, numerous tribes voluntarily detach from the modern world. These cultural and geographical barriers preserve their independent culture and their internal customs.

Generally, society admires their cultural non-conformity and their choice of a lifestyle unadulterated by the impurities of modernity. Their way of life feels quaint and, also, provides us with a healthy reminder of our own primitive virtue when it is untainted by society. These cultures live alone *and apart* and don't stress the human imagination.

In many ways, Jews look like these cultural breakaways. We dress differently, eat differently, speak different and marry differently. Yet, unlike these separatist cultures, we *don't* walk away from society. To the contrary, we drive humanity to a better place. We pray on behalf of all of humanity and fulfill Hashem's word to draw Him and his divine blessing into the entire world. Additionally, we have always advanced the human condition, spearheading science, politics, economics and discovery. Furthermore, we are morally driven to craft a kinder world of social equality and universal opportunity.

We are one-of-kind. Alone but not apart. Separate but engaged. This drives our many haters berserk: "Make up your mind. If you want to influence us, join us. If not, then walk away, as so many others have".

We know better. We want both, because we know that both is demanded of us. To be different, so that we can influence. To influence because we are different. Alone but not apart.