

## ***A PEOPLE THAT SHALL DWELL ALONE: CURSE OR BLESSING?***

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In a world in which the State of Israel has taken its place among many other nations, the oracular pronouncement of Balaam, *Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations* (Num. 23:9), has obvious negative implications. Just as the individual cannot live without community, so in today's "global village" no nation can live a civilized life, politically, economically, or culturally in isolation from the family of nations. Yet, in the biblical context where this verse appears, it must have been intended as something positive. This can be seen in Balaam's repeated avowal, *What the Lord speaks, that will I speak* (24:13), and in the later account of the event: *But the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you* (Deut. 23:6).

The first part of the verse reads as follows: *From the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him*. Balaam's technique as a "seer" and visionary evidently involves taking up a position from which he can view his subject. He then observes certain features which inspire him to imaginatively project them into the future. Thus, Balaam comments on Israel's numbers (23:10), the arrangement of the camp (24:5-6), their military prowess (23:24), their religious practices (23:21). Struck by the unusual nature of the above features and by what he has heard about their remarkable journey through Sinai, Balaam sees Israel as a people with a special destiny unlike that of the other nations. However, like most oracles, the text is rather vague and unclear as to how or why this people will *dwell alone*, inviting all sorts of interpretations. Also, the fact that the text is in the form of religious poetry legitimizes attempts to read novel and contemporary meanings into an ancient oracle.

Thus Rashi, who sees this as a blessing, feels that Balaam is referring to Israel's gift of *indestructibility*, as envisaged by the Prophets. While all nations are subject to history's iron law of rise and fall, Israel is told: *But of thee*

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*I will not make a full end* (Jer. 30:11).<sup>1</sup> By the era of the Talmud, and certainly by the Middle Ages, this dictum of Israel's indestructibility as a nation had received tragic empirical verification. Despite loss of homeland, dispersion, and repeated persecution, Israel managed to survive. By then, Christian theology, puzzled by the disquieting presence of Jesus-denying Jews in the major cities of Europe, disseminated the myth of the "wandering Jew," of the Jews as an accursed people condemned to wander through history, reviled as a pariah and subject to Divine punishment for daring to reject the Redeemer. While Balaam may not exactly have had this in mind, Rashi is correct in pointing to Israel's indestructibility as a primary feature of what has contributed to the perception of Jews as a kind of "mystery people", not only socio-logically but theologically, as a people endowed with an element of the Divine.

An eminent Christian theologian observed: "The Jews can be despised and hated and oppressed and persecuted and even assimilated, but they cannot really be touched; they cannot be exterminated, they cannot be destroyed. They are the only people that necessarily continues to exist with the same certainty as that God is God."<sup>2</sup> So that while "every people is in some sense unique, there seems to be something uniquely unique about the Jewish people."<sup>3</sup>

Although the Patriarchs are assured that a *great nation* will issue forth from their progeny and that it shall be a *blessing to all the families of the earth* (Gen. 12:2-3), there is no explicit reference to any special qualities. However, beginning with the Sinai covenant, the people are told: *You shall be My own treasure among the peoples* (Ex. 19:5), thereby planting the seed for Jewish exceptionalism which will lead to a full-blown concept of Israel as the chosen people of God in the Book of Deuteronomy.

Of course, the question that increasingly agitated Jews in the course of their difficult history was: "Chosen for what"? The answer, implicit in the text, conceives Israel as the "people of God" in the sense of representing God and His teachings in history: their accomplishments and their failures, their collective virtue and their collective shortcomings become signposts marking the progress of God's influence in the world. The Deuteronomic text reflects an acute awareness of the effect of the Jewish condition on the nations. Should Israel remain loyal to the Covenant, *He [God] will make you high*

*above all the nations He has made, in praise, and in name, and in glory* (Deut. 26:19). Whereas, if Israel *will not hearken to the voice of the Lord . . . you will become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples* (Deut. 28:15, 37).

*Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone.* If we disconnect this portion of the verse from the remainder, we can see it as expressing a basic feature of Jewish peoplehood. For in terms of how Israel is to *dwell*, i.e., the ongoing activities of daily life, raising a family, serving God, educating children, and socializing, they are indeed a people apart. The Bible instructs them *not to intermarry* with the nations of the land (Deut. 7:3), nor to adopt their religious practices. And, of course, the many dietary restrictions discourage socializing with non-Jews. While, historically, Diaspora Jews were often compelled to live in a ghetto, the fact is that their religious needs and the communal institutions created to serve them encouraged Jews to live close to each other. Sadly, this feature of Jewish peoplehood has often been viewed as a sign of "racial superiority", provoking hatred and suspicion. This was indeed recognized by Shakespeare as the framework of Jewish-Christian relations in his time. He thus has Shylock the Jew tell his Christian neighbors: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you."<sup>4</sup>

... *And shall not be reckoned among the nations.* It is hard to gauge Balaam's understanding of the term *nation* when, after saying this, he goes on to assert: *Amalek was the first of the nations* (Num. 24:20). Ironically enough, however, in contrast to Balaam's statement that Israel *is not to be reckoned among the nations*, a recent study affirms that it was precisely the Hebrew Bible which inspired the modern concepts of "nation" and "nationalism," Israel being the paradigmatic model of the "nation-state."<sup>5</sup> While arguing that England was the first "nation" in modern times, Professor Adrian Hastings shows that the entire concept (now taken for granted) that human society properly consists of a number of culturally distinct nations springs from the description given in Genesis. An "ethnicity" is simply a group of people with a shared cultural identity, a spoken language, and biological connections. However, an ethnicity can grow into a "nation" when it becomes more self-aware as a community possessing or claiming the right to political autonomy, control of a specific territory, and (surprisingly) "possessing a literature of its

own in the vernacular." According to his analysis, modern Israel should be considered a nation-state – a state that identifies itself in terms of one specific *Jewish* nation, one in which its citizens see themselves not merely as subject to the sovereign but "bonded to each other horizontally." They jointly "own" the state. In light of this new insight, Balaam's oracle that [Israel] *shall not be reckoned among the nations* should perhaps be interpreted as follows: Israel, by virtue of its distinct culture, biological connections, emergence from slavery, and religious literature, should not be counted among the other *so-called* "nations" of the time, which were nothing more than ethnicities. For the fact is that the *first of the nations* was really Israel!

*Lo ,it is a people that shall dwell alone* (levadad). A final thought: There is a distinction that Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik made between two sentences, "I am alone" and "I am lonely." The former is an objective factual report which can be verified as true or false, while the latter is a subjective judgment which the Rabbi calls "an existential or depth experience." According to this view, a person could actually be alone and not feel lonely while another, surrounded by family and friends, could experience loneliness. One of Rav Soloveitchik's best-known teachings is that a feeling of acute "loneliness" is part of what it is to be human. This is not a pathology, but the development of a certain maturity. The individual is becoming aware of his humanity, a unique feeling of selfhood, an experience, as far as we can tell, unknown to any other creature. In the words of Rav Soloveitchik: "To be means to be the only one singular and different. The "I" is lonely, experiencing ontological incompleteness because there is no one who exists like the "I" which cannot be repeated, imitated or experienced by others."<sup>6</sup>

So if there is some sort of prophetic element in Balaam's parables, perhaps he is dimly and unconsciously alluding to an emerging analytic and critical quality which will surface among individuals among this people that will see through the idolatries, the banalities, and the shallow conventional wisdom of the age , and, in so doing, experience this existential loneliness. Perhaps, then, Numbers 23:19 is neither a blessing nor a curse, but rather a provocative hint as to aspects of Jewish nationhood.

## NOTES

1. See also Isaiah 54:17.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 111:13, p. 218.
3. A. Roy Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers* (Schocken, 1967) p. 35.
4. *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene 3.
5. Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) chapters 1 and 8.
6. Joseph D. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, vol. 7:2 (Spring 1965) pp. 22, 27.



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