

ABSOLUTE GREATNESS

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

The Jewish nation, camped in the desert near the border of Moav, posed a tremendous threat to the Moavites. The king of Moav chose to fight the Jews by hiring Ba'alam, a great magician and a prophet equal to Moshe, to curse them. G-d thwarted this plan by placing in his mouth words of blessing instead. "G-d reversed the curse to a blessing." (Devarim/Deuteronomy 23:6) As the blessings were reversals of the curses, looking into the blessings reveals how he wanted to curse us and opens our eyes to the core of our Nation's essence.

Ba'alam's first blessing declared, "Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations." (Bamidbar/Numbers 23:9) Is this, indeed, a blessing? Dwelling in solitude does not sound like a good plight. Further, if this is the reversal of the curse, then the curse would have been that we dwell with other peoples and be reckoned among other nations. This does not sound like a terrible curse.

Rabbi Michel Twerski (1) expounds that the Hebrew for "reckoned" - yis'chashav - can also be translated as "calculate". Thus, the verse is concluding that the Jewish Nation "will not calculate based on other nations." The Children of Israel were blessed that they will not determine their success with a relative standard comparing them to the contemporary ideals of other nations. Rather, their accomplishments will be held to an objective standard set for them by G-d as enumerated in the Torah. G-d created in man the ability to achieve immeasurable levels of spirituality. However, this can only be pursued if his goals are rooted in the Divine. If he allows himself comfort by merely surpassing the achievements of another human being, he squanders the potential greatness that would have taken him inestimably closer to G-d. This is the curse that Ba'alam attempted to send the Jewish people: relative greatness.

Thus, solitude is a blessing. Not unlike the athlete who trains in a secluded location that facilitates a focus on his preparation and growth, so, too, the nation that actively fosters and builds its G-d consciousness desires an environment that assists that development.

Regarding the Jewish nation, the prophet says, "The number of the children of Israel shall . neither be measured nor counted." (Hosea 2:1) How can this be? Contemporary technology today allows the counting of billions of people with virtually no margin of error. The Commentaries explain the prophet refers to the people's endless potential that cannot be quantified. But the only way to even begin to reach that height is to follow G-d's own absolute standard rather than settling for relative greatness. The standard of the Torah is the greatest catalyst for our achievement; consequently, it

was to be the subject of the first curse, which G-d reversed to be our first blessing.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) Rabbi of Congregation Beth Jehudah, Milwaukee, and founder of the Milwaukee Kollel; progeny of the Chernobyl Chassidic dynasty.

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