

BEHOLD! A NATION

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This week's sidrah tells the story of a king, Balak king of Moav, who became infatuated with cursing Bnei Yisrael, who he perceived as his enemy. "And Moav feared the nation, because it was numerous. (22:3)" Amazing how when he feared them, they suddenly became "a nation". Later too, when he sent for Bilaam to come and curse them, the pasuk (verse) reads (22:5), "He sent messengers to Bilaam, son of Beor, saying, 'Behold! A nation has come out Egypt, behold! it has covered the surface of the earth. . .'" Similarly, at the beginning of sefer Shemos/Exodus, we find Pharaoh saying to his advisers (Shemos 1:9), "Behold! the nation, the Children of Israel, are more numerous and stronger than we..." This is actually the first time we are referred to as a nation.

What meaning does all this have? Often, we perceive reality according to our feelings. If we woke up on the wrong side of the bed, or we're just generally having a not-so-great day, we don't say, "Gee, I'm just not doing so good today." Rather, what we often hear ourselves doing is blaming the "day". "Oy, what a bad day this is!" This is a lingual nuance, but it opens a window into our psyche. The "day" is not really bad at all. In fact, there are probably many others who are having a very fine day. But since we're not feeling so good, it seems to us that the "day" is somehow lacking.

Pharaoh began to perceive Bnei Yisrael as his enemy. He was gripped by fear. Suddenly, the children of Yaakov became in his eyes a fortuitous "nation." So too, Balak, who "heard all that Israel had done to the Amorite (22:2)," became suddenly fearful of them. "Behold!" he said, "a nation has come out of Egypt... "

Often, when we fear someone, or we feel they have wronged us in some way, they become "monsters" in our eyes. Listen some time to a person as he/she discusses someone who has been giving them a hard time. I once listened as a mother described a teacher who had, for some reason, not struck things off well with her son. Listening to her speak, one could have imagined that this teacher was an evil person, who "should not be teaching at all." Yet others were perfectly happy with him. Because she was unhappy with his teaching, the teacher's faults (which he likely had, as do we all) took on "monstrous" proportions in the mother's eyes. And watch how people describe a bad meal as compared to how they describe a good one.

Wouldn't it be nice if people used the same hyperbole and exaggeration when describing good things as they use when discussing bad. Somehow negativity adapts much easier to overdoing than does positivity. How about trying to be overly positive and bubbly - to see the world and everyone in it in a beautiful, positive light.

It's not that we have anything against being a "nation." It would just be nice to hear it a little more often from our friends and a little less often from our foes.

Bilaam prophesied (23:21), "He (Hashem) perceives no iniquity in Yaakov, and sees no sin in Israel. Hashem, his G-d is with him, and the teruah (shofar blast - see Ibn Ezra) of the King is in him." How can it be that Hashem sees no bad in Israel? Is this not a lack of fairness and justice?

In Poland there were certain Jews who had their livelihood from going to the wholesale fruit and vegetable market in the early hours of the morning and purchasing their stock. Later, people would come to their stores and buy the fresh produce. Once, someone commented to the Chiddushei haRim (R' Yitchak Meir of Gur) about the ways of these men. Of course it was not entirely their fault, he conceded, that they had to engage in business before davening (preferably one should refrain from engaging in personal affairs until after praying). But all the same it was very unfortunate that these men had to disgrace their tefilah (prayer) by taking care of their business first.

"On the contrary," retorted the Chiddushei haRim, "these men are all G-d fearing individuals. Even though they do what they must before davening, they do the minimum that is possible. Even their speech they limit, not wanting to speak about mundane matters before speaking to Hashem. And when they come to daven, they do so with a broken heart, wishing they had some other way of earning a living. You haven't the faintest idea how much pleasure Hashem derives from their behaviour!"

Let us observe, says Likutei Chaver ben Chaim (quoted in Yalkut haGershuni), a Jew sinning. When a Jew sins, he sins with a krechtz (sigh). He knows that what he is doing is wrong, that he will later regret it, and even now as he does it he already regrets it. He fears Hashem and he fears being punished. Momentarily, his yetzer hara (evil side) has gotten the better of him. Yet he fails even to taste the sweetness of his pleasures, for he is too busy dealing with the first pangs of remorse.

How could Hashem mete out harsh, just punishment for a Jew's sin? A sin from which the sinner has failed to derive any substantial benefit. "He (Hashem) perceives no iniquity in Yaakov, and sees no sin in Israel." Why not? Because, even as the Jew sins, "Hashem, his G-d is with him," there, in his heart, at the time. "And the shofar blast of the King is in him," as he sins, the fear-evoking sound of the shofar rings in his ears. May Hashem deal with us with compassion, and help us to overcome our shortcomings.

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