

PARSHAS BALAK

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Balak, 5643 (and 5644)

Bil'am is recorded as saying (23: 9) "Hein ahm levadad yishkon". (ArtScroll: "Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude"). Solitude -- i.e., living our lives apart from the rest of the world -- has been a key feature of our experience for some 3000 years. What will the Sfas Emes say about this prophecy and its realization in Jewish history? Read on.

The Sfas Emes begins his discourse with a quote from Rashi on that pasuk. Rashi tells us what the Torah has in mind when it speaks of our "dwelling in solitude". Rashi explains that our "solitude" is evident most clearly in the context of joy. When we are joyous ("semeichim") -- e.g., at a siyum or a chasseneh, or on a YomTov -- other nations take no part in that joy. So we are in solitude on that score. And when the other nations have an occasion for joy, we do take part. Surprisingly, that participation leads to further isolation. Why? Perhaps because they resent our "double dipping" -- i.e., our staying home from work on public holidays AND on the "Jewish Holidays".

The Sfas Emes proceeds to discuss the reasons for our isolation. He tells us that what HaShem wants from us is bitul (subordination) to Him. Such subordination is the raison d'etre -- the reason for the existence -- of the Jewish people. Reaching such a condition of subordination would enable us to attain a state of menucha (repose; contemplation) That attitude is best expressed on Shabbos. By abstaining from all work on Shabbos, we demonstrate that all our activities -- labor, parnasa (seeking a livelihood), maintaining our health -- are unimportant in themselves. They have value and meaning only for enabling us to reach the state of menucha vis-a-vis HaShem. So single minded a focus is alien to other nations. Hence, we "dwell in solitude".

Note, in passing, that the Sfas Emes has just given us a new theory of Shabbos observance. He has told us that Shabbos is a time for showing that life's activities lack inherent significance. What is of value is subordinating ourselves to HaShem, in what amounts to a life of contemplation.

You may find some of the thoughts presented in the preceding two paragraphs highly uncharacteristic for the Sfas Emes. In particular, his deprecation here of life's everyday activities jars with the positive views on this subject that we have heard the Sfas Emes utter many times. How can we deal with this problem -- the Sfas Emes's apparent inconsistency on a key issue in life?

As in many other contexts, the most efficacious way to handle such a problem is to continue learning Torah. Sure enough, if we keep on learning, we find that in the very next year (5644), the

Sfas Emes returned to the pasuk "Hein ahm levadad yishkon". That year, too, he cites the same Rashi on the pasuk; but now he heads in a wholly new direction. This time, there is no mention of bitul (subordination) The Sfas Emes says: "Ve'nishtalchu [Bnai Yisroel] la'olam rak le'sakein hakohl". That is, the special mission of Bnai Yisroel is to effect a "tikun" (a repair; a correction) of the whole world.

This statement may seem to complicate the puzzle even more. For, one can ask: which is our prime duty, subordination to HaShem or bringing about a tikun? I suggest the answer is: both! For, in practice, bitul to HaShem may be necessary for effecting a tikun. This connection may seem artificial or forced. But note: we find such a linkage in a classical text, a prayer which is said with awe on Rosh Hashana and with speed the rest of the year. I refer to our tefila "Ahleinu". There, too, we find subordination to HaShem ("Ve'anachnu kor'im, u'mishtachavim, u'modim lifnei Melech Malchai Hamelachim ... ") coming together with making a tikun ("Le'sakein olam ... ").

This may have been rough going, so we conclude with an easier text. Toward the end of his ma'amar of 5643, the Sfas Emes works with the pasuk with which we started. That pasuk begins: "Hein ahm ..". These words call up in the Sfas Emes's mind (and thence, to our minds) another pasuk (23: 24): "Hein ahm kelavi yakum". (Art Scroll: "Behold! the people will arise like a lion cub ... ").

Chazal apply this text as a metaphor for how are supposed to get up in the morning -- full of vim and vigor to serve HaShem. Further, the Sfas Emes quotes a Medrash which tells us that in Greek, the word "hein" means one. The Sfas Emes brings these two thoughts together; and points out an implication. We can view each day as a separate unit, in each of which we rise to serve HaShem with hischadshus (as new people).

And just as we accept HaShem's Kingship anew each day, so too is His love for Klal Yisroel renewed each day. Thus, the text of the beracha is: "Ha'bocher be'amo Yisroel be'ahava." That is: "He chooses His people -- Yisroel -- lovingly each day". Note the verb "Ha'bocher" -- "chooses" -- is in the present tense; i.e., He does so every day. May we merit being chosen by HaShem as His people every day.

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