



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Balak: A People that Dwell Alone

The prophet Bilaam was hired to curse the Children of Israel. However, each time he tried to pronounce a curse, it came out as a blessing. One of those blessings reads:

It is a people that dwells alone [*badad*], Not reckoned among the nations.  
(Num. 23:9)

Israel are depicted as dwelling “alone”. Alone can mean isolation and loneliness, is this a blessing?!

Rashi:

Not be reckoned among the nations. As Targum explains, they will not suffer destruction as other nations will, as it is says (Jeremiah 30:11), "for I shall annihilate all the nations" and Israel will not be counted amongst them.

In other words, Rashi sees the Jewish people as anomalous in world history, outliving ancient cultures and surviving throughout the length of history. As in the famous quote by Marc Twain:

The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities, of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

R. Yoseph Kara:

A People that dwells alone: My curses will not work against them. “Alone” indicates living in security, as it says (Deut 33:28) Israel will dwell in security, alone.

For Rabbi Yoseph Kara, Israel is not alone, but Israel, at this point in their history, dwell in safety.

Others see this verse as a statement of the perennial separateness of the Jewish people. Take, for example, the commentary of the Haamek Davar by the Netziv:

It is a people that dwells alone – Not like all other nations and cultures, that when they go into exile and mingle with the host nations, they win their love and respect... Israel are not like that; when they are alone and content not to assimilate, then they dwell in calm and respect ... but when they try to mix, they are not reckoned among the nations and are considered as sub-human. As the Talmud in Sanhedrin 104a (based on Deut 33:24) ... when they will be “alone” – not assimilating with the Nations – then they will be secure; but of they desire to be similar to the Nations, then they will become “alone”, rejected.

The Netziv who witnessed the great post-Emancipation assimilation of European Jewry, sees this phrase as a warning of the futility of assimilation and the dangers of trying to eradicate once particular Jewish identity. This verse charges the Jewish people to retain its distinctiveness and only thus will it gain respect.

Rabbi Sacks, in his work *Future Tense*, questions a popular understanding of this verse. There is a popular and prevalent attitude that the State of Israel will always be singled out, attacked and condemned on the international scene, at the U.N., the EU and other international forums. Some quote Bilaam as a prophetic assertion or even prediction of this perennial isolation, as if to say, “It was ever thus,” and so it will always be. In a provocative passage Rabbi Sacks wonders whether this needs to be the case:

What makes you so sure that Balaam meant those words as a blessing?  
...Might it not have been that he intended them as a curse?

Consider the incidence of the word *badad*, 'alone', in the Hebrew Bible. It is used about a leper: 'He shall live alone [*badad*]; his dwelling place shall be outside the camp' (Lev. 13:46). It was used by Isaiah: 'The fortified city stands desolate [*badad*], an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert' (Isa. 27:10). Most famously, it occurs in the first line of the book of Lamentations: 'How solitary [*badad*] sits the city once full of people.'

God, who, in monotheism, is necessarily alone. The phrase 'a people that dwells alone' is like Max Weber's description of Jews as a 'pariah people'...

Consider, I continued, who said the words, 'It is a people that dwells alone.' It was the pagan prophet Balaam, who, according to the Pentateuch, was an enemy of the Israelites. ...The Talmud says, 'Better the curses with which Ahijah the Shilonite cursed Israel than the blessings with which Balaam blessed them.' The sages believed that though Balaam had blessed the people, he had done so in deliberately ambiguous terms, so that the blessing would become a curse.

...There is the psychological phenomenon, I said, of the self-fulfilling prophecy...That, I concluded, was the-perennial Jewish danger. If you define yourself as the people that dwells alone, that will be your fate. You will convince yourself that you have no friends; you are isolated; no one understands you; the world hates you. Your efforts at self-explanation will be half-hearted. Your expectations of winning allies will be low. You will not invest as much effort as others do, to make your case in the audience chamber of the world. For inwardly you are convinced that all efforts will fail. You will have decided that this is the Jewish fate that nothing can change. It was ever thus and always will be.

Jews have enemies, but we also have friends, and if we worked harder at it we would have more.” (Future Tense pg.113-116)

**Please discuss:**

- 1) Is the blessing “a people who dwell alone” a blessing or a curse?
- 2) Which interpretation to you identify with? Is it (i) a promise of survival (Rashi), (ii) safety (Kara), (iii) a blessing of a distinct identity and a warning against assimilation (Netziv) or (iv) should we wonder whether Rabbi Sacks’ musings are correct, and that Israel might in fact gain respect on the international stage if we only discard our own “self-fulfilling prophecy”?

Shabbat Shalom!