

# SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

BALAK

Haftarah: Michah 5:6-6:8

JULY 3-4, 2015 17 TAMUZ 5775

The Fast of the Seventeenth of Tamuz will be on Sunday, July 5.

**DEDICATIONS: For a refuah Shelemah – Simcha ( Stephanie) Bat Sara ( Sherry Lynn)**

**In memory of my grandfather Reuben Ben Farha – Reuben Bibi 23 Tammuz**

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## Editors Notes

This week we have included an article on Nicholas Winton who passed away at 106. There are at least 6000 people alive today, descendants of those he saved in 1939 who owe him a debt of gratitude as we all do. In a time when we saw the worst in people and when others stood by silently, here was someone who put everything on the line to save others.

Looking over this week's portion we see the sorcerer Balak who the Rabbis suggest is a grandson of Yitro, making him Moses nephew seeking out assistance from Bilaam who the rabbis tell us is the grandson of Laban making him a cousin on behalf of the Moabites who descend from Lot, the nephew of Abraham. They say the hatred of relatives is worse than the hatred of enemies. Certainly something for us to think about.

This week I was bothered by the entire idea of Baal Peor – We read Israel settled in Shittim; and the people began to stray after the daughters of Moab. And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods ... and Israel joined themselves to Baal Peor...

Why? After 210 years in Egypt and 40 years in the wilderness, why turn to idolatry now? And of all idols, why Peor?

The Talmud in Sanhedrin tells us: There was once a gentile woman who was very ill, who vowed: "If this woman recovers from her illness, she will go and worship every idol in the world." She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world. When she came to Peor, she asked its priests: "How is this one worshipped?" Said they to her: "One eats greens and drinks beer, and then one defecates before the idol." Said she: "I'd rather that this woman return to her illness than worship an idol in such a manner."

This is not Baal of Eliyahu HaNavi's time who people thought could supply them with abundance. This wasn't even the sun or the moon. This sounded crazy.

And whats crazier is what we will read at the end of Devarim ... And Moses the servant of Hashem died there in Moab, as Hashem had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor. Some suggest that Moshe was buried opposite a house of Avodah Zara (Bet Peor) in order to atone for the sin committed by Bnei Yisrael in Moab with Baal Peor, which led to the deaths of 24,000 men. We have also taught that anytime the accuser from that place would come against Israel, Moses would stop him?

But what is it about Baal Peor, seemingly so disgusting that makes it attractive and dangerous?

I thought that if Judaism represents the desire for man to build up his self-control, the worship of Peor is the opposite. It's the philosophy of, "whatever comes naturally is good". I can hear the priest say, "Don't hold back, don't restrict yourself, let it all hang out and express the true you". Forget the priest; can't you just hear people saying that today? "Don't be afraid to leave your inhibitions behind! Be free! Live out your dreams and fantasies! Be who you are!" Sounds like what they must have said in Sedom, way back when! Looks like we're finding much in common with Sedom these days.

Thinking about this, I was reminded of an article I wrote five years ago. Let me know your thoughts on Peor, is attractiveness and its place in the history of our people,

FROM THE ARCHIVES 2010 - This week, we read about Balak who hires Bilaam to curse the Jews. A number of people asked me about the concept of blessing and curses. Rabbi Abittan taught us that the actualization of a blessing or curse – turning it into reality – often lies in the hands of the receiver. Just as he explained that the greatest protection against an evil eye is to have a good eye, so our own behavior determines if we can take the words of a blessing and bring them to reality and chas veshalom, the opposite when it comes to curses.

In preparing my class for Shabbat, I came across a beautiful thought explained by Rabbi Abba Wagensburg. His tapes are available on line at AishAudio.com.

As the Rabbis explain it, the power of Bilaam related not to an ability to bless, but a knowledge of the brief moment each day when Hashem "gets angry" and the Midat HaDin – the aspect of Judgment is given free reign.

The Talmud asks how long that moment lasts and answers, regah – a moment – a second. But what length of time is regah? The Talmud explains that it is the amount of time required to say the word and if you have ever been in Israel you hear some pretty quick and sharp regahs.

But if the period of anger or judgment is so short, what could Bilaam possibly say in that regah? The rabbis answer that he could say a two syllable word Kalem – destroy them.

One wonders – by saying destroy them – is that a curse that could really do it? Is there anything more to the word.

We know that each time Bilaam came to curse there was no period of anger. Hashem showed his love for us and withheld it. And each time Bilaam opened his mouth, the words he spoke were sent from heaven. So what word would Hashem send to replace Kalem. The rabbis answer, the word Melech - King. And they quote the verse Utruat Melech Boh.

Perhaps this means that instead of destruction, Bani Yisrael will rule.

The Tiferet Shemuel brings a beautiful explanation. He tells us that man has three ruling organs. They are Moach – mind which represents intellect, Lev – heart which represents desire and Kaved Liver which represents passion such as jealousy and anger. From these three we function on earth.

When man is ruled by his Moach – his intellect, that intellect rules over his desires – his Lev. His controlled desires then govern his passions – his Kaved. But when man is ruled by his passions, they govern his desires which overwhelms his intellect and mind. We all know people who are governed by their intellect and people who are governed by their passions, by their anger and jealousy. Jealousy can fuel desire and together people do very stupid things.

When one lives the right way, he has Moach governing Lev and Lev governing Kaved – he is a

Melech – a king – the first letter of each of the words. But when a person lives governed by anger and jealousy then he represents the opposite which is Kalem.

All Bilaam could do, all anyone who curses can do is open up a heavenly file and that's scary no matter who we are. After all, even the most careful tax payer fears an inquiry from the IRS.

Bilaam hoped to accuse us of being a people governed by our passions. To our credit, Hashem judged us favorably and called us Melech – king, people who ruled our desires and passions with our intellect.

One lesson of this weeks Perasha is to protect ourselves, lies within our own hands. Its up to us to live as a Melech – as Pirkey Avot teaches – who is a gibor – a strong person, one who rules over his Yetzer, his inclinations, his passions and his desires.

As we head into the summer with the 17th of Tammuz coming Tuesday and the 9th of Av three weeks later, let us protect ourselves by fulfilling Hashem's blessing which replaces Kalem with Melech and in that merit may Hashem bring Melech haMashiach Bimhera Beyameynu, Amen.

Back to today ... Are we ruled by intellect or emotion? Are we in control or completely out of control? These are some interesting questions to ask ourselves and each other?

Shabbat Shalom,  
David Bibi

### **Nicholas Winton, savior of Jewish children, dies at 106 - Associated Press**

*Dubbed "Britain's Schindler," Winton almost single-handedly saved more than 650 Jewish children from the Holocaust, and kept quiet about his role • "The world lost a great man," says British PM • "He valued human life above all," says Israeli president.*

He was just a 29-year-old clerk at the London Stock Exchange when he faced the challenge of a lifetime. Traveling with a friend to Czechoslovakia in 1938, as the drums of impending war echoed around Europe, Nicholas Winton was hit by a key realization: The country was in danger and no one was saving its Jewish children.

Winton would almost single-handedly save more than 650 Jewish children from the Holocaust, earning himself the label "Britain's Schindler." He died

Wednesday at age 106 in a hospital near Maidenhead, his hometown west of London, his family said.

Winton arranged trains to carry children from Nazi-occupied Prague to Britain, battling bureaucracy at both ends and saving them from almost certain death. He then kept quiet about his exploits for a half-century.

His daughter, Barbara, said she hoped her father would be remembered for his wicked sense of humor and charity work as well as his wartime heroism. And she hoped his legacy would be inspiring people to believe that even difficult things were possible.

"He believed that if there was something that needed to be done you should do it," she said. "Let's not spend too long agonizing about stuff. Let's get it done."

British Prime Minister David Cameron said "the world has lost a great man."

Jonathan Sacks, Britain's former chief rabbi, said Winton "was a giant of moral courage and determination, and he will be mourned by Jewish people around the world."

In Israel, President Reuven Rivlin said Winton will be remembered as a hero from "those darkest of times."

"[He] was a man who valued human life above all else, and there are those who are alive today who are testament to his dedication and sacrifice," Rivlin said.

Born in London on May 19, 1909, to parents of German Jewish descent, Winton himself was raised as a Christian.

Late in 1938, a friend contacted him and told him to cancel the skiing holiday they had planned and travel instead to Czechoslovakia.

Alarmed by the influx of refugees from the Sudetenland region recently annexed by Germany, Winton and his friend feared -- correctly -- that Czechoslovakia soon would be invaded by the Nazis and that its Jewish residents would be sent to concentration camps.

While some in Britain were working to get Jewish intellectuals and communists out of Czechoslovakia, no one was trying to save the children -- so Winton took that task upon himself.

Returning to Britain, Winton persuaded British officials to accept children, as long as foster homes were found and a 50-pound guarantee was paid for each one to ensure they had enough money to return home later. At the time, their stays were only expected to be temporary.

Setting himself up as the one-man children's section of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, Winton set about finding homes and guarantors, drawing up lists of about 6,000 children, publishing pictures to encourage British families to agree to take them.

The first 20 children arrived by plane, but once the German army reached Prague in March 1939, they could only be brought out by train.

In the months before the outbreak of World War II, eight trains carried children from Czechoslovakia through Germany to Britain. In all, Winton got 669 children out.

The largest evacuation was scheduled for Sept. 3, 1939 -- the day that Britain declared war on Germany. That train never left, and almost none of the 250 children trying to flee on it survived the war.

The children from Prague were among some 10,000 mostly Jewish children who made it to Britain on what were known as the Kindertransports (children's transports). Few of them would see their parents again. Although many more Jewish children were saved from Berlin and Vienna, those operations were better organized and better financed. Winton's operation was unique because he worked almost alone.

"Maybe a lot more could have been done. But much more time would have been needed, much more help would have been needed from other countries, much more money would have been needed, much more organization," Winton later said.

He also acknowledged that not all the children who made it to Britain were well-treated in their foster homes -- sometimes they were used as cheap domestic servants.

"I wouldn't claim that it was 100% successful. But I would claim that everybody who came over was alive at the end of the war," he was quoted as saying in the book about the Kindertransports, "Into the Arms of Strangers."

Several of the children he saved grew up to have prominent careers, including filmmaker Karel Reisz,

British politician Lord Alfred Dubs and Canadian journalist Joe Schlesinger.

Winton served in the Royal Air Force during the war and continued to support refugee organizations. After the war, he became involved in numerous other charitable organizations, especially in Maidenhead.

A keen fencer who lost his chance to compete at the Olympics because of the outbreak of World War II, Winton worked with his younger brother Bobby to found the Winton Cup, still a major team fencing competition in Britain.

But for almost 50 years, Winton said nothing about what he had done before the war. It only emerged in 1988 when his wife Grete found documents in the attic of their home. "There are all kinds of things you don't talk about, even with your family," Winton said in 1999. "Everything that happened before the war actually didn't feel important in the light of the war itself."

Winton's wife persuaded him to have his story documented. It became well known in Britain after the BBC tracked down dozens of "Nicky's Children" and arranged an emotional reunion on prime-time television. A film about his heroism, "Nicholas Winton -- The Power of Good," won an International Emmy Award in 2002. Then-Prime Minister Tony Blair praised him as "Britain's Schindler," after German businessman Oskar Schindler, who also saved Jewish lives during the war.

Winton was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2003 and also honored in the Czech Republic, where last year he received the country's highest state honor, the Order of the White Lion.

"He was a person I admired for his personal bravery," said Czech President Milos Zeman. A statue of Winton stands at Prague's central station, while a statue commemorating the children of the Kindertransports is a popular sight at London's Liverpool Street Station.

Winton continued to attend Kindertransport events in Britain and the Czech Republic well beyond his 100th birthday. Still, he rejected the description of himself as a hero, insisting that unlike Schindler, his life had never been in danger. "At the time, everybody said, 'Isn't it wonderful what you've done for the Jews? You saved all these Jewish people,'" Winton said. "When it was first said to me, it came almost as a revelation. Because I didn't do it particularly for that reason. I was there to save children."

### Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading Balak - Bilaam tries to curse Benei Israel (year 40)

- 1- Moab fears Benei Israel will attack them and hires bilam to curse Benei Israel
- 2- Bilam refuses to come at first after Hashem tells him not to go. After asking a second time Hashem allows him to go if he will only speak the words Hashem tells him
- 3- Hashem sends an angel to block Bilam's donkey's path on his way to go curse Benei Israel. Bilam fights with his donkey to continue on the path. Bilam finally reaches Balak.
- 4- Bilaam attempts to curse Benei Israel and ends up blessing them
- 5- Bilaam again tries to curse Benei Israel and ends up praising and blessing them
- 6- Bilaam a 3rd time tries to curse Benei Israel and ends up praising and blessing them
- 7- Benei Israel falls prey to the midyanite women and the avoda zara of baal peor. A plague ensues. Zimri brings a midyanite woman in front of Moshe to sin with her. Pinchus heroically kills zimri.

### EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"He perceived no iniquity in Jacob and saw no amal (toil) in Israel." (Bemidbar 23:21)

The Darkei Mussar quotes the Ohr Hahayim, stating that although the righteous engage in Torah and misvot with tremendous zeal and effort, they do not feel that they are toiling exceedingly. To them it is a labor of delight and love.

The Darkei Mussar (as explained by Rabbi D. Staum) explains that this is what Bilam meant by saying that Hashem sees no amal (this word literally means "sin") in the nation of Israel. Hashem does not see tremendous exertion and toil in B'nei Yisrael's service of Hashem because they perform with love and excitement.

Sometimes, we as parents see our children living a difficult life. Maybe they have a large family or are lacking in funds, while they live a life dedicated to Hashem and the Torah. We should feel it is a privilege and a zechut to help them. But, at the same time remember that they are living a life of inspiration and they don't feel it as a burden. How fortunate are these people. Rabbi Reuven Semah

**We are all familiar with the donkey of Bil'am which spoke to him after Bil'am hit it.** This was an extraordinary miracle done for the benefit of the Jewish people to show Bil'am that the power of speech belongs to Hashem, so that Bil'am should not be connected with his ability to bless or curse

people, since even a donkey could talk by will of Hashem.

The amazing thing is that G-d had this donkey killed so that people shouldn't point to it and say, "This donkey talked back to Bil'am the prophet." Imagine what a kidush Hashem, sanctification of G-d's name, it would be if we could see this donkey and what a great lesson it would teach people. But for the sake of Bil'am's honor, even though he was wicked, Hashem caused this animal to die. We see from here how important is the honor of a human being, which can override the lessons to be had with this amazing talking donkey. We would do well to remember this whenever a question comes up which involves the dignity and respect of someone else. Be it with words or deeds, how careful should we be to preserve the honor of any human being, especially a friend or a loved one! Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

### **RABBI ELI MANSOUR Think For A Moment Before Clicking 'SEND'**

We read in Parashat Balak of the attempt made by the nation of Moab to destroy Beneh Yisrael by hiring Bilam, a gentile prophet, to place a curse upon them. This initiative was conceived by Balak, the king of Moab, but there were actually two nations involved in this scheme – Moab and Midyan. The Torah writes, "The elders of Moab and the elders of Midyan went with instruments of sorcery in their hands; they came to Bilam and spoke to him the words of Balak" (22:7).

Curiously, however, the elders of Midyan quickly disappear from the story. After Bilam hears of Balak's request to come and curse Beneh Yisrael, Bilam tells them to stay overnight so he can hear God's reaction to the idea. The Torah then says, "The officers of Moab stayed with Bilam." It is clear from the text that only the Moabite officials stayed; the Midyanite delegation members, apparently, left and did not stay that night in Bilam's home.

The Midrash explains that the Midyanite dignitaries left because they realized that the mission was doomed to failure. They asked themselves, "Is there a father who despises his son?" The Midyanites understood God's love for Beneh Yisrael, and that Bilam's curse was not going to change that. Realizing that this plan had no chance of success, they left the delegation and returned home.

The obvious question arises, why did the Midyanite officials come to this realization only now? Didn't they realize from the outset that these efforts are futile? Why did they come to Bilam in the first place if

they knew that God would not allow Beneh Yisrael to be destroyed?

Rav Zeitchik answered that the Midyanite officials realized their mistake when they were given a chance to pause and think. So often, people get caught up in their emotions and reach irrational decisions without thinking things through logically. Excitement and anger have a way of overtaking a person and leading him to act irrationally. The Midyanite officials were caught up in their hatred of Beneh Yisrael, and in the excitement of the prospect of their demise through Bilam's curse. The flood of emotions drove them to proceed with the plan, despite its obvious absurdity. But once Bilam told them to stay overnight, and they had a chance to stop and think, it occurred to them that the scheme could not possibly work, that no person can persuade the Almighty to annihilate His beloved nation. At this point, they turned around and left.

So many of our problems could be avoided if we would learn and internalize this lesson – to stop and think rationally before acting on emotion. Our emotions have a way of paralyzing our intellect and leading us to do things that we regret later, when our emotions are cooled. It happens so often that we react viscerally to an insulting remark without first pausing and thinking about how to best respond to the situation. We then say words that we regret only when it is too late, when the wounds are too deep to heal.

This is an especially important lesson nowadays, when so much of our communication takes place via email. It just takes a moment to type an angry letter and click "send." If we don't think very carefully before we compose the letter and send it, we can end up shattering relationships. Once we click "send," there is no turning back; the damage is done, and often irreparable.

If we take some time to think before reacting, our reactions will be infinitely wiser, more prudent and more calculated. Acting with raw emotion without exercising the mind is a dangerous affair. Yes, we have what to learn even from the elders of Midyan – the importance of thinking very carefully before speaking or acting, to calculate our words and deeds rather than allow our emotions to control us.

### **Rabbi Wein LOSING TEAMS**

I have always felt that part of the attraction of sports, especially professional sports, leagues and teams, is that it somehow represents a metaphor for general

life. One of the great ongoing mysteries of sports is the loyalty that losing teams continue to exercise over their fan base year after year and even decade after decade.

The Chicago Cubs have not won a championship in major league baseball for over a century. One would think that this would somehow discourage fan loyalty and essentially bring the club into financial bankruptcy. However, the opposite is true. Almost every game that they play is a complete sellout, the team is worth hundreds of millions of dollars and nothing seems to erode its popularity or following.

This is true for many other team franchises all over the sporting world. It is not only the winners who are admired and rewarded but it is also the losers who are snuggled and loved. The concept of reward and punishment, success and failure, does not always apply in the sporting world.

The fan base of losing teams never completely disappears. The slogan is always, "Wait till next year". But the obvious question is why should one feel that next year will be different than this year or the past number of years, the past number of decades or of the past century. But, this is human nature - to be eternally optimistic.

All sports leagues and teams are built on that premise of optimism, that somehow what has not worked in the past will somehow work in the future. And it is not only the winning teams that prosper financially but, in many cases, it is losing teams that produce greater profits for their owners and investors.

To a great extent, this sports oddity is reflected in political life as well. Old policies which have led to failure are constantly recycled and presented as somehow being the greatest of all options available. Discredited political leaders, some of whom have even been convicted of serious criminal offenses, are elected and command party loyalty. Charismatic leaders who promised great things and engendered great hopes are revealed to have clay feet but are still appreciated, if not even revered.

Ideologies that have failed are stubbornly maintained in the political, social and even religious world. It is as though everyone loves a loser no matter what the consequences. I think that it is pretty clear that the "two-state" solution to the Arab-Israeli struggle is not really a viable solution. Lip service to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems that both the Arabs and the Israelis instinctively realize that this is the case and neither side is really interested in pursuing its implementation.

Yet, the whole world loves a loser and is adamant that somehow this failed solution should be imposed upon the parties. The Chicago Cubs will continue to sell out all of their home games. The "peace process" and the "two-state" solution will continue to grind on to the ultimate detriment of all concerned. It has become an institutionalized industry in which many have now invested great interests and wealth and is unlikely to be shut down any time in the foreseeable future.

There are many examples of failed policies and counterproductive measures that abound in the Jewish world. The great tide of assimilation and intermarriage which is sweeping the Jewish world in the Diaspora and especially in North America is being attacked by policies, tactics and strategies, all of which failed to stem the secularization of the Jewish world in the nineteenth century in Eastern and Central Europe.

Yet, we persist in adopting those same tactics, which unfortunately failed us then, and apply them once again to our current situation. Not only that, but those who would advance a different outlook and different tactics to try and counter the current desperate situation are usually accused of being not true fans and of being disloyal to the home team.

Loyalty to the home team, no matter what, is a comfort zone that people readily adapt to and eventually come to treasure. If the object of the game is to win, at least some of the time, then true loyalty would dictate demanding changes that would possibly create a winning team. Strangely, I know many fine Jews who are complacent and even satisfied regarding the present state of Torah and tradition in Jewish society. They love rooting for a loser. Until that situation changes and rights itself it is unlikely that we will produce a winner.

### **Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks A People That Dwells Alone?**

In the course of blessing the Jewish people Bilaam uttered words that have come to seem to many[1] to encapsulate Jewish history:

*How can I curse whom God has not cursed?  
How can I doom whom God has not doomed?  
I see them from mountain tops,  
Gaze on them from the heights.  
Look: a people that dwells alone,  
Not reckoned among the nations. (Num. 23: 8-9)*

That is how it seemed during the persecutions and

pogroms in Europe. It is how it seemed during the Holocaust. It is how it sometimes seems to Israel and its defenders today. We find ourselves alone. How should we understand this fact? How should we interpret this verse?

In my book *Future Tense* I describe the moment when I first became aware of how dangerous a self-definition this can be. We were having lunch in Jerusalem, on Shavuot 5761/2001. Present was one of the world's great fighters against antisemitism, Irwin Cotler, soon to become Canada's Minister of Justice, together with a distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were talking about the forthcoming United Nations Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001.

We all had reasons to know that it was going to be a disaster for Israel. It was there in the parallel sessions of the NGOs that Israel was accused of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and attempted genocide. The conference became, in effect, the launch-pad of a new and vicious antisemitism. In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they were hated because of their race. In the twenty-first century they are hated because of their nation state. As we were speaking of the likely outcome, the diplomat heaved a sigh and said, "Twas ever thus. Am levadad yishkon: we are the nation fated to be alone."

The man who said those words had the best of intentions. He had spent his professional life defending Israel, and he was seeking to comfort us. His intentions were the best, and it was meant no more than as a polite remark. But I suddenly saw how dangerous such an attitude is. If you believe your fate is to be alone, that is almost certainly what will happen. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why bother to make friends and allies if you know in advance that you will fail? How then are we to understand Bilaam's words?

First, it should be clear that this is a very ambiguous blessing. Being alone, from a Torah perspective, is not a good thing. The first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah is in the verse, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2: 18). The second time is when Moses' father-in-law Jethro sees him leading alone and says, "What you are doing is not good" (Ex. 18: 17). We cannot live alone. We cannot lead alone. It is not good to be alone.

The word *badad* appears in two other profoundly negative contexts. First is the case of the leper: "He

shall dwell alone; his place shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13: 46). The second is the opening line of the book of Lamentations: "How alone is the city once thronged with people" (Lam. 1: 1). The only context in which *badad* has a positive sense is when it is applied to God (Deut. 32: 12), for obvious theological reasons.

Second, Bilaam who said those words was not a lover of Israel. Hired to curse them and prevented from doing so by God, he nonetheless tried a second time, this time successfully, persuading the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, as a result of which 24,000 died (Num. 25, 31: 16). It was this second strategy of Bilaam – after he had already said, "How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I doom whom God has not doomed?" – that marks him out as a man profoundly hostile to the Israelites. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) states that all the blessings that Balaam bestowed on the Israelites eventually turned into curses, with the sole exception of the blessing "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel." So in the rabbis' view, "a people that dwells alone" eventually became not a blessing but a curse.

Third, nowhere in Tanakh are we told that it will be the fate of Israel or Jews to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a day on which "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is. 2:3). Zechariah foresaw that "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zech. 8: 23). These are sufficient to cast doubt on the idea that antisemitism is eternal, incurable, woven into Jewish history and destiny.

Only in rabbinic literature do we find statements that seem to suggest that Israel is hated. Most famous is the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai "Halakhah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob." [2] Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years. [3] His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

Those who quote this passage do so only partially and selectively. It refers to the moment at which Jacob and Esau met after their long estrangement.

Jacob feared that Esau would try to kill him. After taking elaborate precautions and wrestling with an angel, the next morning he sees Esau. The verse then says: "Esau ran to meet them. He hugged [Jacob], and throwing himself on his shoulders, kissed him. They [both] wept" (Gen. 33: 4). Over the letters of the word "kissed" as it appears in a Sefer Torah, there are dots, signaling some special meaning. It was in this context that Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: "Even though it is well known that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment he was overcome with compassion and kissed him with a full heart."<sup>[4]</sup> In other words, precisely the text cited to show that antisemitism is inevitable, proves the opposite: that at the crucial encounter, Esau did not feel hate toward Jacob. They met, embraced and went their separate ways without ill-will.

There is, in short, nothing in Judaism to suggest that it is the fate of Jews to be hated. It is neither written into the texture of the universe nor encoded in the human genome. It is not the will of God. Only in moments of deep despair have Jews believed this, most notably Leo Pinsker in his 1882 tract *Auto-emancipation*, in which he said of Judeophobia, "As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable."

Antisemitism is not mysterious, unfathomable or inexorable. It is a complex phenomenon that has mutated over time, and it has identifiable causes, social, economic, political, cultural and theological. It can be fought; it can be defeated. But it will not be fought or defeated if people think that it is Jacob's fate to be hated by "Esau" or to be "the people that dwells alone," a pariah among peoples, a leper among nations, an outcast in the international arena.

What then does the phrase "a people that dwells alone" mean? It means a people prepared to stand alone if need be, living by its own moral code, having the courage to be different and to take the road less travelled.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offered a fine insight by focusing on the nuance between "people" (*am*) and "nation" (*goi*) – or as we might say nowadays, "society" and "state." Israel uniquely became a society before it was a state. It had laws before it had a land. It was a people – a group bound together by a common code and culture – before it was a nation, that is, a political entity. As I noted in *Future Tense*, the word *peoplehood* first appeared in 1992, and its early uses were almost entirely in reference to Jews. What makes Jews different, according to Hirsch's reading of Bilaam, is that Jews are a distinctive people, that is, a group defined by shared memories

and collective responsibilities, "not reckoned among the nations" since they are capable of surviving even without nationhood, even in exile and dispersion. Israel's strength lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on justice and human dignity.

The battle against antisemitism can be won, but it will not be if Jews believe that we are destined to be alone. That is Bilaam's curse, not God's blessing.

[1] A People that Dwells Alone was the title given to the collection of essays by the late Jacob Herzog. It was also the theme of the autobiography of Israeli diplomat, and brother of Israel's former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the late Naftali Lau-Lavie.

[2] *Sifre*, Behaalotecha, 89; Rashi to Gen. 33: 4; see Kreti to Yoreh Deah ch. 88 for the halakhic implications of this statement.

[3] Shabbat 33b. [4] See Rashi ad loc.

### AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

"The speech of him that hears the words of G-d and knows the knowledge of the Most High" (24:16)

The expression "Most High" (*Elyon*) means that Bileam was sent to reveal that which other prophets did not reveal, and even Moshe was unwilling to reveal. The extraordinary virtue of the holy people was not preached by the prophets who desired to urge Israel to return to their perfection which they had attained at Sinai, when Hashem had said "Would that they should have such a heart as this, always to fear me" (*Devarim* 5:26).

Although their reproof was beneficial, yet there was still a higher truth which Hashem does not so lavishly reveal. This higher truth was now inserted in the Torah by means of Bileam, who revealed his knowledge of the 'Most High'.

The truest friends of Israel, in the days of old, refrained from praising the people and instead constantly rebuked them. But the Torah needed some revelation of Israel's superb nature, and for this higher truth Bileam was sent.

Thus, when the status of Song of Songs (*Shir Hashirim*) was under discussion, Rabbi Akiba spoke up with emotion and he declared: "All of the (holy) Books are holy, but *Shir Hashirim* is the holy of holies" (*Yadayim* 3:5). It is not the Book itself, but the theme of this Book which is devoted to Hashem's love of Israel, which is the holiest of themes.

Not Bileam himself, but this theme of Hashem's love of Israel, is the highest truth of Knowledge of Hashem.

Quoted from "Journey Into Greatness" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZT'L