

פ' בלק תשפ"ד

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RAV ELCHONON'S YAHRZEIT

It is a people (am) that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations (goyim) (23:9)

The Beis Halevi expounds this *possuk* as follows: If the Jewish nation is alone, living in a literal ghetto or a self-imposed spiritual ghetto, it will dwell securely, but if it wants to live amongst the nations and mimic their way of life, then they shall not be reckoned, because they will lose their superiority over the nations.

Rav Elchonon Wasserman was in London collecting for his yeshiva. Rav Sternbuch, who was a boy at the time, was present during his speech in a *shul* in London when he expounded this *possuk* differently. He said that “*goy*” refers to a nation united by a common territory, like all the nations of the world, whereas “*am*” refers to a group of people with a common language, dress code or other customs, which, notwithstanding the lack of a common territory or state of its own, is still considered to be one nation.

Bilom was saying that the Jewish nation shall dwell alone, because we are a solitary holy nation with no connection to the other nations, and as for being a *goy* with a state of our own, we attribute no significance to that, as we are distinguished as a nation without having our own territory, and the reason we yearn to live in *Eretz Yisroel* is on account of its sanctity and the *mitzvos* which can only be observed there, but our national essence is not dependent on living there.

He continued to expand on this theme, even though his audience was becoming sparser by the minute, as the majority consisted of Zionists, who walked out in protest. Rav Sternbuch recalls that by the time he had finished, there was barely a *minyan* left. Rav Elchonon, who knew from experience what the likely response to his words of rebuke would be, and the consequent loss of donors, explained to the amazed questioners who remained, that it was his duty to increase *kvod shomayim* (the Honor of Heaven) regardless of the consequences. Hashem has guaranteed the eternity of Torah and Torah learners, and He would surely find a way to maintain his yeshiva even without the support of these potential donors.

Rav Elchonon was solely concerned with fulfilling Hashem's Will, regardless of the consequences, following in the footsteps of his teacher, the Chofetz Chaim, from whom he absorbed his greatness.

This past Monday evening Rav Sternbuch spoke at Yeshivas *Or Elchonon* on the occasion of Rav Elchonon's Yahrzeit. He was murdered 83 years ago on 11 *Tamuz* 5701. Rav Sternbuch recalled how Rav Elchonon lived with a pure and simple faith that all of life's trials are divinely ordained. His holy image and desire to fulfil the Will of our Father in Heaven remain before Rav Sternbuch's eyes and still inspire him.

Rav Sternbuch told the boys that anyone who overcomes trials is sanctified greatly by Hashem. Our whole desire in this world is to attain sanctity, and, by doing so, we hasten the coming of Moshiach.

As for the current threats to recruit boys to the army, Rav Sternbuch noted that the Jews have always displayed *mesirus nefesh* for Torah in all conceivable situations. As the Torah testifies, we are a “stiff-necked” nation that does not compromise on its principles, and stubbornly adheres to Hashem and His Torah.

POPULATION GROWTH

And Moav became disgusted with life (see Rashi) because of Bnei Yisroel (22:3)

If the people of Moav were scared of a battle with the Jewish nation, why should that have made them become disgusted with life? Moreover, Bolok knew that the Jews were forbidden to wage a full-scale war against Moav, and he was only afraid that they would impose taxes on him. Surely the thought of that is not enough to make the whole nation disgusted with life.

In truth, they were not worried for their pockets, but were disgusted at the thought of having to come into any contact with the Jewish nation. The thought that their licentious and corrupt lifestyle could be affected by the holy way of life practiced by the subduing nation made them become disgusted with life. They preferred death to having restrictions imposed on their unbridled lifestyle.

In *Eretz Yisroel*, too, we hear about the alarmed reaction of local residents when even one religious family moves into a fortress of secularism. This stems from their fear of the influence these new neighbors could wield on their way of life.

Our erring brethren worry about the population increase among the *chareidim*. One of their methods of dealing with this “problem” is to hold out all sorts of baits in order to encourage *chareidim* to assimilate into the way of life followed by the general population. In several cities in *Eretz Yisroel* mayors do what they can to counteract the influence of the *chareidim*, and they fight against *Shabbos* observance.

In a similar vein, Israel's Education Ministry once accepted criticisms voiced by the Secular Forum bemoaning the promotion of Jewish religious observance in state secular schools. More than 70% of Jewish children receive their education in these schools. Parents are worried that any mention of G-d or religion might provide the *chareidim* with unwarranted influence. They insist on secular schooling with no religious content of any kind. In other words, they are disgusted by the thought that their children might become closer to the religious. For the same reason, one previous government wanted to make it a criminal offense to attempt to influence a boy under 18 to enter a Torah educational institution without his parents' consent.

SMOKING ON THE BOAT

Rav Sternbuch recalls the time he was traveling on a boat from *Eretz Yisroel* to Italy. During that journey, Rav Sternbuch attended a lecture given by an internationally renowned doctor warning of the dangers posed to a smoker's health, and how cigarettes can shorten a person's life. Just several hours later, Rav Sternbuch was astonished to see this same doctor walking around calmly smoking a cigarette.

Rav Sternbuch asked him how he could behave so hypocritically, and why did he not practice what he preached. The doctor responded that he saw no contradiction. “I said that smoking shortens people's lives, I did not say that because of that people should stop smoking. Far from it. I prefer to lose ten years of my life and enjoy my cigarettes, rather

than live longer without them.” Rav Sternbuch says that this experience taught him the extent of the *tumah* of non-believers, who may be blessed with great intellect, but are unwilling to bridle their desires even for the sake of the gift of life.

AYIN HORO

Moav became terrified of the people, for they were numerous (22:3)

The commentators (see e.g. Ramban on 22:3) ask why Bolok was afraid of the Jews, since, as we said, he knew that the Torah forbade us to fight him at all as it says, “Do not be at enmity with Moav, neither contend with them in battle” (*Devorim* 2:9).

Perhaps Bolok was afraid of the *erev rav*, as it says, “Moav became terrified of the people [*ho’am*]” and “*am*” is a connotation for the *erev rav*, e.g. in the context of the *chet ho’egel*. Bolok knew that the *erev rav* did not observe the commandments of the Torah, because they had made the Golden Calf, and he was therefore afraid that they would also not observe the commandment not to start a war with Moav. According to this, when Bolok asked Bilom to curse the Jews, he meant the *erev rav*, because he was afraid only of them.

Based on this explanation, we can understand the extent of Hashem’s mercy in thwarting Bilom’s attempt to apply an *ayin horo* on the Jews. Rav Sternbuch heard from Rav Eliyohu Eliezer Dessler that an *ayin horo* only has the power to harm a bad person, for example a depraved person or someone who has an evil eye himself, such as a person who is jealous of someone else’s wealth, but not a good person, who has a “good eye”. Therefore, a wealthy person only needs to worry about *ayin horo* if he is stingy, because then many people will be jealous of him and wonder why he deserves to have so much money if he does not give charity. However, if he donates generously, he has nothing to fear. Even though everybody realizes that he must be very wealthy to give so much money to charity, the *ayin horo* has no power to harm a good person.

If Hashem would not have overturned Bilom’s curse to a blessing, his curse would have been very successful in causing harm, because Bilom wanted his *ayin horo* to have an effect specifically on the *erev rav*, and since they were wicked people they were ripe candidates for being victims of an *ayin horo*. Therefore, were it not for Hashem’s miracle they would have definitely been harmed by Bilom’s *ayin horo*.

Hashem prevented Bilom from cursing the *erev rav* because if they would have been killed or hurt, the Jewish nation would have become very frightened and disheartened. Bolok too had been interested in that side effect of Bilom’s curses, although his main purpose, was to prevent the *erev rav* from harming him militarily.

CURSES INSTEAD OF BLESSINGS

Please come and curse this people for me (22:6)

If Bilom had the power to bless, why did Bolok not ask him to bless him for success in his attempts to wage war against the Jews, instead of asking him to take the circuitous path of cursing the nation so that they could not succeed?

The Chofetz Chaim notes that when a Jew is in trouble, he goes to a *tzaddik* to seek a *brochah*, but the wicked are not interested in blessings for themselves but only in harming others. Hence, Bolok preferred that Bilom curse the Jews rather than bless him.

The urge of anti-Semites to witness the downfall and suffering of their (imagined) enemies has always been stronger than their concern for their own welfare. In World War II,

for example, Hitler was informed by his generals that trains were desperately needed to bring more soldiers and weapons to the front. They asked him for permission to put a temporary halt to the deportations of Jews to concentrations camps so that more trains could become available. Hitler responded in fury, "Don't you understand? Our main war is against the Jews. They have to be annihilated, and as long as there are any of them left, the whole war will not have been worth it!"

ADMIRING POLITICANS

Bilom refused to go with the elders of Moav and the elders of Midian, who had magic charms in their hands, and conveyed Bolok's message to him (22:7). Only when Bolok subsequently sent "dignitaries, more and higher in rank than these" (22:15) did Bilom accompany them to meet Bolok.

The first group consisted of religious leaders, with their magic charms, and Bilom had no respect for them, whereas the second group was composed of government ministers, who were held in very high regard by Bilom.

Unfortunately, there are also people today who think that a government minister or a professor is worthy of being honored, whereas a *yeshiva bochur* is not. Similarly, there are some parents who have the great fortune of having a son who has studied Torah for many years, but instead of taking pride in this, they do not find religious matters important enough, and would prefer their son to acquire an academic degree. This attitude is reminiscent of Bilom's approach.

On the subject of government ministers, Rav Sternbuch notes with pain that we should feel no affinity with any politician, irrespective of his political affiliation. Rav Sternbuch heard from the late Gerer Rebbe, the *Beis Yiroel*, that we do not distinguish between left and right, and we do not oppose any party that does not fight us. In any event, it is a desecration of the divine name to feel any personal connection with a secular politician. Anyone who has a personal or social connection with a heretic and completely non-observant politician demonstrates that he has lost any sensitivity for any matter of *kedusha*.

AVOIDING BLESSINGS FROM THE WICKED

You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people because they are blessed (22:12). Rashi: He said to Him, "If so, I will curse them in my place." He replied to him, "You shall not curse the people." He said, "If so, I will bless them." He replied, "They do not need your blessing, 'for they are blessed.'" As the saying goes, "We say to the wasp, 'Neither your honey, nor your sting.'"

Why would Bilom, who hated the Jews so much, want to bless them?

The so-called blessings of the wicked are no less detrimental to us than their manifest curses, and no good can come from them. Bilom's request from Hashem was that all the blessings of the Jews should come from him, because that would effectively ruin them as much as an outright curse from him. Hashem responded that he had no permission to bless the Jews, because they were themselves the source of all blessings, and had no need for any of his.

During the Second World War, Rav Moshe Schneider's yeshiva suffered terrible financial straits, but even when there was no bread to feed the boys, Rav Schneider refused offers from *mechalalei Shabbos* to come to the yeshiva's rescue, arguing that in order to

ensure its continued success, the funds supporting the yeshiva had to come only from pure sources. In a similar vein, Rav Chaim Brisker said that the Volozhiner Yeshiva was eventually closed because the people responsible for collecting funds for it had not been particular about the character of the donors, and this had affected the *kedusha* of the Yeshiva.

ANGEL OF MERCY

“G-d's wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of Hashem stationed himself on the road to thwart him” (22:22). Rashi: “It was an angel of mercy, and he wanted to prevent him from sinning, for should he sin, he would perish”

The *mashgiach* of *Ponevezh*, Rav Yechezkel Levenstein expressed amazement at this *possuk*. Bilom was in the process of committing the very serious sin of causing sorrow to Hashem and cursing His nation, and nevertheless Hashem sent an angel of mercy to him to benefit him and prevent him from sinning. How much more so when a person performs the Will of Hashem will Hashem send an angel of mercy to assist him.

Rav Yechezkel added that this conduct only applies in this world in which the Trait of Mercy is predominant, but in the Afterlife a person will suddenly perceive new concepts and not recognize Hashem's conduct at all, because in that world Hashem only acts with the Trait of Justice without any admixture of Mercy, all actions committed in this world being punished without mercy, until the person is cleansed and ready to enjoy the Divine Radiance and receive reward for his good deeds in this world.

HERESY AND MIRACLES

And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey (22:28)

The Sforno says that Hashem opened the donkey's mouth for Bilom's benefit in order to give him a chance to repent as a result of witnessing this open miracle. However, in practice he did not utilize this opportunity, and continued in his wicked ways. A person can witness an extraordinary miracle right before his eyes and continue as if nothing was happening, as noted by Rabbenu Bachaye.

Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin said that in light of all the evidence of a Creator all around us and inside us, heresy that denies the existence of Hashem, claiming that the only reality is nature, is so irrational that it can only be explained as a supernatural phenomenon created by Hashem, in order to maintain free choice. This explains, for example, how Amolek could have espoused such views after the unprecedented miracles of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*.

Rav Diskin added that much *siyatta d'Shmaya* is needed to enable us to keep our distance from *epikorsus*, especially in the final period prior to the coming of Moshiach, when the powers of *tumah* drastically increase, knowing that their end is near.

Rav Sternbuch was once visiting the Brisker Rov when an American visitor told the Brisker Rov that in America people were waiting for Moshiach to come. The Brisker Rav asked him whether people were preparing themselves for this great event. The visitor responded that Moshiach should come already with or without our preparations. The Brisker Rav replied that this would not work. We must start the process of repentance and strengthening our faith now, intensifying our Torah and prayer and working on our character traits so that we will be worthy of welcoming Moshiach and witnessing the unprecedented miracles that Hashem will perform at that time. Even revealed miracles, the Brisker Rav said, will not change a person who is stubborn or steeped in his desires.

Although *epikorsim* (heretics) clothe their views in an intellectual veneer, in reality their outlook usually does not have intellectual roots, but rather stems from negative character traits. Deep down they feel the emptiness of their lives, and seek to justify licentious behavior by citing sundry intellectual “problems” that they claim to have detected with regard to leading a religious lifestyle.

WE DO NOT CURSE

It says in the *parsha* that Bolok was afraid of a war with the Jews (and as a *kosem* he must have known about the qualities of the Jews and how much he had to be afraid of them). However, instead of beseeching Hashem to save him, he hired Bilom to curse the Jews. That is the method adopted by the likes of Bilom and Bolok. By contrast, when we are in trouble, we turn to Hashem in prayer to save us, and we never curse our enemies.

R. Amram Blau, who was in the habit of speaking vociferously against the less forceful path advocated by many *gedolim*, told Rav Sternbuch that he never cursed any of his opponents. Similarly, the late Satmarer Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, said that during his speeches against opposing approaches he never cursed any *rov*, since that is the technique adopted by Bilom, not of the Jews.

SPIRITUALIZING THE MUNDANE

Who counted the dust of Yaakov or the number of a fourth of Yisroel (23:10)

Bilom was saying: Who can compare to the Jewish nation? They even have *mitzvos* pertaining to dust, such as *kisuy hadam*, the *eifer* of the *sotah*, and the *parah adumah*. They are capable of spiritualizing even the most material and insignificant elements, such as dust. The strength of the Jews lies in their ability to elevate the material part of creation. If these people can elevate even dust, said Bilom, then ultimately nothing is merely material, and everything is inherently holy and spiritual. Hence, if a Jew, for example, works with the intention of fulfilling the will of the Creator, then even his material actions are actually spiritual ones.

The message to Bolok was that he could not hope to subjugate a nation with such unique abilities.

DYING RIGHTEOUS

Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end (acharisi) be like his (23:10)

The commentators explain that Bilom’s statement is typical of the wicked, who are intellectually aware of the reward for *mitzvos* and the punishment for sins in the World to Come, and may even make a point of finding someone to pray and learn for them to elevate their souls after they pass away, but nevertheless cannot extricate themselves from their unbridled lifestyles in this world, being too accustomed to fulfilling their lusts. Bilom too wanted to die like a righteous person, even though his lifestyle was so far from righteous.

The Sforno explains that a person's children and descendants are called his *acharisi*. According to this, Bilom desired to have righteous children. When a person dies leaving behind children or students going in the path of the Torah, the soul is not cut off, because his descendants, students, or others on whom he has had an effect during his lifetime, or the descendants and students of these people, are both physically and spiritually still alive. This was the "death of the righteous" for which Bilom yearned.