

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XL: Balak (Num. 22:2–25:9)

Essay 7. Balaam testifies as to Israel's uniqueness

פְּרָק ד' דְּסִנְהֶדְרִין אָמַר לִיהָ הָהוּא מִינָא לְרַבֵּי אַבִּינָא: כְּתִיב "וַיְמִי כְעֵמֶדָּה פְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בְּאַרְצָא" מַאי רַבּוּתִיכוּ? אַתּוּן נְמִי עֲרַבִיתוּ בְּהַדְוֹן, דְּכְתִיב "כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם פְּאִין נִגְדּוּ", אָמַר לִיהָ: מְדִיכּוּ אֶסְהִידוּ עֲלֵן, דְּכְתִיב "וַיְבַגְּוּ לֹא יִתְחַשְּׁב", כְּדַרְבֵּי אֶלְעָזָר, דְּרַבֵּי אֶלְעָזָר רְמִי: כְּתִיב "טוֹב־הָ לְכָל" וְכְתִיב "טוֹב ה' לְקַוּוֹ", מְשַׁלְּ לְאֶדָם וְשִׂישׁ לוֹ פְּרָדָס: כְּשֶׁהוּא מְשַׁקָּה, מְשַׁקָּה אֶת כָּלוּ, וְכִשְׁהוּא עוֹדֵר, אֵינּוּ עוֹדֵר אֶלָּא הַטּוֹבִים שְׂפָהֶם ע"כ.

Chapter 4 of tractate Sanhedrin:

A certain heretic said to Rabbi Avina: “It is written: ‘And who is like Your people, Israel, a unique nation on Earth.’¹ What is your uniqueness? You are also mixed together with us, as it is written: ‘All nations before Him are as nothing; they are counted by Him less than nothing and vanity.’”²

[Rabbi Avina] said to him: “One of yours, [i.e., Balaam], has testified for us, as it is written: ‘It is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.’”³

This is like Rabbi Elazar, for Rabbi Elazar raises [a contradiction]: “It is written, ‘The L-rd is good to all,’⁴ but [elsewhere] it is written, ‘The L-rd is good to those who wait for Him.’⁵ There is a parable of a man who has an orchard. [The man is good to all in that] when he waters it, he waters all of it [not discriminating between the good trees and the weak trees]. [But he is more discriminatory] when he hoes [around the trees], [for then] he hoes only [around] the good ones among them. [Similarly, when G-d bestows goodness to the world, all receive it, but when He protects people from harm, not all are protected.]

- Sanhedrin 39a

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¹ II Sam. 7:23.

² Isaiah 40:17.

³ Num. 23:9.

⁴ Ps. 145:9.

⁵ Lam. 3:25.

קשה דמאי נפקא מינה בין רבי אבינא למהוה מינא, ואמאי איצטריוך רבי אבינא למימר מדידכו אסהידו עלן וכו', דמה צורף הנה שנסהידו הם מינייהו על זה, ונהלא אם הנה כתוב בתורה פסוק זה בלי שיאמר אותו בלעם הנה ראיה על זה, דהואיל דהוה מינא הביא ראיות מן התורה אף הוא הנה יכול להשיבו מן התורה, ומה צורף שייעיד בלעם. ועוד מאי שיידה הקא הך דרבי אלעזר והמשל לאדם שהנה לו פרדס וכו'.

Question 1: **It is difficult to understand what practical difference there is between Rabbi Avina and that heretic.** They have a difference of opinion as to whether Israel is counted among the nations or not, but isn't that just a rhetorical dispute? What is the practical significance?

Question 2: **Why did Rabbi Avina need to say, "One of yours, [i.e., Balaam], has testified for us." What need was there that they should testify from among their own about this? After all, if that verse had been written in the Torah without being said by Balaam, it would have still been proof of the matter. Since the heretic brought proof from the Torah, [Rabbi Avina] also could have responded from the Torah, so why was Balaam's testimony necessary?**

Question 3: **Moreover, what is the relevance here of Rabbi Elazar's statement and the parable of a man who has an orchard, etc.?**

ונש לומר דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "ובגוים לא יתחשב", כשאומות העולם שמחים ישראל שמחים עמם וכשישראל שמחים אין אומות העולם שמחים עמם שנאמר "הן-עם לבדד ישפן ובגוים לא יתחשב". וכוננת המין היתה לומר אתון נמי צרביתו בהדן ואם פן יש לנו לשמות בשאתם שמחים, לפי שאחר החלוקה שעשו יעקב ועשו שייעקב נטל לחלקו העולם הבא ועשו העולם הזה לא נשאר לייעקב שום טענה ליהנות מהעולם הזה. אלא שהואיל שייעקב היה רחמן על בניו נתחכם לקנות מעשו הרשות ליהנות מעט מהעולם הזה, כדאיתא במדרש על פסוק "מכרה כיום את-בכרתה לי", ובין לי חד יום מן דידך, וכמו שהארבנו על זה לעיל במקומו ועיי"ש, ואם פן בשלמא שיהיו ישראל שמחים מעט עם האומות גיחא, אבל שישראל יהיו שמחים לבדם בלא האומות לא גיחא ומקח טעות הוא זה ואינו מן הדין.

One can say that it is stated in the Midrash on the verse, "and shall not be reckoned among the nations":

When the nations of the world rejoice, Israel rejoices with them. But when Israel rejoices, the nations of the world do not rejoice with them, as it is said, "It is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations."

- Num. Rabbah 20:16

The intention of the heretic was to say: "You too have mingled with us, and therefore we have the right to rejoice when you are happy." For after the division that Jacob and Esau made with the sale of the birthright, that Jacob took for his portion the World-to-Come, and Esau took for his portion this world, Jacob no longer had any claim to benefit from this world.

However, since Jacob was compassionate toward his children, he cleverly sought to acquire from Esau permission to benefit slightly from this world, as is stated in the Midrash (Gen. Rabbah 63:18) on the verse, “Sell me this day your birthright,” which the Midrash interpreted as, “Sell me one day from yours,”⁶ and as we explained at length on this in its place, parashat Toldot, essay 6, and see there.

If so, the answer to Question 1, as to the practical difference of their argument, the heretic was arguing that given the contract made between the brothers, **it is understandable that Israel might rejoice a little along with the nations; that is acceptable. But that Israel would rejoice alone, without the nations; that is not acceptable, as that would be a mistaken transaction between Jacob and Esau and not just.** [This can be understood in at least two different ways. Artscroll’s interpretation is that “sell me one day from yours” means that Israel could enjoy a small portion of this world, to rejoice with the nations, but not enough to rejoice alone. The interpretation of Rabbi Zvi Kahn is that there would have been an expectation on Esau’s part that if he was ceding a bit of this world to Jacob, that Jacob should have ceded a bit of the World-to-Come to Esau.]

ורבי אבינא רצה לתרץ לו דאין הכי נמי דמשמעם אותה המכירה הנה הדין כן, אבל הואיל שאחר כך נתגלגלו הדברים ובאו הברכות ליעקב, ניתוסף פחו שמה שאינו יכול ליהנות מכל המקח הנה מחמת הברכות. ואם תאמר ועל זה אני דן ויש לי אף בזה מקום טענה לומר שהברכות הן גזולות בידי לפי שבאו לו במרמה ובעקבה, הלא כבר הודיתם שתהינה לישראל אלו הברכות ואלו ההנאות הבאות מחמת הברכות. וזהו שהשיב לו ר' אבינא מדידכו וכו' כלומר הואיל שמעצמכם הודיתם לנו שבצעת שמחתנו אין לכם חלק עמנו אם כן הודעת בעל דין כמאה עדים דמי, ומשום הכי נקט מדידכו וכו'.

Rabbi Avina wished to answer him: Indeed, it is true that by reason of that sale, the law would be as you say, that if Israel wants to claim the entirety of the World-to-Come, it would have to entirely cede the entirety of this world to Esau. But since afterward, the events unfolded and the blessings from Isaac came to Jacob, his strength was increased, such that what he could not lawfully benefit from the transaction, he could now benefit due to the blessings.

Rabbi Avina was essentially saying to the heretic: “**If you should say: ‘But this is exactly what I argue, and I also have grounds to claim that the blessings are stolen in his hand, since they came to him through deceit and trickery,’ haven’t you already admitted that Israel should have these blessings and the benefits that come because of the blessings?’**”

Thus, the answer to Question 2 is that **this is why Rabbi Avina answered him: “One of yours, [i.e., Balaam], has testified for us,” as if to say that since you yourselves have admitted that in our time of joy you have no share with us, then a party’s own admission is as valid as a hundred witnesses. Because of this, he chose to respond, “One of yours, [i.e., Balaam], has testified for us.”**

⁶ Gen. 25:31.

והשקתא אתי שפיר המנשל שהביא מנשל לאדם וכו', אף פאן הקב"ה פנשנותן שלנה לאומות גותן אף לישראל אכל פנשנותן רק לישראל אין זר אפם ועל זה אמר הכתוב "נמתה שמחה בלבי מעת דגנמ ותירושם רבו", פנשאתה משמח לאומות אף אני שמח עמקם מעט, ולכן "פנשלום נהדו אשכבה ואישן" איתענדן אינה מעט כמו שינת לילה. אכל "פנשאתה ה' לבדד" פלומר פנשאתה משמתני לבדי, כמו "ה' פדד ננחננו", אז "לקטח תושיבני" לא ינה עוד כמו שינת לילה, רק תנה מנוחה שלמה בלי שום ערעור מהאומות, שהרי פבר הודו לי על הברכות.

Now, the answer to Question 3, is that **the parable that was brought, "a parable of a man who has an orchard," fits well. So too here, when the Holy One, Blessed be He, gives tranquility to the nations, He also gives it to Israel. But when He only gives it to Israel, there is no stranger with them.**

About this, the verse says, **"You put joy into my heart when their grain and wine show increase,"⁷ i.e., when You gladden the nations, I too rejoice with them a bit. Therefore, "safe and sound, I lie down and sleep,"⁸ I enjoy a small measure of delight, like a night's sleep. But when "You alone, O L-rd,"⁹ as if to say when You gladden me alone, as in "The L-rd alone will guide them,"¹⁰ then "You cause me to dwell in safety."¹¹ It will no longer be like the sleep of night, but rather a complete rest, without any disturbance from the nations, for they have already admitted to me regarding the blessings.**

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⁷ Ps. 4:8.

⁸ Ps. 4:9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Deut. 32:12.

¹¹ Ps. 4:9.