

ARE WE SHEEP OR LIONS?

Category: Balak, Bamidbar

How the Jewish people view themselves vs. how the other nations view us.

There is a famous Jewish joke about a Jew who used to read anti-Semitic newspapers. When asked why he reads papers that are so full of hate for his people, he explained, "When I read Jewish papers all I see are tzaros. Here somebody died, here somebody lost his money, there are communities fighting, bombs in Israel... It's depressing! But when I read these papers all I see is, "the Jews own the banks and the Jews control the government..." It makes me proud to be Jewish!"

In Jewish tradition, the Jews are often compared to various animals. It is interesting to note which animals our sages compare us to and which animals our enemies compare us to.

Our sages have compared us to a dove. The dove is known as a symbol of peace for there is no animal more peaceful than she. She does not fight and she does not steal from others. The dove is a modest peace loving bird. Just as the dove can protect itself only by its wings so can we, the modest peace loving Jewish nation find protection from our enemies only in the Mitzvos.

The Midrash adds, "... Just as the dove roams far from its nest and returns to its nest so will the Jew."

The prophet Isaiah also notes the Jew's desire to return home despite the dangers that lurk along the way when he says, "Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their nest?"

What is the message here for our generation?

To all those who are striving to return to their spiritual home, to Torah and Mitzvos, the message is clear. Often the urge may be weak and the road home may be difficult but this tendency to return has been lingering within the Jewish people and it will burst forth sooner or later. No matter how far from home a Jew might be he will return. It is only natural.

We have also been compared to sheep. "Israel is like scattered sheep," says Jeremiah. Why sheep? The Midrash explains, "Just like when a lamb is hit on one limb it feels the pain all over, so, too, when one Jew sins all of Israel feels the pain."

The same applies to actual pain. When one Jew is suffering, G-d forbid, the whole nation feels his pain. And just as a sheep feels safest when they are all together in one group so is the Jew safest when he is among his people.

Andrianus, Caesar of Rome once commented to R' Yehoshua, "How difficult it must be for the one sheep among seventy wolves." To this R' Yehoshua responded, "See, then, how mighty is the shepherd who protects us from them all!"

An entire flock of sheep cannot stand up to even one wolf. How much more so can one sheep not stand up to seventy wolves! We, the Jewish people are like one little shepsele surrounded by seventy growling wolves, protected only by G-d, our mighty shepherd. The seventy nations have surrounded us and launched attacks on every side yet the sheep remains intact. The only explanation is,

"Behold the keeper of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers." G-d has been at our side all along.

So, these are the animals our sages and prophets have compared us to.

However in this week's parsha we find Bilaam, the gentile prophet, trying to curse the Jews but instead blessing them against his will. Among the things he says he compares the Jewish people to an animal, a lion. "Behold a people that rise like a lioness and raise itself like a lion. It does not lie down until it eats its prey and drinks the blood of the slain." Bilaam did not see us in the same light as we see ourselves. What he saw from outside the camp was a powerful nation, one that shows no fear or weakness at all!

Rashi explains Bilaam's parable: **A people that rise like a lioness...** We wake up in the morning like lions, ready to grab mitzvos, to don a tallit, recite the shema and put on tefillin. **It does not lie down until it has eaten its prey...** A Jew does not lie at night until he recites the shema on his bed, entrusting his soul in the hands of G-d, thereby "consuming" any harmful thing that comes to tear him.

This prophecy is so special that our sages wanted to include it in the shema.

The Marshah adds that just as no one has to rouse the lion for he enthusiastically gets up on his own, so must we Jews rise enthusiastically in the morning to recite the shema. Jews are also compared to lions for we know how to overcome spiritual obstacles.

The Rebbe explains that there is a deeper similarity between the Jew and the lion. Halachah dictates that although some animals can be domesticated, it is impossible to tame a lion! A lion will always remain true to its “king of the Beasts” nature.

Similarly, the Jew is a creature that cannot be “tamed” or “domesticated” to behave like the rest of the world. Although people of every other nation, after two or three generations they will lose their identity and become just like everybody else, when it comes to a Jew, no matter how many nations will try to “tame” him, to train him to be like them, he will never be domesticated. He will always “rise like a lion”. And this is what Bilaam meant when he said, “They are a nation that will live alone.”