

MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO
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Encamped to its Tribes

A Biblical phrase came to my mind after the Israeli elections.

I admit that this phrase is not connected to this week's parsha in any way, nor does it relate to the current calendar period. I also warn you that it will "come out of left field," emerging from a very surprising, unexpected source.

Nonetheless, I bring this passage to your attention, If only as a springboard for discussion concerning this past, frustrating week.

Travel with me for a moment to a turning point in one of the Torah's strangest stories: the story of Bilam and Balak.

Balak, the king of Moav, has hired the sorcerer, Bilam, to curse the fledgling Israelite nation. Bilam's repeated attempts, however, have all ended in in failure. Hashem has thwarted him every step of the way, forcing him to recite blessings in place of his intended curses.

At Balak's urging, Bilam ascends a mountaintop for another attempt. Perhaps this time he will finally accomplish what Balak has hired him to do. Perhaps this time he will at last succeed in bringing a curse upon the Israelites.

But then something inside the sorcerer shifts. Recognizing the futility of his efforts. Bilam decides to set aside his sorcery and "turn his face toward the wilderness."

From his high vantage point, Bilam looks down. The scene before him apparently moves him deeply.

And Bilam lifted his eyes and he saw Israel encamped to its tribes, and Hashem's spirit descended upon him."

Why is Bilam profoundly affected by the sight of the Israelite nation "encamped to its tribes"? What within this tableau could possibly move an evil sorcerer to bless - of his own volition- a nation that he had been hired to curse?

The answer may lie in a delicate balance rooted in our earlier arrival to, and departure from, Sinai.

A well-known Midrash maintains that *national unity of purpose* marked our arrival at Sinai. On this one occasion we were "as one man with one heart." Apparently, only a fully united camp could merit God's miraculous revelation.

In contrast, our departure from Sinai was marked by *diversity.* By ordering the Israelites to surround the Sanctuary; tribe by tribe, family by family; God conveyed the clear message that *unity does not mean uniformity*. Different ideas, different views, different backgrounds, will power a people united by common purpose and dream.

Now, almost forty years later, Bilam looks down upon the Israelite encampment and, against his will, is impressed by the results of God's blueprint for His nation. The sorcerer sees before him a people peaceably "dwelling according to its tribes"; a united

nation that has learned to respect and appreciate its own natural diversity. Such a people, he realizes, will be immune to his spiritual attacks. Such a people will not be easily defeated.

Thousands of years later, apparently, we are still a work in process.

The public bitterness, infighting, and rancor that marked the weeks leading to the recent elections; the wheeling and dealing that has marked its aftermath; could easily lead to frustration, if not despair.

But such frustration should not blind us to the miraculous source of the problem. Israel is after all, the most diverse country in the world. What an endeavor! A country cobbled together of Jews emerging from vastly different origins, featuring widely disparate temperaments, cultures and outlooks. Add to that our fundamental character as an *Am K'shei Oref, a stiff-necked people*, is it any wonder that we will be contentious at times; that we will disagree on important issues; that we will fail to recognize the value of other opinions?

None of this excuses us from the struggle to find common cause. We remain ever obliged to learn to respect the opinions of others. We should always find better ways to argue and debate.

But, every once and a while, we should step back to appreciate the adventure that we share. We are tasked with new dimension of a challenge that has marked the journey of our people from its inception. We have come home. We are now obligated to shape a country in which the *unity and diversity of our people can live side by side.* ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."

