

בלק

BILAAM PRAISES WHILE THE PROPHETS COMPLAIN

Nowhere in the Torah do we find as glorious and splendid a description of *Klal Yisrael* as the accolades bestowed upon them by Bilaam in his frustrated attempt to curse *Klal Yisrael*.

מה אקב לא קבה קל ומה אזעם לא זעם ה'

How shall I curse, when G-d had not cursed? And how shall I execrate, [whom] Hashem has not execrated? (*Bamidbar* 23:8).

הן עם לבדד ישכן ובגוים לא יתחשב

Lo, it is a people [that] shall dwell alone, and among the nations shall not reckon itself (*ibid.* 9).

תמת נפשי מות ישרים, ותהי אחריתי כמוהו

Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his (*ibid.* 10).

לא הביט און ביעקב, ולא ראה עמל בישראל

None had beheld iniquity in Yaakov, neither had one seen perverseness in Israel (*ibid.* 21).

The above is just a small sampling of this prophecy, which continues on in the loftiest of terms. It is a most admiring and impressive testimony on behalf of a people. It is so eloquent that *Chazal* contemplated including it in the daily *Kerias Shema*, but declined because its sheer volume would be too laborious for the masses (*Berachos* 12:).

The only other individual in the Torah who presents a similarly exalted evaluation of *Klal Yisrael* is Korach.

כי כל העדה כלם קדשים ובתוכם ה'

For all the congregation is holy, every one of them; and Hashem is among them (*Bamidbar* 16:3).

In *Megillas Esther*, we find one additional character who identifies and presents *Klal Yisrael* in an illustrious light, although his intention was critical. Haman states:

ישנו עם אחד מפזר ומפרד בין העמים, בכל מדינות מלכותיך, ודתיהם שנות מכל עם, ואת דתי המלך אינם עשים

There is a certain people scattered abroad, dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; and the laws of the king they do not observe (*Megillas Esther* 3:8).

Although *Klal Yisrael* is evicted from their homeland, and scattered all over the globe, they still tenaciously cling to the laws and traditions of the Torah. Haman also complained: “They do not eat our food, they are not involved with our women, and they do not mingle with us” (*Megillah* 13:). But these are the only three individuals in *Tanach* who portray *Klal Yisrael* in this fashion. There are indeed various references to Hashem’s love of *Klal Yisrael* and vice-versa in *Tanach*, but these passages by the *Nevi'im* are not solely devoted to this ideal. Their primary purpose is to prod *Klal Yisrael* often in a harsh, severe and scolding manner. Only one other composition is totally dedicated to *Klal Yisrael* in a favorable way, and that is at the end of *Tanach*, where we find a very unusual song, *Shir Hashirim*. It is composed of a series of beautiful verses in which two lovers express to one another, and occasionally to others, the delights and anguish of their mutual adoration. They lavishly compliment and praise each other’s features. The vivid imagery sets a mood and creates an aura of emotion which invites the reader to participate in and share in their mutual joy and delight. This piece is actually an allegory in which Hashem expresses His love for His people, and *Klal Yisrael*, in return, express its love for Hashem. Our survey raises the question: why is scant complimentary mention of *Klal Yisrael* made in the *Tanach*, and when it is made at all, it is bestowed by three avowed enemies, Bilaam, Korach and Haman; and why does this paean to the warmth of the love between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael* appear only at the end of *Tanach*?

The *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 14•) explains that it was the custom of the nation to store *terumah* (an agricultural offering) in the *Aron Hakodesh*. It was their conviction that it was appropriate to store the holy foods together with the holy scriptures. Mice were attracted to the food, and at the same time, they nibbled on the holy scrolls. In order to avoid further damage to the scrolls, the Sages declared that the holy scrolls make human hands *tamei*. Hence, they would also defile the *terumah*. Now, *terumah* would no longer be stored in the *Aron Hakodesh* and the *Sifrei-Kodesh* would be protected from further attack by rodents. The *Mishnah* in *Yadaim* (3:5) discusses which of the *sefarim* would render human hands unclean. Initially, there was doubt as to whether *Shir Hashirim* would be included in this group. The final decision was uttered by Rabbi Akiva:

שאינ כל העולם כלו כדאי כיום שניתן בו ש"ה לישראל, שכל כתובים קדש, וש"ה קודש
קדשים

The world was unworthy until the day that *Shir Hashirim* was revealed to *Klal Yisrael*; all the writings are holy, but *Shir Hashirim* is holy of holies (*Yadaim* 3:5).

Shir Hashirim is exceptional in all of *Tanach*, for it reveals, once and for all, the bond of love between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael*. The theme of *Shir Hashirim* is unique in that on the surface it is so different from the style of the rest of *Tanach*.

The key to answering the above questions lies in understanding the purpose of *Tanach*. The Rambam (*Hilchos Dei'os* 6:8) sheds light on the *Nevi'im* as he presents the process of rebuking one’s fellow man:

In regard to duties to Hashem, if an individual, after having been privately rebuked, does not repent, he should be shamed in public; his sin should be openly declared. He is to be reviled, affronted and cursed until he returns to the proper course. This was the method followed by all the prophets of Israel.

The Rambam points out that the purpose of the *Nevi'im* was to be unrelenting in prodding *Klal Yisrael* to improvement. They were not interested in coddling and complimenting *Klal Yisrael* or in giving pats on the back, and they were even dissatisfied with maintaining the status quo. Their sole interest was in refining *Klal Yisrael* to the purest levels of holiness. The job of the *Navi* was to push and provoke *Klal Yisrael* up the ladder of achievement.

Historically, there were the “feel-good” *Nevi'im*, the false *Nevi'ei Hashem*, who promulgated lies to *Klal Yisrael* in order to make them feel comfortable (*Yermiyah* 23:16). They told the masses what they wanted to hear. They bolstered their confidence and promoted a “feel-good” situation. Among them were Tzidekiyah son of Kena'anah (*Melachim* I 22:11), Tzidekiyah son of Ma'aseiyah and Achav son of Kolayah, who were all vilified by Yermiyah *Hanavi* (29:22) as being responsible for the exile, for they lulled *Klal Yisrael* into a false confidence. Indeed, the *Kinos* of *Tisha Be'av* (43) states:

Tzion, enter into litigation against your false prophets who deliberately misled you with deceit and who failed to expose your iniquities

The role of a true *Navi*, on the other hand, was to breathe fire — to castigate in the harshest terms, in hopes of inspiring improvement.

This system of *Nevi'im* was established by Moshe *Rabbeinu*.

נביאיך נטעי אביגדור

Your prophets are the plantings of Avigdor (Moshe) (*Kinos Tisha Be'av* 14).

He is called “*avi hanevi'im*” — “the founder of prophecy” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:15).

Moshe castigated his generation in the harshest terms:

דור עקש ופתלתל...עם נבל, ולא חכם

A perverse and crooked generation...a foolish and unwise people (*Devarim* 32:5-6).

His harsh attitude toward *Klal Yisrael* set the tone for all future *Nevi'im*. Moshe understood that this was the appropriate way to treat his people, because this is the way Hashem treated Moshe. It must be remembered that Moshe *Rabbeinu* was the greatest human being who ever lived. He was specifically created for his role, and he carried it out with exhilarating fervor. Yet, in order to improve him, Hashem castigated even him in the severest tones:

לא האמנתם בי

You did not believe in Me (*Bamidbar* 20:12).

על אשר מעלתם בי

You trespassed against me (*Devarim* 32:51).

Moshe recognized that the more severe the scolding he received, the more beneficial it would be. Moshe taught this lesson to *Klal Yisrael*, and this behavior was emulated by the future prophets. Only because Hashem loves those who are close to Him, does He scrutinize their minutest actions under the lens of a microscope (*Yevamos* 121:), all to make the beloved even better. This, therefore, became the system of the *Nevi'im*.

The Vilna *Ga'on* uses a metaphor to explain the system of *nevuah* —prophecy. In order to properly apply cosmetics to beautify herself, a woman sometimes makes use of a magnifying

mirror. This mirror exaggerates every flaw and blemish of her skin, even ones that may normally be unnoticeable. The purpose of this mirror is obviously to enable women to perfect themselves in the most advantageous way. Similarly, *Klal Yisrael*, already a great and noble nation, utilized the system of *nevuah* to artificially highlight their own shortcomings, so that they, too, could become even more elevated and exalted than they previously were.

Lest one err and doubt the integrity, uprightness and probity of *Klal Yisrael*, small attestations to their greatness were permitted to be slipped into *Tanach*. These were the statements of Korach, Bilaam and Haman. The intended role of these men was not to improve *Klal Yisrael*, and so they had no interest in criticizing them — and therefore they revealed the truth.

Nevertheless, Hashem, Himself, felt compelled to publicly describe His love for His people. There was a need somewhere in *Tanach* for an expression of adoration, delight, devotion, homage and veneration. The place was to be near the end of *Tanach* in *Shir Hashirim*. This was the vehicle for declaring the most eloquent emotions from Hashem to *Klal Yisrael* and vice versa. It is the holiest of themes.

The placement of *Shir Hashirim* late in *Tanach* is consistent with logic. The Rambam delves into the concept of *ahavas Hashem* — love of Hashem — only at the conclusion of *Hilchos Teshuvah*. The Rambam spends nine chapters on the techniques of *teshuvah* —repentance — where he presents every detail and nuance of *teshuvah*. Finally, at the conclusion of *Hilchos Teshuvah*, which is also the conclusion of *Sefer Mada*, the Rambam teaches the importance of love of Hashem. This virtue is only relevant after one has studied and worked through all the other aspects of one's relationship with Hashem and has understood the entire gamut of his responsibilities to and his association with Him. Similarly, *Rabbeinu Bechaya*, in *Chovos Halevavos*, reserves discussion of *ahavas Hashem* to the concluding chapter.

The nature of *Tanach* is to provide a relevant vibrant memorial to the method of Hashem. This method is to prod His beloved people to the greatest spiritual heights. There is no room in *Tanach* for an emotional outpouring of love — because that is not the intended purpose of *Tanach*. At the end of *Tanach*, in the form of *Shir Hashirim*, space was finally allocated for the mutual expression of true feeling between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael*. Nevertheless, even in the main body of Torah, a little bit of space was earmarked by Hashem to allow an outsider to present a glorious and splendid accolade to the beloved nation.

aA