

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Balak)

One of the saddest stories of ‘what might have been’ to come out of the Holocaust was the story of Joel Roth.

In the spring of 1944 the Jews of Poland, Western Europe, Belarus and the Ukraine were largely gone, and the Nazis set their sights on the last great Jewish community on the European continent: the Jews of Hungary. As the Germans took over and the Nazi recipe of ghettos and deportations began to unfold Joel Roth, an accomplished politician, saw what was coming. Desperate to avert the inevitable, he had a plan to save the Jews of Hungary by negotiating a deal between the Allies and the Germans.

At the time, the Germans were being over-run on all fronts and their largest problem was their overextended supply lines. The Allies were bombing the rail tracks and most trains still moving were busy transporting Jews to Auschwitz, so Roth proposed a simple deal: 400 trucks for 400,000 Jews. Called in by no less than Adolph Eichmann (the grand architect of the Nazis’ final solution), Roth had several high-level meetings with Eichmann himself.

To prove that he could deliver, Eichmann stopped the gas chambers for two weeks in August of 1944, at a time when 10,000 Jews a day were being gassed in the mass extermination camp.

Roth eventually managed to smuggle himself out of Nazi occupied Europe to meet with the British and propose the deal but the plan reached the ears of the Allied high command and Roth was arrested as soon as he landed in Italy. He spent the remainder of the war in a cell, never being given the opportunity to meet with the Allied command. After the war when the full import of the massacre of European Jewry became clear, Roth eventually committed suicide.

Eichmann, when captured and put on trial in Israel in 1960, admitted that he took this as a sign that the world was not interested in saving Jews, and renewed his destruction of Hungarian Jewry with vigor; ultimately 400,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered by the Nazis in the summer of 1944.

Think about it: if 400,000 Jews are not worth 400 trucks, then 1,000 Jews are not worth a truck. So what was one Jewish life not worth in the summer of 1944? A steering wheel? A truck-tire?

If ever there was a time when the Jewish people got the message that when push comes to shove, we are all alone, it was during the Holocaust.

And the source of that idea, that we are a nation that dwells apart is in this week’s portion of *Balak*. Tasked by the Moabite king Balak with cursing the Jewish people, the world-renowned sorcerer Balaam cannot help but bless them from atop the mountain, as he must heed the will of G-d. And among his many words Balaam prophesizes that the Jewish people are and will forever be an “***Am levadad yishkon***” (Bamidbar (Numbers) 23:7); a ‘***People that dwells alone***’.

But Balaam is a most unlikely source for blessing. Listed by the rabbis (*Mishna Sanhedrin* 10:2) as having no portion in the World to come, his plan to curse us is thwarted but he ultimately devises a plan which does the Jews great damage, enticing them to idolatry (*ibid.* 31;16). And the Talmud further suggests (Tractate *Sanhedrin* 105b) that almost all of Balaam’s blessings were left ambiguous and will turn to curses.

Which leaves us with an interesting question: is it good that we are apart and alone? Is this a blessing or a curse? Interestingly, early on in its development, the reform movement seems to have viewed this as a

curse and part of the punishment of exile thus exhorting its followers to consciously assimilate into European and later American society. Indeed, early Reform rabbis were encouraged *not* to wear a kippah (skullcap), and all mention of Israel was removed from their prayer books. And while this seems to have emanated from a sincere desire to bring Jewish values to bear in the broader society one cannot ignore the inescapable conclusion that being ‘apart’ or ‘other’ was viewed as a curse rather than a blessing.

On the other hand, there are certainly many Jews today who believe that being apart is somewhat of an ideal with distinctive Jewish dress and separate Jewish communities far from the cultural and spiritual influences of the broader society viewed as the ideal rather than a necessary evil. So, which is it? Should we aspire to be apart or should our goal be to unite with the nations that surround us? Is assimilation an ideal or a failure?

Interestingly, the Torah seems very clear on the nature of being alone or apart:

The only time anything is described as ‘not good’ in the entire Torah, is in describing being alone. Introducing the creation of Eve prior to which Adam was all alone the Torah says:

“Lo Tov heyot ha’Adam le’vado” “It is not good for man to be alone”

(Genesis (Bereishit) chap. 3)

And the only other time anything is described as *not good* in the Torah is when (Exodus (Shemot) chap. 18) Yitro exhorts his son in law Moses to appoint judges because *it is not good to sit and judge alone all day*

Indeed, the leper is forced to sit alone as part of the consequence of his actions:

“Badad yeshev mi’chutz la’machaneh” “He must sit alone outside the camp...”

(Vayikra (Leviticus) 13:46)

And the rabbis interpret this as a punishment for the *tzara’at* (leprosy-like) affliction seen as punishment for slanderous speech.

And in describing the consequence which befalls the Jews for their wickedness which leads to the Temple’s destruction, Jeremiah laments:

“Eicha yashva badad ha’Ir rabati am...”

“How doth the city sit alone that was once so filled with people...?”

(Lamentations (*Eicha*) 1:1)

Clearly to be alone and apart is far from ideal. And yet, the Torah does not describe being alone as ‘bad’; it merely says it is not good.

One wonders, if G-d creates Eve as a solution to the problem of man being alone initially which was ‘not good’, why was Adam alone in the first place? Especially given that previously, on the sixth day of creation “G-d saw all he had done and it was *very* good.” Either it was good or it wasn’t; which is it?

Perhaps initially being alone was actually good, and only becomes ‘*not good*’ later on. In fact one might suggest that it was originally good for man to be alone so that he could appreciate what was missing, much like a person who yearns to get married but experiences loneliness for a time, the better to appreciate the joy of marriage and love when it finally arrives .

Thus, loneliness was not necessarily ‘good’ but it wasn’t bad either, it just depends on how you handle it. And one of the interesting things that happens when you are alone is that you learn to be independent;

to fend for yourself. You learn that the only person you can and must always count on, is yourself. And while this is not necessarily always good, it is often reality.

For thousands of years we dwelled alone and apart, in just about every country we found ourselves in. It wasn't necessarily the ideal, but it was reality. Today, in a more modern world, we have convinced ourselves we no longer need to dwell apart, and we assume, especially in Western democracies, that we have finally arrived at a better reality when Jews can assimilate and be completely together with the nations around us.

But the Jewish people has something beautiful to share with the world: a model of how a society can function, and an ethical standard to which the world should aspire. And to be such a role model we need to be apart, and distinct. Jews today are fighting a protracted battle with our enemies who are determined to set us apart as a pariah in the world, encouraging boycotts and spewing venom and hatred across the streets and campuses of Europe and North America, and all over the world. Perhaps as we fight yet again for the right to be accepted among the nations as an equal, we would do well to remember that there is still a value to that which sets us apart and makes us distinct.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman