

INSIGHTS from the SEDRA

Insights from the Sedra is a project of the Scholar's Kollel of Great Neck. It aims to provide several questions and answers about the Sedra, culled from various commentaries, including the following: Baal Haturim, Darash Moshe, Vedibarta Bam by Rabbi Moshe Bogomilsky, Torah Treasures by Dov Furer, Wellsprings of Torah by Alexander Friedman, and Kol Dodi by Rabbi Dovid Feinstein, Great Torah Lights by Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Goodman, Something To Say by Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser, The Vilna Gaon, Growth Through Torah by Zelig Pliskin and The Call of the Torah.

זאת חקת התורה

"This is the statute of the Torah." (19:2)

This exact expression is only found twice in the Torah. At the beginning of this *parsha* where it speaks of the preparation of the "Mei Chatat", the waters mixed with the ashes of the red heifer for the purification of the unclean; and in *parshat Mattot*, where it speaks of the cleansing of utensils taken from the Midianites as spoils of war. The Torah wishes to allude here to the fact that these two issues, the purification of the body and the koshering of one's utensils is a prerequisite to the observance of the 613 mitzvot. (Rabbi Shimshon Rephael Hirsch)

וירא בלק בן צפור את כל אשר עשה ישראל לאמרי ויגר מואב מפני העם מאד...ויקץ מואב מפני בני ישראל...ובלק בן צפור מלך למואב בעת ההיא

"And Balak son of Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Amorites. Moav became very frightened of the people... and Moav was horrified at the children of Israel...And Balak ben Tzipor was king of Moav at that time..." (22:2-4)

Why does the Torah not identify who *Balak* was when his name is first mentioned, rather than waiting several verses to do so?

As *Rashi* (v. 4) mentions, *Balak* was originally not the king of *Moav*; he was in fact not a *Moavite* at all. It was only "at that time" that he was declared king, as an emergency measure in the face of a possible invasion of the Israelites. And why was *Balak*, of all people, chosen for this task? *Rav Chaim* explained that it was because of his hysterical, fanatical pronouncements against the Israelites: "Behold, a people has gone out of Egypt" (v. 5); "And now, the congregation will lick up our entire surroundings" (v. 4). The Talmud (*Gittin* 56b) tells us that "anyone who denounces and intimidates Israel becomes a leader. Since it was *Balak's* diatribes against Israel that lifted him to power, the Torah first presents him as just *Balak*, an ordinary man. Only after quoting some of his anti-Jewish fulminations does it say that *Balak* was the king of *Moav at that time* – as a result of those pronouncements. We see the same thing happening today in the world. (Brisk on Chumash)

ויגר מואב מפני העם מאד כי רב הוא

"And Moav was very afraid of the Jewish people because they were many." (22:3)

It is worthwhile to note that seemingly, the Jews should be referred to in the plural. When the verse says the Hebrew word for "many," why does it say רב and not רבים? Also, why does it call the Jewish nation הוא, which is singular and not הם, which is plural? Why not say *Moav* was afraid of the people הם כי רבים instead of הוא כי רב?

The key, writes the *Yismach Moshe*, is our Sages' teaching, "If Israel is united, and all the Jews love and respect one another, no other people can rule over them or harm them." The *Midrash* provides an analogy to a tightly tied bundle of reeds. If the bundle becomes untied, each reed is left on its own. As a result, one can easily break all of the reeds. One simply snaps them in half, one by one. However, if the bundle remains tied, no one can break even one of the reeds!

In several verses about the Jewish people, the Torah hints to this principle, by speaking of the nation in the singular form, rather than in the plural. For example, when the Torah describes how the nation camped at the foot of *Har Sinai*, before the giving of the Torah, the verse writes the word “camped” in the singular form (*Shemot* 19:2). *Rashi* explains “as one man with one heart.” This, in fact, was what terrified *Moav*. They saw that the nation was *singular*! Although they saw that we were many, they also saw our unity. We all stood together, like the bundle of reeds that cannot be broken. Thus, the *Moabites* gave up hope, because when Israel is united, no other nations can do us harm.

(*Torah Anthology*)

א-ל מוציאם ממצרים כתואפת ראם לו

“It is G-d who brought them forth from Egypt according to the power of His loftiness...” (23:22)

In the pronouncements of *Bilam* in this *sedra*, every verb and pronoun about the Jewish people is in the singular form, except for this verse (“who brought them”). This amazing exception must surely have a special meaning or message. I believe there is a deep meaning here. The constant use of singular forms is surely a way of understanding why *Bilam* could not pronounce a curse, for this represents the wonderful unity of the Jewish people. Indeed, in his third set of pronouncements, the text emphasizes that he saw all of Israel at once, in contrast to seeing only a section of Israel the first two times. In this third view, the Torah changes its style to point out that he reached his highest level of prophecy.

The exceptional plural is used in the phrase of our leaving Egypt. At that time, we had not yet received the Torah, and we were not yet one great unity. As *chazal* tell it, even at the sea, there were four distinct groups advocating different approaches. Once we receive the Torah we are pictured as a total unity. The lesson is that it is the Torah that unites us as a people and has indeed preserved us as a people throughout the centuries despite all the efforts of our enemies to, G-d forbid, destroy us.

(*Great Torah Lights*)

כי לא נחש ביעקב ולא קסם בישראל כעת יאמר ליעקב ולישראל מה פעל א-ל

“There is no divination within Jacob and no sorcery in Israel. Even now it is said to Jacob and Israel what G-d has wrought.” (23:23)

While this verse is complex enough, the *Vilna Gaon* was intrigued by the varied use of *Yaakov* and *Yisrael*. First, these names are mentioned separately in two phrases, and then combined in a third. Why?

The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 34a) states that when prayers are said for someone in need, his name must be mentioned. Surely, this is true also if one wishes to curse someone. *Bilam* understood this and began to experiment with the names of the Jewish people. In his first prophetic attempt, he concentrated his mind on the name *Yaakov*, but a beautiful prophecy emerged. In his second attempt, he focused on *Yisrael*, but again found words of blessing emanating from his mouth. Thus, in this verse he registered his feelings. Sorcery has no power with *Yaakov*, and no magic power can affect *Yisrael*. Now, he expresses his astonishment that if his attempt at combining the names of *Yaakov* and *Yisrael* for a curse doesn't work, “What has G-d wrought?”

(*Vilna Gaon*)

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