

Not Reckoned Among the Nations:

The Blessing and the Curse of Being on the Outside

Rosh HaShana 5776

Rabbi Neil S. Cooper

(Begin by singing *Ma Tovu...*)

From the precipice high above, the people below looked small, indistinguishable. To the untrained eye, one might call them insignificant. A prophet, however, possess an eye sharper than most. He is able to see beneath the surface, to perceive that which is hidden from the rest. Neither the mist of the morning nor the distance from the people he regarded obscured his vision. Even from such a distance, he perceived something unique at the core of the scene below.

To others, the scene might have evoked an unremarkable comment: a large group, perhaps a wandering people, camped in the valley below. Tents had been erected in an orderly fashion, not in straight lines, as was common in military encampments, but staggered in a way so that the door of one tent did not open opposite the opening of the adjacent tent.

Standing on that perch, however, the prophet, whose name was Bilaam, stood staring intently at the scene below. He had been hired by the King of Moab, whose name was Balak, to invoke a curse on this people. Despite the peaceful and unremarkable scene below, their reputation preceded them: This unassuming tribe had defeated the powerful and feared army of the Amorites, not to mention the Egyptians. Hearing that news, Balak thought to himself:

“If this deceptively powerful tribe below could, with the help of their God, defeat the Amorites and the Egyptians, what might this people do to me and my Moabite armies?

We are not nearly as strong as the either army they have already defeated”.

And so the king did not want to take any unnecessary chances. He hired a prophet to curse the Children of Israel camped below.

“Get on with it, Bilaam. Invoke the curse!” the King demanded. But Bilaam the Prophet would not be rushed. Neither would he invoke words which had not come from God. Even though

he was not a Jewish Prophet, he was a prophet. He could not speak until the words came to him. Finally the Prophet spoke:

" Behold this is a people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations.....How beautiful are the tents of Jacob, the dwelling places of Israel/ *Ma tovu ohalecha ya'akov, Mishkenotecha yisrael*" (Numbers 23:5 and 24:5).

These, of course are the words to the song with which I began. Indeed, these are the first words intoned when one enters a synagogue. It is ironic that our first words, preceding our prayers, are from a non-Jewish prophet, a prophet sent to curse the Children of Israel.

The meaning of these words, however, is not entirely clear. Was this a blessing, extolling the virtues of the People with the "beautiful tents? Was this simply a description or was it an ominous prediction: This People, in spite of their beautiful tents, is a People destined to "not be reckoned", to be alienated and judged differently than other nations. Is this a People destined to live apart from all other nations? And, if so, is such an existence a blessing or a curse?

From the time of Bilaam and Balak to this very day, The Jewish People can be described quite accurately as a "people not reckoned among the nations". To many, Jews and non-Jews alike, the Jewish People has stood, and continues to stand, outside history and the normal laws which have governed the fates of other nations.

This is particularly true when it comes to the longevity of the Jewish People. We are reminded of this explicitly every year at the *seder of Pesach* when we read:

"B'chol dor va'dor 'omdim 'aleinu l'chalotenu... In every generation they have arisen to destroy us. We, however, have been saved. We are still here. They are not.

Or from the Psalms (20:9) which suggests that in the end:

Hema kar'u vi-nafallu va-anachnu kamnu v'nit'odad

They stumble and fall but we have risen and we stand firm.

Why has that been the case? Neither Bilaam nor anyone since that time can answer that question fully. Why were our ancestors not "reckoned" with the same tools used to "reckon" other nations? Why have we lived, since that time to the present, as a nation apart from the rest? Some of our Prophets seem to suggest that we have brought this status upon ourselves. Listen, for example, to the words a Jewish Prophet, Malachi:

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and oblations are offered to My name My name is honored among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts, But you [Israel] profane it. (1:11-12)

I am a God for all people who serve me. But they have served me with honor, but you, Israel, unlike the others, says the Prophet, profane my name.

Perhaps, then, “not reckoned among the nations” means being singled out by God for greater scrutiny, that God has explicit requirements and high expectations for us, which may be why the Bible is, in great part, the story of the shortcomings and failures of the Jewish people.

Here is what the Prophet Amos has to say:

You alone have I singled out, of all of the families of the earth - that is why I will call you to account for all of your iniquities. (Amos 3:2)

From the time our ancestors became a nation, this "outsider" status, this “singling out”, has been part and parcel of what it means to be Jewish. Bilaam the Prophet saw this when he saw the Children of Israel camped below, in the desert. The Prophet Amos saw this as an eternally defining feature. But, rarely in history have we been reminded of this status as "outsider among the nations” more than today.

At this most holy time of the year, as we contemplate the year gone by and the year which opens before us, I feel compelled to speak to this issue, to consider once again what it means to be on the outside, what it means for Israel not to be reckoned among the nations.

Especially over these past several months, we have been painfully reminded of our outsider status in countries throughout Europe, not to mention in the halls and assemblies of the UN. Despite the fact that the State of Israel was formally accepted into the family of nations (by a vote of the UN on November 29, 1947) it is hard not to feel abandoned, even disowned by the very countries in that august forum of the nations of the world which voted to welcome Israel into its midst.

To be a "people that dwells alone" means that we are relegated to a place where our voices are not, cannot, be heard. To be described as, "not reckoned among the nations" means that

when decisions are made on matters that affect all nations, we are not considered to be “among the nations”. Despite the fact that Israel is a sovereign state, part of the UN, it is as if we don't exist. Indeed there are non-States, so-called “observers”, who participate who have attained greater respect, greater recognition and greater sympathy than Israel. But that is a different story...

At this moment of our history I feel as strongly as ever that Israel has been marginalized. And, because of is, we have no choice but to make ourselves heard. We have no choice because we, once again, have been shone to our seats on the sidelines, banned from the field of play. Because of this, therefore, we have an obligation, a mandate, as supporters of the State of Israel, to remind our government and the rest of the P5+1, who are making existential decisions on behalf of the world regarding Iran's determination to create nuclear weapons, that it is Israel that is in harm's way. It is Israel that is located on the front line of this issue, not Germany, France or the US. Israel is their buffer against attack. Should not Israel have a say? Should not supporters of Israel demand to be heard? For Israel, Iran's race to obtain nuclear weapons has gone beyond the level of being a problem or a concern. For Israel, this is existential.

To those who complain that the Jewish Community makes too much noise, or that Israel's supporters use pressure tactics through a mysterious, nefarious cabal of Jewish heavyweights known as “The Jewish Lobby”, to those who say: “We don't like those pesky outsiders”, my response is this:

It is our responsibility to stand up and be heard.

We have an obligation to stand up and be heard! And we must raise our voices because you have relegated us to the sidelines, you have marginalized Israel's sovereignty and you have legitimized those who call for Israel's destruction. And honestly, we have no choice but to raise our voices lest yours be the only one heard.

I was in Israel this summer while the negotiations between the P5 + 1 countries and Iranian representatives were negotiating an agreement. Almost daily, in the weeks and days preceding the announcement of an agreement, the news reported on the progress of the negotiations. The daily updates conveyed to the public would sound like this:

*We are very close to an Agreement.

*We are at a particularly perilous moment in this negotiation.

*We have made great progress.

*We have reached an impasse.

As these reports were received, I heard echoes of the words of that prophet Bilaam:

Israel, you are not reckoned among the nations. Your place, Israel, is not at this table.

I heard the nations of the world saying, in a tone which, to me, sounded patronizing:

"Don't worry, we've got your back.

We know your concerns. Trust us", they say.

But I am the one who lives in that neighborhood! I should have a seat.

"Well, the table isn't all that big...it would be too crowded... Sorry, but there is no place for you in these negotiations... But, don't worry. We've got your back.

But your decision affects me most. For you, Iran is a long-distance call. For me, it's local. And in my head I hear: "You are a people that dwells alone, that is not reckoned among the nations".

Even before the deal was done, I wondered: where is Israel in this deal?

Think about it:

1. Israel has been singled out by the UN as a pariah. More resolutions and rebukes condemning Israel have been passed by the General Assembly of the UN since its inception than against all other nations combined.
2. There is only one country in the Middle East which has been directly and explicitly threatened and set apart by the Iranians for extermination. That, of course, is Israel.
3. Then there are the promises of the Iranian clerics and theocrats to be relentless as they pursue their goal to destroy Israel. In Israel, this is taken as a unilateral declaration of war against a sovereign state within the UN. This is an explicit threat by a country seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. And those nuclear weapons are not being developed as ornaments to be placed over a fireplace, on the mantel at some mullah's home.

Where is the world's outrage? What does it mean, after all, to be a member of the family of nations if the countries of that same family will not support the right of a country to protect and defend itself against such aggression!

Those negotiating, however, advised Israel to "take easy".

You need to take those comments with a grain of salt. Don't take those threats literally.

The P5 + 1 advised:

You should just overlook those incendiary and unconscionable statements which threaten Israel with extinction. We do. You'll see. Ignore those statements and you'll sleep better at night.

After all, look at President Rouhani. President Rouhani...such a handsome, nice guy. He is charismatic and refined, a Scottish-educated jurist who still dons the robes of a jurist. He even said at one point, with respect to the negotiations, that, "Our goal is a shared interest between our two nations" (Ally, Oren, p. 333).

But what people say in one context may be very different from what they say to a different audience. President Rouhani, with that winning smile and good looks is the same person, however, who called Israel a "one bomb country", a "miserable country" and "a wound on the body of the Islamic world for years [that] should be removed" (Ibid, p. 333).

But you ask: How can he say one thing at one time and something totally different at another time? Well, I have an answer to that question which fits perfectly into Rosh HaShana. The answer is in the word "*Taqqiya*"

For us, *Tekiya* represents the call of the Shofar. In Arabic, *Taqqiya* is the Shiite concept that permits believers to "dissimulate" their true beliefs in order to advance the interests of their faith. Islamic tradition permits you to lie if it gets you where you want to go! Their own culture warns us not to believe what they say!

And through all of this, Israel is on the sidelines, waving her hands and saying, Wait! But her voice is not heard:

Are we not the ones at greatest risk? Is not Israel the country which will be most directly affected by this Agreement? You are negotiating with liars. Should not our voices be heeded?

It was Bilaam who called us "a nation that dwells alone". But this outsider status was not created by Bilaam. It was bestowed upon us by God. We are, after all, God's Chosen People. (And here, I am reminded of Tevya who pleaded with God when he said, "You chose us, God,

from among all other people, but, now and then, couldn't you choose someone else?") Our "apart-ness", our isolation in this world is certainly a source of great pain for us. And yet, there may be a silver lining. Perhaps the fact that we are not reckoned among the nations can also be seen as a blessing.

It is easy to see how being apart from the rest can work to our detriment. But despite it all, on Rosh HaShana in particular, I believe we must find a more positive the vantage point from which we can see the blessings in this as well. And I believe that there is such a perspective. I believe that there is reason for hope. Indeed, despite all of the difficulties we have faced as a People, despite the curses pronounced upon us, being separate, apart and reliant mostly on each other is an indispensable piece of our make-up as Jews. In fact, I believe that those words which Bilaam used to describe that wandering tribe, describe a situation inextricably connected to our survival.

In a beautiful essay, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Former Chief Rabbi of Britain, he references Charles Darwin and points out that Darwin, himself anti-religious, gave us one of the great arguments for the power of religion in general and for the survival of the Jewish People in particular. At the heart of Darwin's thesis, in his famous and, at the time, controversial book, The Descent of Man, is the theory of the survival of the fittest. Evolution, he contended, implies the struggle to survive.

If life is a competition for scarce resources, if the strong win and the weak are destroyed, then those with the greatest power would be most likely to survive. People would give greatest deference and respect to those who are strong and not, for example, those who made sacrifices for others. And yet, Darwin realized that was not the case. In our society, it is often the case that we honor those who give rather than take, we revere those who help rather than exploit.

According to his theory, Darwin writes, the bravest and most self-sacrificing people "[should], on average, perish in larger numbers than other[s]". A noble person, according to the theory "would... leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature." It seems scarcely possible, he wrote, that virtue "could be increased through natural selection, that is, by survival of the fittest". And here, Darwin realized that this phenomenon contradicted his own theory of survival of

the fittest! How, on the one hand can one believe that only the strongest survive, while explaining that society esteems and reveres those who are selfless, kind and altruistic?

Darwin solves most of this riddle himself: his theory is correct on the level of the individual. Individuals, after all, are the ones passing on their DNA to the next generation. But civilizations, larger groups, do not conform to this model. As Darwin stated: " A tribe including many members who, from possessing in high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection". But he ended by lamenting that he was unable to say how to get from the individual to the group. That challenge was, "at present too difficult to be solved". I however, have a suggestion for Charles Darwin.

How does one instill patriotism, fidelity and concern for each other in a group of people? Begin by considering that group as a "nation not reckoned among the other nations". You see, to be a Jew implies a willingness, at times, to stand apart from others, a commitment at times to stand with your people when others reject them. Those characteristics enumerated by Darwin, patriotism, fidelity and commitment to others in the group, are exactly the characteristics Judaism counts on. And these are exactly the characteristics which the State of Israel relies on.

My friends, we are stronger and better together. Our strength comes not only from physical might but from our collective will, from moral imperative which we share and from a common sense of spiritual connection. We stay together not because we all think the same or believe the same, but because we care about each other despite our differences. That is the source of the power of which I speak.

What we have here in this congregation is not a collection of individuals but a community, a community not measured by the power of individuals but by the power of the collective. That is what the Prophet Zacharia means when he says:

Lo b'chayi v'lo b'koach ki im b'ruchi amar Adonai Tzivaot/

Our hope is found neither in power nor might. Our hope is rooted in the power of God's spirit. (Zach. 4:6)

We have hope because we share spiritual power. We are connected to each other because we know how to embrace each other. And we have hope because we know how to transmit these values to future generations.

This then has been the Jewish spiritual “gene”. This is the quality and character which has survived, which perseveres and which has and will prevail. This is not a gene which is transmitted biologically, this is a gene acquired through a shared desire, through our collective will and because we share the sense of purpose necessary to survive.

Other nations have disappeared. Yet we persevere despite our out-sider status, or better, we survive because of that status. And those who join us understand intuitively that ours is a people which, despite the odds, will survive, will persevere and will thrive because we refuse to let go of each other. We refuse to lose hope. And now, as I and we look to the future, that issues about the Agreement come to us front and center.

I have spoken with my children in Israel about this Agreement and have asked for their perspectives. I can tell you that this issue is seen there as paramount and existential. And I can tell you that each has told me that they are frightened by this Agreement. And when pressed to articulate that fear, Yonatan said it succinctly, “I am afraid that I will not be able to protect my children”. The question, therefore, becomes which direction moving forward will provide for them and for Israel the path to protect our children into the future.

I like what Michael Oren, formerly Israel’s Ambassador to the US, wrote about his plans for the future. He said, "I'm a historian. I have enough problems predicting the past. I don't know anything about the future! ". If we look at the past, however, it does give us hope for the future. I don't know specifically what the future holds (and if I did know, I wouldn't tell you because that would ruin the fun). I cannot say what the outcome of the Agreement with Iran will mean to Israel. I do admit that it does make me nervous when one side says, "Israel will be safer than ever" while others say "this agreement is a historic mistake which renders Israel more vulnerable than any time since 1948". As one with children and grandchildren in Israel, I want nothing more to believe the former and nothing less than to enable or facilitate the latter.

But here I am compelled to add one more comment: The Jewish People has been on the outside for all of human history. My guess is that this situation will last at least a few more years. And during that long history, one would be hard-pressed to find among the nations of the world, at any time in history, another country which has been, consistently and unshakably a friend to the Jewish People more than the United States of America.

There has never been, and by all accounts there will not be in the foreseeable future, any alliance or friendship which will approach the depth of affection, the degree of shared values and the same commitments to common goals which exist between the US and Israel. There is no example, either for the US or for Israel, which can compare to the alliance and the friendship, for the last 67 years, between the State of Israel than the United States of America. That is not to be taken lightly or for granted.

Whether you or I like the Agreement (and I hope you made your opinions known to our legislators in the Congress and Senate), we now know that a vote will not be taken in Congress. This, I believe can be called a victory for Diplomacy and a defeat for Democracy. But now we must prepare to focus our sights and energies on the future. And in that vision of the future, I have great confidence that the close and unbreakable friendship between Israel and the United States of America shall remain intact.

Moving forward, especially in light of the Iranian situation, we must remember that Israel, with the ongoing help and support of the US, has many tremendous assets and strengths. There is no question that one of the greatest asset Israel possess is in its military might. Israel's military strength is and must remain of unparalleled strength and quality in that region of the world. But I would argue as well that Israel's friendship, the connections and affections which characterize Israel's relationship with the United States, is indispensable. As Americans, the friendship between us and Israel is crucial to both Israel and the US in confronting in the future any and all eventualities. Israel has no asset greater than it friendship with the United States. And this is something of which I remind my children in Israel.

Beyond politics, votes and agreements and friendship, I have faith. My faith is rooted in my knowledge of the history of our people. Ours is a history which includes unimaginable pain and persecution. Ours is the history of the most hated people in all of human history. But

ours is also a history of a living, vibrant and resilient people. I will tell you that my belief in God (which will be my topic for My Yom Kippur Sermon) is also deeply rooted in the survival of the Jewish People and the establishment of the State of Israel. I believe that God will protect the State of Israel.

As the State of Israel was first conceived, Theodore Herzl taught us, "*Im tirtzu ein zo agada / if you will it, it will not remain a dream*". But along with Herzl, I quote Irish poet William Butler Yeats who said, "In dreams begin responsibility". We have a responsibility to use our voices and to use our collective power to support the State of Israel. It is our duty to utilize the strength of our unity and the power which the American Jewish Community has attained, to make our case to those who will listen and to ask for help from those willing to lend their hand. But of this you can be certain: No one else in this world can be expected to fight for Jews other than Jews. No one else can be counted on to support Israel unless we support her first. It is our responsibility as Jews, in times of existential threats, to be sure, to support, to stand up for and to fight for Israel. And, if we do our part, I believe that God will do God's part to protect Israel by using us as her agent.

My friends, on this first day of a new year, many look forward with trepidation. I included. But I and we must look forward as well with hope and optimism. We are the descendants of those people camped below the precipice, observed by the Prophet Bilaam. We are the ones who dwell alone, not reckoned among the nations. We are the ones who have been both blessed and cursed by Bilaam the Prophet and by many others throughout history. But we have survived because of our allegiance to each other, our fidelity to Jewish Life and our commitments to our God and to Israel.

And as we look forward to a new year, let neither discord nor divergent political perspectives convince us that we no longer possess the sense of unity which is our hallmark. We can and we must speak with one voice in our support of the State of Israel. Let us defend ourselves against those who malign us. Let us fight with vigor and might against those who wish us harm. And let not this moment pass without a commitment made in the heart of each person here today, to affirm our connections to each other and to Israel, for those lines of connections represent the sense of cohesion at the core of the Jewish People. That sense of cohesion and unity has preserved us, strengthened us and empowered us through the ages.

May God bless us all with strength and with spirit. May God protect the State of Israel and her People. May God bless America and may God bless each of us with a year of Unity and *Achdut*, Prosperity and Peace.

Adonai oz l'amo yiten, Adonai yivarech et amo ba-shalom.

V'chen yehi ratzon. V'nomar: Amen