

A Muse: Balak 2008

“For from its origins, I see it rock-like; and from hills do I see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.”
(Numbers 23:9)

Over the centuries there have been many Torah commentaries which have discussed the meaning of this puzzling expression said as a blessing by Balaam that Israel is “a nation that will dwell in solitude, not to be reckoned among the nations”. A significant 19th century commentator from Galicia, Poland Rabbi Nachman Krochmal shed some interesting light on this puzzling blessing. Before sharing with you his interpretation of this verse, a few words about him.

Nachman Krochmal, known as the ReNak (1785-1840), was one of the founders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the Science of Judaism, and considered one of the founders of the Haskalah. He believed that unlike all other nations which are transitory, Israel was eternal. This eternity is due to the special relationship (*zeekah*) that Israel has with God. However, and in spite of this he doesn't believe that Israel transcends history. Its eternity is a result of the continuous renewal of the *zeekah* between Israel and God. This special relationship between Israel and God he uses to explain the destruction of the first Temple. The fact the people followed the culture of the gentiles weakened the special relationship and brought about the destruction of the Temple. On the surface this conflicts with his interpretation on the need for the twelve tribes to venture into Egypt and there to a partial assimilation.

Krochmall maintains that it was an essential prerequisite for the tribes to venture into Egypt and to learn their culture. Without this experience they couldn't have learned the essential building blocks of designing their own unique culture. So there seems to be a contradiction. On the one hand the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile was a result of the assimilation into the surrounding culture, weakening the *zeekah*. On the other hand, Krochmal contends that the Hebrews had to go through the Egyptian crucible, without which it is doubtful if they would have acquired the necessary tools for building their own culture. Krochmal postulates however that there has to be a special

balance between the two needs and maintaining this balance gives full expression to the term used by Balaam that “Israel is a nation that will dwell in solitude”. Essential is it that the Israelites maintain the unique connection with God; however, they are obligated to maintain a connection with the other nations of the world, since it is the same God who is creator of all mankind. Without fully appreciating the other nations it is impossible to maintain this special relationship with God.

Krochmal’s central thesis is that maintaining this delicate balance is what assures Israel of their continued special relationship with God. Once the balance isn’t maintained and we are no longer in the special sphere of God we are subject to suffering as all other peoples have been in history. It isn’t God that is causing the suffering, but the fact that we are no longer within His protective cocoon. Is that, I wonder, how Krochmal would have explained the Shoah?