



“A People Like a Lion”: On Identity and Power

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Parashat Hukkat-Balak 5786

Bilam’s prophecies are rich, dense, and enigmatic. One in particular was emphasised recently in 2025 when the war with Iran took its name from Bilam’s words: “a people like a lion” (*am ke-lavi*). What does this phrase mean? What kind of people are “like a lion”? What does this mean for our identity as Israel? And what use of power does Bilam’s analogy suggest?

The words appear in Bilam’s second parable, delivered at Sedeh Tzofim:

במדבר כג:יח,כד

¹⁸וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר... ²⁴הֵן עַם כְּלָבִיא יָקוּם וְכָאֲרִי יִתְנַשֵּׂא לֹא יִשְׁכָּב עַד יֹאכֹל טָרֶף וְדָם חֲלָלִים יִשְׁתֶּה:

Numbers 23:18,24

¹⁸And he took up his parable and said... ²⁴“Behold, a people rises like a lion (*lavi*), lifts itself up like a lion (*ari*); it shall not lie down until it eats prey, and drinks the blood of the slain.”

The metaphor of a lion rising immediately conjures up violence and physical power. Some *midrashim* lean into this and understand Bilam is prophesying about his own and the Midianite’s future military defeat at the hand of Israel:



מדרש תנחומא בלק יד

לא יִשְׁכַּב עַד יֹאכַל טֶרֶף, זֶה בִּלְעָם. וְדָם חַלְלִים, אֵלֵינוּ מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן.

Midrash Tanhuma Balak 14

“it shall not lie down until it eats prey”—this is Bilaam; “and drinks the blood of the slain”—these are the kings of Midian.

Another *midrash* notices the connection between Bilam’s prophecy and the Shema. Bilam said “rises... lie down” while the verses of the Shema (in a perfect chiasmic echo) read: “when you lie down and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6:7). In this picture, the lion metaphor represents a kind of spiritual power that comes from Israel’s zealotry in declaring God’s sovereignty. Midrash Tanhuma continues:

עַמְדוֹ מִשְׁנֵתוֹ, עוֹמְדִים כְּאַרְיוֹת חוֹטְפִים קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּמַמְלִיכִים לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, נִעֲשִׂין אַרְיוֹת, מִפְּלִיגִין לְדֶרֶךְ אֶרֶץ לְמִשְׁאֵל וּמִתֵּן. אִם נִתְקַל אֶחָד בְּכָלִים אוֹ אִם מַחְבְּלִין בָּאוּ לִיגַע בְּאַחַד מֵהֶם, מִמְּלִיךְ לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד יֹאכַל טֶרֶף. כְּשֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר, ה' אֶחָד, נֶאֱכָלִין הַמַּחְבְּלִין מִפְּנֵי, מְלַחֲשִׁין אַחֲרָיו, בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד, וּבּוֹרְחִין. וְהוּא נִסְמָךְ בְּזָכוֹת קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע מְשׁוּמְרֵי הַיּוֹם לְשׁוּמְרֵי הַלַּיְלָה. וְכִשְׁבָּא לִישׁוֹן, מִפְּקִיד רוּחוֹ בְּיַד הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְאוֹמֵר: בְּיַד אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי. וְכִשְׁנִיעוֹר, מִמְּלִיךְ לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. הַשּׁוּמְרִין בְּלַיְלָה מוֹסְרִים אוֹתוֹ לְשׁוּמְרֵי הַיּוֹם, שְׁנֵאֲמַר: נַפְשִׁי לַה' מְשׁוּמְרִים לְבִקֵּר שׁוּמְרִים לְבִקֵּר (תהלים קל, ו). לִכֵּן בִּלְעָם אוֹמֵר, אֵין אֶמָּה כְּזוֹ.

When they arise from their sleep, they stand like lions, eagerly seizing the recitation of the Shema and declaring the sovereignty of the Holy Blessed One; they become lions and set out for worldly affairs, for commerce. If one encounters any obstacle, or if destructive forces come to harm one of them, they declare the sovereignty of the Holy Blessed One, “It shall not lie down until it eats prey”—when it says, “God is One,” the destructive forces are consumed before them; they whisper after them, “Blessed be the name of God’s glorious kingdom forever and ever,” and flee. And they are supported by the merit of the recitation of the Shema, from the guardians of the day to the guardians of the night. And when they come to sleep, they entrust their spirit into the hand of the Holy Blessed One and says,

“Into Your hand I entrust my spirit.” And when they awaken, they declare the sovereignty of the Holy Blessed One. The guardians of the night hand them over to the guardians of the day, as it is said: “My soul waits for God more than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning” (Psalm 130:6). Therefore Bilaam says, “There is no nation like this.”

According to this *midrash*, our early and late Shema recitations give us the lion-like spiritual might to scare away the forces of darkness. In complete contrast to the military interpretation of the prophecy, these interpretations understand the verse as referring to Israel’s spiritual work.

These two interpretive paths channel the description of Israel into two opposite directions. On the one hand, a path of physical warfare on the battlefield and the use of physical force; on the other, a path of spiritual conduct that requires effort in the realm of daily life.

However, most human circumstances do not occupy one extreme or the other, but are found in the middle or in a multiplicity—a state of “both/and.” The *midrashim* seem to be offering a choice between a life devoid of physical power—in which there is ongoing spiritual engagement—and a life entirely consumed by physical power and nothing else. But the lives of individuals, and of nations, are complex: sometimes physical strength is needed to sustain a spiritual, moral, and responsible public sphere, and sometimes spirit is needed to summon physical strength that can be channeled in a responsible and moral manner. Is there really such a stark dividing line between these two approaches?

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary to the verse, offers an integration of these two poles.



Jacob-Israel¹ does not need the wisdom of our seers. Nor does he need divination; he is secure in his future. He has no need for sorcery; through other means he will become master of his destiny.² He will not fight to secure his external standing as a nation among nations, as a national power against other national powers. Rather, “Behold, a people”: he will fulfill his internal social mission, walk humbly with his God, and conduct his own unique way of life. By virtue of the deeds he performs as a “people,” he will be bold as a leopard and courageous as a lion toward the outside world, and through these traits he will overcome the world.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch opens his commentary by stating that the verse marks a goal and the way to achieve it. The goal is for Israel to become master of its own destiny. In fact, he views the verse as a discussion of Israel's unique means to achieve this goal. According to R. Hirsch, the verse indicates the means through which Israel will become a people with external standing, as an equal among nations, as a national power among other national powers.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch also charts a direction for this effort: inward. It is not always intuitive to think that internal development yields an empowering effect outward. Here, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch clarifies that “by virtue of the deeds he performs as a ‘people’”—those very deeds the nation performs within its internal social sphere—“he will be bold as a leopard and courageous as a lion toward the outside world.” Internal conduct strengthens the people and establishes them as powerful overall. Here we find a language different from both interpretive directions we have seen so far—not just physical strength in battle, and not just individual spiritual effort, but a combination.³

¹ The two names of the people are mentioned in the verses preceding this parable, but they also carry different concepts and distinct identities: a people that fights—Israel (“you have striven with God and with humans,” Genesis 32:29)—and a people that is dragged along, struggling not to be at the heel, trying to advance by virtue of holding onto the heel—Jacob (“then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau,” Genesis 25:26).

² See Numbers 23:23.

³ It also echoes the language of Mishnah Avot (5:20): “courageous as a lion, bold as a leopard”—which is directed toward building good character traits. R. Yehudah ben Teima also thought of the lion metaphor as neither about only physical or spiritual power.



Once the goal has been defined and the direction of effort described, R. Hirsch characterizes the necessary deeds: this is neither battlefield warfare nor exclusively spiritual activity, but an action that integrates theology and people. It is the fulfillment of a social mission, born out of an awareness that we walk under God, humbly, and possess a unique path. We must work to build a model society—from which its strength flows—spiritually, theologically, and physically. There is a unification around religious goals, walking humbly with God while maintaining a unique way of life—and this provides a dimension and scope that carry power, might, and courage. Before us is a peoplehood that holds a spiritual dimension, and from that flows its strength in the family of nations as well.

In his interpretation, R. Hirsch echoes the words of the prophet Micah, which we read in the Haftarah for Shabbat Balak: “God has told you, mortal, what is good, and what God requires of you: Only to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Perhaps when we have done this we can “rise like a lion.”

