

Behold! It is a nation who shall dwell alone and not be reckoned among nations. (23:9)

Bilaam was an archetypical anti-semite. His ability to master the double-entendre is manifest in his description of the Jewish people. He portrays the Jews as a "*people who shall dwell alone.*" He seems to be saying that the Jewish people have the ability to resist assimilation, to weather the tide of paganism and immorality that characterize secular society. That is what he seems to be saying. In reality, Bilaam was offering a critique of the Jewish people. He was branding them for their exclusivity, labeling them as reclusive and unsociable isolationists. Historically, the anti-semites reviled us for not distancing ourselves from the surrounding pagans. They vilified us for being different and keeping to ourselves. They denounced us as arrogant and ridiculed us for our lack of relationship with our pagan neighbors.

Bilaam's second compliment was even more ambivalent: "*And (you) shall not be reckoned among the nations*" is also an ambiguously laudatory remark. We are a nation unto ourselves with no reliance upon the nations of the world. Hashem is our G-d and Protector. Bilaam, however, did not mean that. He degraded us for not having national status on a par with the other nations of the world community. We have always been critiqued as a people who have no right to nationhood and no homeland. This characterization originated with Bilaam and has followed us for centuries. When you really think about it, Bilaam should not be blamed for his myopic view of our nationhood. To paraphrase **Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon**, our rights as a nation results from our allegiance to the *Torah*. "*Ein umoseinu umah bli haTorah.*" Our nation is not a nation without the *Torah*. If some of us do not accept this dictum, how could we expect a degenerate such as Bilaam to understand our claim to national existence?