

From its origins, I see rock-like, and from hills do I see it. (23:9)

Bilaam was looking for every way to render *Klal Yisrael* a death blow. His power was in his tongue, his ability to deliver a curse that would be effective and lethal. He begins his litany by acknowledging that it is difficult to curse a nation whose origins are likened to craggy rocks (Patriarchs) and hills (Matriarchs). He intimated that when he looked back at the roots of the Jews, he saw them as firmly established as rocks and hills. The loyalty to their forebears is what distinguishes them and makes them that more difficult to curse. I would like to employ my writer's license to embellish this idea and suggest a powerful lesson to be derived about the predominance of the Jew, specifically as a result of his ancestry.

Horav Yechiel Tzucker, Shlita, relates a story that took place in the winter of 2016. *Horav Avraham Altman, Shlita (Rosh Yeshivas Ateres Tzvi)*, and his son, *Horav Eliyahu Meir*, take an annual trip to Argentina on behalf of their *yeshivah*. They spend a few weeks meeting members of the community, speaking in the various *shuls* and raising badly-needed funds for the *yeshivah*. It was *Shabbos* morning after *Musaf*, and *Rav Altman* had delivered a powerful speech that shook up the congregation. Everyone was impressed and complimented him. As he was leaving, he was approached by a middle-aged Jew who said that he, together with his partner, owned a large factory which produced trousers. He offered to invite the *Rav* and his distinguished son to visit the factory. He would make it worth their while. They visited the next day and, as the owner had promised, he gave them a check that made the trip worth their while. Suddenly, in the midst of the conversation, the man broke down in bitter weeping. He explained that he had a partner who was dealing with a female client. One thing had led to another, and the relationship between him and the client had breeched the parameters of pure business, and a not-so-platonic relationship ensued. He was now bent on marrying her. She was a gentile, and he was now prepared to turn his back on *Yahadus*, on the religion for which his ancestors had died. The man continued to weep.

Rav Altman asked to meet the partner. The man was a bit nervous to meet a *Rosh Yeshivah* from *Eretz Yisrael*, but his partner came out and graciously received the *Rosh Yeshivah*. *Rav Altman* said, "Your partner gave me a generous check from the business. I would like to thank you since it is a joint account. Perhaps we could all go out to lunch tomorrow before we fly back to the Holy Land." The partners agreed to meet at a restaurant for lunch.

During lunch, *Rav Altman* interrupted the conversation twice to express his fascination with the partner. He said he did not know why, but something about his visage had impressed him. Clearly, receiving such compliments made the partner feel very good. It was not every day that he was complimented so much. "Tell me, are you married?" the *Rosh Yeshivah* asked. "No, not yet," was his response. "I give you a blessing that this year should be the year that you find your *bashert*, Heavenly-designated spouse. Indeed, I will attend the wedding and dance with you!"

The partner was clueless that *Rav Altman* was aware that he was about to marry out of the faith. "What will I do?" he mused to himself. "The *Rosh Yeshivah* will dance with me in a church and the priest will be '*mesader kiddushin*,' perform the service?" A few months passed, and the religious partner received a call from his partner. He was weeping bitterly, "I cannot go through with it! How can I, a distinguished Jew with whom the *Rosh Yeshivah* from *Eretz Yisrael* is fascinated, marry a gentile? I am breaking the engagement!" A few months passed, and he was engaged again – only this time to a *frum*, observant girl. What happened? How did someone who had fallen to such a nadir arise from the pits of spirituality and return to normative observance?

Rav Tzucker explains this with an incident recorded in *Midrash Eichah* (1:9). A wise man from Athens came to Yerushalayim and chanced upon a young *Yerushalmi* boy. The Athenian considered himself wise, but he failed to perceive the wisdom of young Jewish boys. He told the boy, "Here are some coins. Please purchase some cheese and eggs for me." The boy returned with the cheese and eggs. The Athenian then asked the boy, "Can you tell me which brick of cheese came from a white goat and which came from a black goat?" The boy countered, "You are a grown man, so it is only proper for you to first show me which egg is the egg of a white chicken and which is from a black one."

The *Tiferes Tzion* understands the exchange between the Athenian and the young boy as a metaphor for the Jewish People's unique relationship with Hashem, Who favors us because of our Patriarchal ancestry. As a result, we, too, take immense pride in our illustrious lineage. This pride should be a cornerstone of our observance.

The Athenian asserted that ancestry had no enduring value, since progeny do not necessarily resemble their ancestors. He presented as proof positive that the Jews do not look any different than anyone else, regardless of their religion. This is the message he intimated when he asked the boy to identify the source of the cheeses. He alluded thereby that, just as two types of goats produce identical cheeses, it makes no difference whether one descends from righteous, virtuous individuals or average lineage.

The young boy oppugned to the Athenian, asking him to show which egg had come from a black hen and which had come from a white one. He implied that just because no external differences appeared between the two eggs, it does not mean that internally no differences existed. Indeed, place the eggs under a hen to incubate, and the chicks that emerge will have the color of its mother. Likewise, the Jewish People may externally appear to be similar to everyone else; when given the opportunity, however, they will manifest a clear, abiding relationship with the *Avos*, Patriarchs. This is the same metamorphosis that took place with the partner. *Rav Altman* made him feel a sense of relief in knowing that they are, by virtue of being *Bnei Avraham*, *Yitzchak* and *Yaakov*, on a higher spiritual plateau. Come what may, we are not like them. The Jew is always welcomed back home, because he actually has never left.