

Thus, Yisrael shall dwell secure, solitary. (33:28)

Bilaam harasha, the wicked, whose curses turned into blessing, made a similar statement concerning *Klal Yisrael*. *Hein am levadad yishkon*, “Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude” (*Bamidbar* 23:9). Is there a difference between the two? Apparently, they both underscore the importance of *Klal Yisrael* living in solitude and not comingling with the nations of the world. Second, why did Moshe *Rabbeinu* specifically choose the importance of solitude as the blessing that would ensure the growth of *Klal Yisrael* as a Torah nation? *Horav Leizer Brody, Shlita*, observes distinctions between Moshe’s blessing and that of *Bilaam*. *Bilaam* emphasized the word, *am*, collective nation, referring to everyone who was a part of the Jewish People, even the *erev rav*, mixed multitude, all of those who straggled along with the Jews. They, too, would be included in this insular society.

Moshe, however, blessed *Klal Yisrael* with *betach*, security, which can be achieved only when *Klal Yisrael* is sheltered from those who would undermine and eventually destroy their spiritual status quo. Thus, he said, *V’yishkon Yisrael* – not, *am*, nation, which is all-inclusive, encompassing individuals who are under the umbrella of Judaism, but do not ascribe to the same spiritual demands as does a Torah-oriented Jew. *Yisrael* is the symbol of spiritual strength and superiority (*Daas Zekeinim m’Baalei Tosfos* commentary to *Devarim* 33:28), denoting a nation that adheres to *Toras Yisrael*. When we, who are committed, remain exclusive, not deferring to the winds of liberal, open, constantly evolving (with the times), modern-day mixed multitude, those who would revoke and exchange the Judaism for which their forebears have sacrificed, just to receive societal recognition, only then we will be secure and be able to retain our spiritual Jewish identities.

We lived in the Egyptian exile for 210 years of brutal persecution; yet, as explained by the *Abarbanel* (commentary to the *Haggadah*), there was never an incident of assimilation in the sense of inter-marriage (except for Shlomis *bas* Divri). This was because we retained our Jewish identity via language, name, dress code and maintaining our geographical distance from the Egyptians. *Maharal* adds that if *Klal Yisrael* would have changed their Hebrew names to Egyptian names, they would not have been spiritually fit for liberation.

The reader must be incredulous. Millions of Jews living in a country of pagans, and not a single instance of intermarriage. If one were to peruse and digest the tragic intermarriage statistics in America and Europe today, after being here (post-Holocaust) for less than a century, he would be shocked. Why is this? According to *Maharal*, when Jews exchange their Hebrew name for Christian ones; when the *momma lashon*, traditional language, is that of their adopted country, when they live together as one with their gentile and free-thinking neighbors, their children attending their schools and parties, etc. – you have an assimilated rate that mortifies the senses. I must add that this is only when one does so out of shame, not wanting to be different, a desire for his societal acceptance. Otherwise, if the name and language are arbitrary due to business and other demands, it is not an issue. It is only when we lose our natural pride that we are no longer *badad*, exclusive, and consequently not *betach*, secure.

Obviously, I could add much more to this subject, but, for the sake of brevity I will leave it as is. However, I do want to share a story that recently occurred. This story is about the retention of Jewish identity through a Hebrew name. In the course of counseling inmates incarcerated in a state correctional facility, I interact with a Catholic Deacon (one step below priest), who is the Christian chaplain. (Obviously, he works with Christians, while I work with Jews.) Three years ago, he mentioned in passing that he was flying to Hawaii to attend his granddaughter's *bas-mitzvah* celebration. The reader can imagine that I was truly thrown for a curve. *Bas-mitzvahs* are celebrated by Jews; he is a bonafide Catholic. When he saw the look of incredulity on my face, he explained his daughter-in-law's pedigree.

She grew up in Chicago, born to Jewish, albeit totally assimilated, parents. When she attended college and sought some form of religious connection, she "converted" to the Presbyterian Church. This conversion was later changed to Catholicism, when she met her future husband. They were married in the Catholic Church, shortly before her husband joined the Navy. He rose through the ranks, to the point that he became the commander of a vessel. During this time, his wife's *bubby* (who had some relationship with traditional Judaism,) passed away and left her Jewish ritual objects – such as a *Shabbos* candelabra, *challah* cover and *mezuzah* – to her granddaughter. Once the young lady came in contact with her Jewish heritage, she told her husband that she wanted to identify as a Jew and raise their children according to the religious crede of her biological religion. Her husband acquiesced and encouraged her to study and learn more about her family's history.

Meanwhile, their daughter reached the age of twelve while they were stationed in Hawaii. They proudly celebrated her *bas-mitzvah*. Last year, her brother celebrated his *bar-mitzvah*. He even put on *Tefillin*, which I encouraged his grandfather to purchase for him.

Two weeks ago, Deacon Tom informed me that his granddaughter was ill with an infection affecting her entire body. The family is now stationed in Bahrain (Mideast), where I have no contacts. I suggested that I make a *Mishebeirach* and recite *Tehillim* for her. Her family was gratified. I then asked if by some "remote" chance his daughter-in-law, Courtney, and/or granddaughter, Katelin, had a Hebrew name. He emailed Bahrain and within a few minutes the response was Courtney = Eliana Chaviva; Katelin = Sara Chaya. Imagine: Two conversions out of the faith; intermarried, and yet she could not – rather, would not – forget her Hebrew name, and she saw to it that her daughter also had one! The situation is sad. Yet, it is hopeful that, one day, the children will return home.