

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Balak

We are accustomed to saying three paragraphs in the Shema, but the Talmud questions the rationale for these particular three portions. While the first two parts contain directives to say these words “when you lie down and when you get up,” we do not have an obvious reason to twice daily read about the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* together with the other two paragraphs. The Talmud (*Berachot 12b*) explains this paragraph is important because aside from the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, it also contains several other central *mitzvot*. Tosafot adds, based on the Jerusalem Talmud, that in these three portions we can find hints to the Ten Commandments.

The Talmud there states that the Rabbis wanted to make *Parshat Balak* part of the Shema, but they did not do so because the lengthy Shema would have been too cumbersome. The Talmud further suggests they were unwilling to insert only one part of *Parshat Balak*, because since it is not divided in the Torah scroll into separate portions, we do not break it up in the siddur. The Talmud wonders why *Balak*, of all Torah portions, should have been in the Shema. The Talmud cryptically answers that *Parshat Balak* carries weight because in it the verse states (Numbers 24:9), “He crouched and lay down like a lion and like a lion cub, who can stand him up?”

The Talmud leaves us with this enigmatic verse, not explaining its awesome significance and why it would really belong in our twice daily recitation of Shema. After all, it would seem to not fit at all with the other Torah excerpts which make up our Shema. Our three paragraphs all describe tenets of our religion, such as the oneness of G-d, reward and punishment, and the importance of *mitzvah* observance. But this verse, in which the prophet Balaam metaphorically describes the Jewish people laying undisturbed like a lion, seems to tell us nothing fundamental about our religion. If so, why say it?

At first glance, we might suggest the metaphor of the lion laying down refers to the timing of Shema and its recitation, which the Torah describes with the line “when you lie down and when you get up.” In fact, in an earlier verse (23:24) Rashi quotes the Midrash that the metaphor there of the “rising lion cub” alludes to the Jewish people rising with alacrity to don talit, read Shema, and put on tefillin. He adds that when the verse there says the lion “will not lie down until it consumes prey,” it alludes to the special Shema said right before one goes to sleep at night, which helps protect one from demons and other harmful threats. Perhaps our verse (24:9), which also employs the metaphor of the lion’s position, hints to the recitations of Shema in the morning and night. However, the Midrash does not say that 24:9 refers to the Jewish people saying the Shema, and the Talmud still claims it (and not 23:24) ought to be in Shema. So the question resurfaces



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how 24:9, the metaphor of the lion laying down undisturbed, relates to the Shema.

Rashi (*Berachot 12b*) says this verse refers to the fact the Jewish people can lay down and sleep quietly and peacefully throughout the night until they rise in the morning because Hashem protects them. We must therefore understand the Talmud to mean that although this verse does not mention anything about the mitzvah of Shema, still it should have been incorporated into the Shema. It would have been similar to the *parsha of tzitzit*, which does not mention anything about the mitzvah of Shema, but was added to the Shema because of the vital messages it relates. The Jewish people can sleep like a lion because they trust Hashem and rely on Him to care for them and protect them. While the main body of Shema deals with our beliefs (*emunah*), this verse talks about our trust and reliance (*bitachon*). Even if we believe in G-d and fulfill His mitzvot, our service is still not complete if it is not accompanied with the conviction that G-d takes care of us and does not leave us.

Although the Rabbis decided not to put the verse about Hashem's protection in the Shema, they made a blessing to be said after the Shema at night which talks about His protection. "Lay us down to sleep in peace, and enable us to stand up to life...shield us, and remove from us sword, famine, and woe...and guard our goings and comings...Blessed are you Hashem, Who guards His nation Israel forever." The Talmud (*Berachot 4b*) even calls this an extension of the previous blessing, which describes how G-d redeemed the Jewish people and will redeem them again in the future. In a similar vein, this blessing talks about Hashem's special providence, protecting us from our enemies and from dangerous happenings.

In the wake of the recent horrific act of terror in Israel, we must take the opportunity to strengthen ourselves. While we do not understand the ways of G-d and we may feel especially vulnerable, we must find ways to rise above this impediment. Ultimately, we need to continue to grow to the best of our ability, and then to realize Hashem watches over us and protects us. May this realization give us renewed strength during this most difficult time.

Shabbat Shalom

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