



5779 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Parashat Balak / פרשת בלק

## A Boost of Confidence

Kri'at Shema plays a central role in the daily life of a Jew. Recited at least twice daily, the text of Shema allows a person to proclaim his allegiance to basic principles of Judaism. The Mishna teaches us that the first paragraph relates to “accepting the yoke of heaven” while the second paragraph describes the nature of the commandments.<sup>1</sup> The third paragraph teaches of the importance of tiztit which enables us to remember all of the mitzvot as well as the redemption from Egypt which triggered our unique relationship with God. It is a form of a Jewish pledge of allegiance.

Therefore, it is surprising that the Talmud seriously entertains the possibility that Bilam’s blessings should be included in Kri’at Shema:<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Abbahu ben Zutarti said that Rabbi Yehuda bar Zevida said: The Sages sought to establish the blessings of Balaam that appear in the Torah portion of Balak, as part of the twice-daily recitation of Shema. And why did they not establish it there? Because extending Shema would place an encumbrance on the congregation, from which the Sages sought to refrain.

While the Talmud justifies this surprising assertion that Bilam’s blessings are worthy of being recited twice daily with a specific verse, the overall rationale seems puzzling. What is so crucial about these verses that they deserve to be recited daily if not for a technical consideration of the length of the service?

Rav Kook explains that the basic theme of Kri’at Shema is God’s unity and His influence over the world. While the paragraphs of Kri’at Shema illuminate this theme from a variety of angles, one key idea is missing: the people who are supposed to execute God’s plan in this world and reveal

<sup>1</sup> Mishna Brachot 2:2.

<sup>2</sup> Brachot 12b. Translation is from sefaria.org.il.



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God's unity. The major motif of Bilaam's blessings is "the eternity of the Jewish people." Beginning with the Avot and concluding with Mashi'ach, Bilaam showered praise after praise upon the Jewish people. Reading these blessings daily will give us the confidence in ourselves that we can fulfill our divinely mandated mission of revealing God's unity.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of the "eternity" of the Jewish people and their unique mission is intimately linked to the city of Yerushalayim. The Gemara describes Yerushalayim with the single word "*netzach*,"<sup>4</sup> which contains the dual meaning of "eternity" and "victory." This city, now thriving again after so many centuries of desolation, embodies the eternity of all that is godly and holy. And it is this eternity and refusal to be defeated that gives us hope and confidence in its ultimate "victory" when God will finally fully return to his earthly abode and have His presence palpably felt once more in Yerushalayim.

Thinking about Yerushalayim, connecting to Yerushalayim, will give us the boost that we need to fully believe that we can fulfill our historical mission. According to Rav Kook's interpretation of the Talmud, this theme is worthy of daily contemplation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ein Ayah Brachot perek 1, piska 170.

<sup>4</sup> Brachot 58a.