

A Nation of Isolation and Connection



This piece first ran on our Substack, Reading Jewish History in the Parsha. We're pleased to share it here on our website.

Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.
-[Bamidbar 23:9](#)

Bilam's words above paint a picture in many of our minds of a fundamental aspect of the relationship between the Jewish People and the rest of humanity. At first glance it would seem that this relationship is characterized by antipathy and aloofness, as if Israel's isolation on the international stage—and perhaps even antisemitism itself—is decreed by fate.

True, the Torah's commandments engender a certain isolation. The stringent observance of Shabbat and dietary laws makes it harder to fraternize with non-Jews, and generates a sense of distance from them. This schism is evident in modern Hebrew, which divides the globe into two: Israel and "outside Israel" ("*chutz laaretz*," a term with clear negative connotations). Additionally, immigrants to Israel are called "*olim*," or "ascenders," while those who migrate from the country were for a long time referred to as "*yordim*," or "descenders."

But history shows that the opposite is also true, and the Jewish People are notable for their connection to humanity at large. Jews were always interacting with other peoples in what could be described as mutually beneficial relations. For thousands of years, Jews were scattered throughout the world, a state that many consider an actualization of the Jewish People's purpose of being a "light unto the nations." As the Netziv writes: "The fact that most of our existence is in exile is due to the blessed Holy One revealing to Abraham that his children were created to be a light unto the nations, a state that is only possible when they are scattered in the Diaspora."

The term "light unto the nations" first appears in Isaiah (42:6), but the Netziv links it to the election of Avraham in Genesis, when his ultimate purpose vis-à-vis all of humanity is described: "Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (18:18).

What is the nature of this blessing? The following verse explains why Abraham is chosen: "For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (18:19). That prophecy has indeed been fulfilled: The biblical precepts of righteousness and justice—including the sanctity of life, caring for the other, the principle of equality, and the idea that humanity was created in God's image—have become essential truths for all of humanity.

Furthermore, many Jews throughout the generations were members of the scientific, technological, and philosophical elite. Figures such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, and Mark Zuckerberg gave rise to global revolutions that reshaped human consciousness, even if in retrospect some had a negative contribution. One need only consider the fact that Jews have won Nobel Prizes at a rate far higher than their percentage in the population to realize the scope of their contribution to humanity.

Election Generates Connection

Does the tension between particularism and universalism not indicate a schizophrenia of sorts? It seems not, for at bottom there is no contradiction between the two approaches; on the contrary, they complete each other.

The Torah does not open with the birth of the Jewish People, but rather with the creation of the world and the dawn of humanity. After relating the story of the Flood, the Torah lingers on the covenant between God and humankind, while the story of the Tower of Babel shows us that God seeks variety among the nations. The Bible notes that God is not only the deity of Israel, but the god of the entire world: “For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name is great among the nations; and in every place offerings are presented unto My name, even pure oblations; for My name is great among the nations, saith the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 1:11).

The choosing of one people does not mean the neglect of the rest of humanity. Rather, such an election lends that people a purpose that relates to humankind as a whole—as we see in the explanations for the Jewish People’s chosenness that appear in the Book of Isaiah.

Paradoxically, the connection to the rest of humanity depends on a certain degree of separation from it. The Jewish People’s unique status derives from its purpose and mission for the sake of humankind. This can be likened to the role of the priesthood, who are kept apart so as better to fulfill their task: to bless the Jewish People and represent them before God through the Temple rites. On a larger scale, the Jewish People serve as a priestly class for the rest of humanity: “Now therefore, if you will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples ... and you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). As the verses tell us, the election of the Jewish People is not a matter of race, but rather depends on the fulfillment of the tasks that emanate from its covenant with God.

As for Bilam’s assertion, “Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations,” it seems that his words should be read as encouraging a separateness born of special purpose. He is an outside observer, praising the Jewish People’s capacity for remaining apart by virtue of its task, not extolling the merits of aloofness.

The Heart of Humanity

It seems that Rabbi Judah Halevi put it best when he said that when we liken humanity to a single body, “Israel amidst the nations is like the heart amidst the organs of the body” (Kuzari II:36). The heart fulfills a unique role in the body, in that it is connected to all of the organs and limbs. It cannot function alone because it depends on the rest of the body; yet this is a mutual dependence, for the heart provides the body with lifeblood.

The image of the Jewish People as a heart is also manifested in the territory that God chose for us. The Land of Israel is at the crossroads of three large continents, and is thus naturally an arena of interactions. It is thus clear why God sends Abraham from his homeland in Mesopotamia to a land that has always been a corridor between civilizations.

The rest of the quote in Halevi's *Kuzari* regarding the relationship between the Jewish People and the nations is fascinating: the heart, and by extension the Jewish People, he says, "can be the most sick and most healthy of all organs simultaneously." According to the *Kuzari*, this is an expression of a profound sensitivity that enables the Jewish People to resonate with the good in the world, as well as with the evil. We can find echoes of this in recent history. In the past century, three ideologies threatened humanity and tried to take over the world: fascism, communism, and radical Islam. The first to suffer from these three movements were the Jews. Antisemitism is not fueled by Jews' apartness from the world, but rather by their connection to it. One does not become popular through taking on a mission and asking ethical questions. One statement attributed to Hitler is emblematic of this truth: "Conscience is a Jewish invention."

Beyond History

The historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) asserted that there is a pattern to the rise and fall of nations. According to the criteria he describes, the Jewish People should have disappeared long ago. But the fact of the Jewish People's continued existence in the world did not prompt Toynbee to second-guess or amend his theory; rather, he explained that the Jewish People is a "fossil" civilization. Toynbee was an anti-Zionist who opposed granting national rights to the Jews. But it seems that he was correct on one count: The annals of the Jewish People transcend the laws of nature governing history. This insight can also be found in the Talmud ([Shabbat 156a](#)), which states, "Israel is immune from planetary influence." The implication is that the principles guiding history—in the past these were believed to be the planets and the signs of the zodiac—do not apply to the Jewish People.

The Jewish People and Humanity

The Italian kabbalist Rabbi Eliyahu Benamazegh (1823–1900), in his book *Israel and Humanity*, presents his approach to the relationship between the Jews and the other nations. To him, Judaism is the source and foundation for a world religion that should be based upon the Seven Noahide Laws, including the demand to maintain a justice system and prohibitions against idolatry, sexual immorality, murder, and theft. Some of those values were transmitted from Judaism to humanity by way of Christianity and Islam. Rabbi Benamazegh interprets the final verse in the books of Prophets—“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Mal. 3:24)—as a statement on the future relations between the three religions.

If the Jewish People is to fulfill its purpose in the world, it must maintain its identity; for otherwise, “the Jewish people’s tiny drop of blood would be subsumed in the broad arteries of humanity. The breath of Israel would be smothered, and its mission would remain unrealized. Rather, safeguarding this nation requires precautions, and, indeed, many commandments, even if that is not their exact purpose, have that effect.”

Vision of the Last Days

When Israel was established, the menorah was chosen as the symbol of the state. Among the reasons for that choice were the prophecies of the end times, when the Jewish People will be a light unto the nations. But in the ensuing years, the vision clashed with reality, and the term “a light unto the nations” has since become a joke in many circles. Still, even if we acknowledge our shortcomings, we must not despair of ever fulfilling our responsibilities. The Jewish People succeeded in sparking humanity’s imagination with the visions of the prophets, with the aspiration for a rectified world in which the nations live side by side in harmony. Just as we have overcome immense adversity to realize the vision of our return to Zion, there is cause to believe that if we only devote ourselves to the cause, we can realize those visions as well. Yet, the success of the Jewish People in the world depends solely on the power of the spirit—politics will always fall short of realizing this ultimate vision. As the prophet Isaiah says:

And it shall come to pass in the end of days.... And many peoples shall go and say, “Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Is. 2:2-4)

The vision will be fulfilled, according to Isaiah, through spreading the Torah and the word of God. The Torah does not aspire to “win souls” to Judaism, but that is not due to indifference to the fate of the other nations. Rather, it stems from the conviction that every human being, Jewish or not, can reach the pinnacle of holiness. An echo of this idea can be found in the Talmud’s likening of a non-Jew who studies the Torah to a high priest ([Sanhedrin 59a](#)). It is an approach that makes room for the other, for it does not threaten their fundamental identity, but rather seeks to amplify and empower it.

For thousands of years, the Jewish People was inward-facing, striving to return to the Land of Israel from the Diaspora. We have succeeded in implementing that stage and returning to our place. The next phase is to become outward-facing, from Israel out into the world. Though it will require a mental reorientation, it is in fact a direct continuation of the return to Zion, which is not a goal in itself but rather a condition for fulfilling our purpose. Many in Israeli society yearn for a part in the fate of humanity, and often feel that Judaism comes between them and the rest of the human race. Developing the connection between Judaism and what takes place outside it could bring these people back into the fold, “and thy children shall return to their own border” ([Jer. 31:16](#)).



An expression of togetherness and humanity. Rav Nagen is third from left.
