

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

CHUKAT-BALAK 5785

*Once again, a bit longer than usual, but, hopefully, worthwhile the read.*

On June 13th of last year, Israel launched its now famed "Operation Rising Lion - K'LAVI YAKUM, Israel's military attack against Iran. The phrase was taken directly from Bil-am's prophecy in our Parsha (23:24): HEIN AM K'LAVI YAKUM..., Behold, a people that will rise like a lioness; it will lift itself like a lion." Whoever chose the name of the operation - K'LAVI YAKUM, Rising Lion - we may not know, but the Baal Shem Tov teaches that everything is by Divine Providence and everything we encounter holds a lesson. As such, it behooves us to investigate this phrase and reflect upon its various meanings. Clearly, on that Thursday night, when the world was asleep, there arose a lion of Jewish might and courage, and proved to the world once again that the nation of Yehoshua, King David and our great Biblical warriors was still very much alive!

There appears to be two very different interpretations of the metaphor K'LAVI YAKUM, and in keeping with the rabbinic maxim of "the language of the Torah is one thing, and that of Chazal something

else" (Avoda Zara 58b), both are quite valid. The first is Midrashic, and has been given to a series of different interpretive iterations, each building upon the former. The Midrash reads (Tanchuma Balak 14, Bamidbar Rabba 20:20): "Behold, a people shall rise up as a lion - there is no nation in the world like them. Although they had been asleep to the Torah and the mitzvot, they awoke from their slumber like lions, eagerly recited the Sh'ma, and proclaimed the kingship of the Holy One, blessed be He." Here, Chazal speak of a metaphorical slumber, that is, a period during which Jews neglected the Torah and the mitzvot, but in the end, awakened from their slumber and arose like lions to proclaim the unity of Gd and crown Him as King.

Rashi (23:24, s.v. HEIN) quotes this text from the Tanchuma, but with significant changes. First, he does not interpret the Israelites' sleep as metaphorical, but as literal. Second, he understands the lion to refer not to the Israelite nation, but to the individual Jew. Third, he conceives the character of the lion in light the Mishna: "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a gazelle, and mighty [GIBOR] as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven" (Avot 5:20). Rashi writes: "'Behold, a people shall rise up as a lion - when they awake [OMDIN] from their sleep in the morning, they rise up mightily

[MITGAB'RIM] like a lion or regal lion [K'ARI] and eagerly perform the mitzvot: donning the tallit, reciting the Sh'ma, and laying t'filin." In Rashi's adept revision of the Midrash, the subject is not a historical event in which the people of Israel have sinned, repented and returned to monotheism, but rather it is the daily routine of the individual Jew who arises mightily each morning as a lion to perform the mitzvot. Rashi deftly shifts the focus from nation to individual, from national morality to personal morality. Inspired by the Mishna, he employs the verb MITGAB'RIM ("they rise up mightily"). The Jew awakens every day at dawn and as a mighty lion he zealously performs the mitzvot. In the words of the Maharal, "The mitzvot are acts of valor" (Gur Aryeh, ad loc.).

Clearly influenced by Rashi's skillful personalistic modification of the Midrash, we now come to the M'CHABEIR (R' Yosef Karo), in his opening words to the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 1:1), who transforms Rashi's descriptive account of one's morning conduct into an explicit command: One should be mighty as a lion to arise in the morning for the service of one's Creator! In this codification of what began as a Midrash, the Shulchan Aruch is mandating that the Jew adopt the attributes of the lion in his service of HaShem. Indeed, life according to Torah is one in which a

Jew must be MITGABEIR like a lion, acting heroically by subduing his natural inclinations and subjugating them to the Divine mitzva norm.

We now turn to the plain - P'SHAT - meaning of the rising lion-metaphor. Adopted first by Onkelos and later by Ramban and others, the K'LAVI YAKUV imagery is a militaristic one. Balak is told that Israel will defeat the mighty kings of Canaan. But the more general and unmistakable message is: "Do not take the lion at rest as a docile, domestic animal incapable of inflicting harm. Rather, if disturbed or threatened, this beast can rise with ferocious power, attack and crush any challenger. Later (24:9), Bil-am continues this depiction: "He [Israel] crouched and lay down like a lion, and like an awesome lion, who dare rouse him?" The rising lion represents strength, initiative, readiness, defense. But the crouching lion? That's another kind of power: restraint, dignity, inner peace, stability. Bil-am sees both. He says: "The Jewish people aren't only mighty when they roar. They are majestic even when they are quiet. Even when they're crouching - seemingly asleep - they carry the presence of a lion. Even when they lie still, they are often most dangerous, because they are watching, waiting, and can leap into action at any moment."

The Ohr HaChayim (23:24, s.v. HEIN) unpacks this lion-metaphor even

further, giving it an almost uncanny relevance to our current events. First, he asks: why is the Jewish people compared to a lioness? He explains that unlike most who require extended training before becoming powerful warriors, the lioness rises immediately and performs wonders. The same is true of the Jewish people. While others may need years or even centuries to become effective, the Jewish spirit can awaken instantly and strike with profound force, far beyond what one might expect from a first attempt. Second, he notes that lions grow stronger with age. Similarly, despite enduring countless persecutions and exhausting battles, the Jewish people do not tire or despair. Instead, they continue to rise, not weaker but stronger, more determined and valiant with each challenge. And third, the Ohr HaChayim writes that the nations tremble with disproportionate fear before the Jewish people whose small size masks their inner prowess, not just military strength, but a spiritual and moral force, magnified by HaShem's providential protectiveness.

In examining these two very different understandings of the rising lion-metaphor, it is more than just interesting to note that many of our commentators - including Rashi - elect to mention both interpretations. We therefore would like to suggest

that both are not only correct, but complimentary and mutually reinforcing. The prophecy is declaring that when the allegiance of the Jewish people to HaShem is loyal and unwavering in both belief and deed - when they dutifully rise every day to observe His Word, then they will be an unconquerable 'lion' on the battlefield as well. And so, while it may be that during our long years Exile, our great sages creatively developed a spiritual exegesis of the prophecy of Bil-am, now, with the independence of the sovereign State of Israel, why can we not build upon that foundational doctrine of Torah obedience and activate the original p'shat interpretation of the elected prophet of the gentiles?!

If "Operation Rising Lion" can teach us anything, it is precisely the critical importance of cojoining the "lion" of Torah with the "lion" of the sword. The Melech HaMashiach, in Rambam's presentation (Hilchot M'lachim 12:1,4) will, of course, be unconditionally committed to the entirety of Torah, and it will be he who will also valiantly fight the battles against our enemies, ushering in the great redemptive era we all so long for. Could it be that perhaps, what we are seeing in our day is a prelude to that glorious epoch?! May we only be so worthy.

Let us conclude with this true story

whose message of hope is clear.

The great Rav and posek of Kovno, Rav Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, was once confronted by a Russian anti-Semite who contemptuously challenged the Rav: "You are a lowly people who serve no purpose; the world would be better off without you and the problems you cause. What contribution to humanity justifies your existence?" Rav Yitzchak Elchanan did not flinch. Instead of feeling threatened or upset, the great Rav was filled with joy. Those present were confused. Smiling, he responded by quoting our pasuk: "'At that time, it will be said to Yaakov and Yisrael...' At that time when our enemies question our right to exist and say about us, MA PAAL KEIL, 'For what reason did Gd bother to create you', it means that the rest of Bil-am's words will be fulfilled as well: "Behold, the people will rise in like a lioness and raise itself like a lion!"

Once again, unabashed anti-semitism has become the 'acceptable' norm around the globe. We face enemies who do not simply disagree with us; they call into question our very right to exist. Yet, even with the great losses and tragedies we have suffered through, we are witness to, and part of, a wondrous awakening of nishmat Yisrael, Jewish identity, pride and strength: The lion of Torah hand-in-hand with a generation of

lion-warriors, setting a magnificent example of religious and national idealism. Our soldiers, in the Beit Midrash and in the theater of war, in their valor and sacrifice are a sacred inspiration for us all. 🙌