

## The Crouching Lion

By: Yanki Tauber

*He crouches and lies like a lion, like a lioness; who will dare rouse him?*

(From Balaam's blessings, Numbers 24:9)

It's always nice to receive a compliment from a friend or a loved one. But praise that we truly savor is praise that comes from an adversary. When a rival at work, a business competitor or an outright enemy says something like, "I must say, you guys have something there!" -- that's the kind of vindication we relish most of all.

Little wonder, then, that we Jews have such a warm place in our heart reserved for Balaam's blessings. As the Torah tells it (in Numbers 22-24), the prophet and sorcerer Balaam, an archenemy of the people of Israel, was summoned by King Balak of Moab (an even bigger enemy) to curse the Israelites. But when Balaam opened his mouth to curse, blessings came out instead. He tried three times, each time with the same result. And then he finished off with a prophecy describing the triumph of Israel in the "end of days."

And what beautiful blessings they are! The verses uttered by Balaam are amongst the most delicious poetry in the bible. Balaam's blessings include the *Mah Tov* ("How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel...") -- a verse we love so much that, three hundred sixty-five days a year we start our morning prayers with it. They include the most explicit reference in the Chumash (the five books of Moses) to [Moshiach](#), the Jewish leader who will bring about the full and ultimate redemption. And they include the verse we cited at the beginning of this article ("He crouches and lies like a lion, like a lioness; who will dare rouse him?") which, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, is a most powerful and meaningful description of the Jewish people in the state of *galut* -- a state in which we've found ourselves for much of our history.

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Every once in a while an item makes an appearance in the newspapers. The details differ somewhat (a tiger raised in a Brooklyn apartment, a trained circus lion "losing it" in the ring), but the basic story is the same: a large cat, of the sort that rightly belongs in the savannah or the steppes, raised and supposedly "trained" as a pet or performer, "suddenly" sheds its domesticated persona and...well, you don't want to be in its way when that happens.

Interestingly, the Talmud (the repository of Torah law compiled 1500 years ago) and the Shulchan Aruch (the "Code of Jewish Law" put to writing about 1000 years after that) includes a law that all would-be lion "trainers" should take to

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heart: according to Torah law, there's no such thing as a "domesticated" lion. Other animals can be "owned", and be legally classified as such. So if your ox or goat goes berserk and inflicts damage, there are numerous stipulations as to when, and to what extent, you are liable, reflecting the extent to which you are expected to anticipate your animal's behavior under the given circumstances. No such qualifiers have any legal standing in the case of a wild cat. A lion remains, by nature, a free creature, and never accepts the yoke of ownership or "domestication" -- no matter how many years these states have been imposed upon it.

This, says the Rebbe, is the deeper significance of Balaam's metaphor of the crouching lion applied to the people of Israel. For much of our history we have been in a state of *galut* -- exiled from our homeland, enslaved by other nations, subjected to alien cultures, "trained" to perform in accordance with the dictates of what "the world" expects and desires from us. At times, the subjugation may seem quite real, at least to the cursory perception of the circus audience. But it is never real. The lion may crouch or lie in seeming docility, but it has not been conquered. It remains free. If it is docile, it is docile by choice, not by nature. It remains free, and is never more than an instant removed from the seemingly "sudden" assertion of its innate freedom.

In the words of Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch (words quoted by his son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, as the latter stood on the platform of the Leningrad train station on a summer day in 1927, moments before boarding the train that would take him into the exile decreed upon him by the Communist rulers of the land for his work to preserve and strengthen Jewish faith):

"We did not depart from the Land of Israel of our own free will, nor will we return to there by virtue of our own capabilities. G-d, our Father and King, has sent us into exile, and it is He who will redeem us and gather in the dispersed of Israel from the four corners of the earth, and cause us to be led back firmly and proudly by Moshiach, our righteous redeemer -- may this occur speedily, in our times.

*"This, however, all the nations of the world must know: Only our bodies were sent into exile and subjugated to alien rule; our souls, however, were not given over into captivity and foreign rule. We must therefore proclaim openly and before all, that any matter affecting the Jewish religion, Torah, and its mitzvot and customs is not subject to the coercion of others. No one can impose his belief upon us, nor coerce us to conduct ourselves contrary to our beliefs..."*

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