

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's portion Balak, we read about the attempts of the evil Bilaam to curse the Jewish people. When Bilaam opens his mouth intending to curse the Jewish people, Hashem causes Bilaam instead to utter praises of the Jewish people. In Bilaam's first "blessing" he says about the nation of Yisroel, "Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations." (Bamidbar 23,9) When the verse states that the Jewish nation will "not be reckoned among the nations," it means that we are different and special; i.e., Hashem does not treat us as He treats the other nations. From here we see that the Jewish people receives special supervision from Hashem.

By examining history, we can clearly see that the Jewish nation has had a special fate among the nations. The continued existence of the Jewish people, against all odds, in the face of persecution, demonstrates that we are truly a exceptional nation, a nation which will "not be reckoned among the nations."

One of the most difficult periods in recent history was the Jewish experience in World War II. While we do not know for certain why such tragedies befell our people, one thing we know for certain: stories of amazing Divine Intervention during the darkest periods of history demonstrate that Hashem did not abandon His People. The following amazing true story is one such story which illustrates a ray of light from Hashem during the darkest night. It was World War II, in Cracow, Poland. Reb Yitzchok Isaac Klingberg's apartment had been commandeered by the invading Germans who then set up their headquarters in the building. Amazingly, the Germans allowed R' Yitzchok to remain living in the hallway. It was a precarious existence for R' Yitzchok, but he was thankful to be alive. "Zhid!" The German commandant's officer awakened R' Yitzchok from a fitful sleep. "Get into the office!" he commanded. "The commandant wants to see you." R' Yitzchok scrambled to obey the man's orders. He followed the German officer into the office and stood at attention, while the drunken commandant managed to stumble around his desk and sprawl into his chair.

R' Yitzchok's eyes widened in terror as the commandant pulled his gun out of his belt and flung it on the desk between them. "You see this gun?" he barked at his shivering victim. "I'm going to ask you a question. If you don't answer me truthfully, I'll kill you." R' Yitzchok managed to nod, but his heart sank. The commandant was so drunk that he would probably shoot R' Yitzchok with the slightest provocation—even if he did speak the truth. "Vaas es das Rema—who was the Rema?" the commandant demanded. R' Yitzchok stared, speechless. What sort of question was this? Why would a German commandant want to know about the Rema, and acronym for Rabbi Moshe Isserles? (died 1572) The sixteenth century Torah leader was a towering figure whose works are among the foundations of Torah law. Rabbi Yosef Karo wrote the Shulchan Aruch, the guide to our daily lives, and the Rema added the Ashkenazic viewpoint on various customs and rulings wherever they differed. He was prepared to write the entire guide on his own, but he humbly abstained when he heard Rabbi Karo had already begun his work.

The commandant abruptly stood from his chair. "We were commanded to destroy the cemetery here in Cracow!" he shouted. "But then they sent us a telegram, telling us not to touch the Rema's shul, or his grave."

R' Yitzchok blinked in surprise. Could this really be true? "Vaas es das Rema—who was the Rema?" the commandant asked again, with drunken urgency. R' Yitzchok didn't know where to begin. Should he talk about the Rema's life, or simply mention his great written contributions to Torah Jewry? But before R' Yitzchok's could say a word, the commandant suddenly swayed—and then slid to the floor, passing out right at R' Yitzchok's feet. R' Yitzchok let out his breath with words of thanks to Hashem before beating a hasty retreat from the commandant's office.

R' Shimon Spira, R' Yitzchok's cousin, had a similar experience. After the war, R' Shimon Spira walked slowly through the streets of his hometown of Cracow, Poland. It was so different now than it had been had been before the war! Where were the sixty thousand Jews who had made Cracow their home before World War II? R' Shimon was among the paltry two thousand survivors who had managed to escape the hands of the Nazis. After the war, it was natural for him to return to the city where he had spent his entire life. But there was not much left to see in postwar Cracow.

As his feet led him through the deserted streets, his recollections were interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. "Excuse me, sir." R' Shimon turned to see a shabbily dressed young man, accompanied by two friends of about the same age. "We're looking for the grave of the Rema. Could you show us the way?" R' Shimon raised his eyebrows in surprise as the sound of the holy Rema's name passed through this young man's lips. He himself had visited the burial site many times before the war. But what interest would three non-Jewish men have in the Rema's grave?

"Why do you want to go there?" R' Shimon asked. "I understand why you're asking us that," the leader of the group said ruefully. "But despite the way we look, we really are Jewish. We were pretty young when the Nazis took over, and we were forced to work for them. Our assignment was to knock down the tombstones in all the Jewish cemeteries across town." The man's voice grew hushed. "When we reached the Rema's stone and prepared to knock it down, the sirens went off, and we ran to take shelter from the air raid. When the all-clear sounded, we went to try again—and again the sirens went off. It kept on happening. Every time we went back to knock down the gravestone, the sirens would go off, and we had to run away."

"We finally gave up," the second man added. "But we did manage to chip off a small chunk from the gravestone," "Now we want to go back there to ask forgiveness," the leader concluded. With the world completely shattered by war, three secular young men sought atonement for chipping a stone. Tears sprang to R' Shimon's eyes.

"I can show you where to go." R' Shimon reassured the three men. He beckoned them to follow him toward the shut and the adjoining cemetery. "Your tale does not surprise me," R' Shimon remarked as they walked. "It is only fitting for this great tzaddik, the Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles." R' Shimon stopped suddenly. "See that beautiful building?" R' Shimon gestured to the high archway that marked the entrance to the old shul. "The Rema's father built it in his honor, four hundred years ago. The Isserles family was very prominent, very wealthy and very supportive of Torah learning." R' Shimon fell silent for a moment. "On the Rema's yahrtzeit," he continued quietly, "so many Jews came to daven here. Every year—on Lag B'Omer." R' Shimon's final words, while unspoken, reverberated through the quiet streets. "No more ...no more..." "I showed them the grave," said R' Shimon as he finished telling his story. "Just like they said, the Rema's gravestone was still standing tall and straight. They asked the Rema for forgiveness—and then they vowed to change their way of life. All in the merit of the Rema." (Reb Yosef Weiss, p. 138 Visions of Greatness.)

History demonstrates that we are a nation which will "not be reckoned among the nations." We may not always understand Hashem's ways, but we clearly see that Hashem guides us with extra special Divine Providence. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ob'm

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