

## THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

by Rabbi David Algaze

*"I shall see him but not now, I shall look at him but it is not near."* (Bamidbar 24:17)

One of the leitmotifs in this parasha is the eye and what it can see. Bil'am is called the "man with the open eye", "the man who sees the vision of G-d" and many other verses along the same theme. In the verse quoted above, the Midrash comments that what Bil'am was seeing was the eventual Redemption that will come to Israel. In the Midrash (Yalkut Shim'oni) we find a very perceptive comment by Rabbi Yitzhak. Regarding the Salvation, Moshe Rabbenu said that it is near, "For the day of their catastrophe is near and future events are rushing at them" (Devarim 32:35)—meaning that the day of retribution to the nations that oppressed Israel will come and Israel will be saved—but Bil'am says "I shall see him but not now" meaning that the Salvation will not come soon. This may be compared to two people looking at the same phenomenon—a friend and a foe; the friend will look at it in a positive light whereas the foe will see it in a negative manner.

Rav Henschel Leibowitz, zt'l, comments that it all depends on the eye of the person. Bil'am, whose character was depraved, saw the events from the bad side, that the Redemption will take a long time in coming. Moshe Rabbenu, on the other hand, who had a pure nature and loved the Jewish people, saw the unfolding events from a different perspective. The friend and the foe may look at the same sequence of events; yet what they will see will be very different. The perception determines what we see. The eyes of the beholder can actually see a different reality depending on one's outlook and disposition.

Once the Rabbis were strolling together among the ruins of the Temple Mount and they heard the din of the metropolis of Rome. The Rabbis wept as they contemplated how the evil empire was rejoicing while Jerusalem

lay in ruin. Rabbi Akiva burst out laughing. Surprised at his attitude, the Rabbis asked him, "How can you laugh?" Rabbi Akiva explained, "If G-d allows the wicked such joys, imagine how much more He will do for those who observe His will!" (Makot 24). Both the Rabbis and Rabbi Akiva saw the same sight and experienced the same phenomenon, yet one saw one thing and the other a totally different sight. When Rabbi Akiva saw the utter destruction, he realized that the punishment had reached its pinnacle and that from now on the Redemption was about to start. The sight of the Destruction that brought the Rabbis to tears, made Rabbi Akiva more optimistic. He understood the positive side of the terrible sight. He saw a totally different reality.

From we learn that in every situation one may find a positive and a negative side and that all depends on our perspective. For this reason it is important for us to cultivate the right approach to events and to understand that in the end what we see may depend on the eye of the beholder.

In the Land of Israel today we find a similar situation. Although the Jewish people have returned to the Land and created there a beautiful nation, there are many obstacles and threats around it. However, the situation that may cause some to despair and give up, brings others to have high hopes and sublime energy to continue the beautiful enterprise of creating a Jewish state. We must behave as Bil'am saw us: possessing the quality of lions, "He crouched and lay down like a lion, and like a lion cub, who can stand him up?" (verse 9) which the Targum understands to mean that "they will settle in the land with strength and courage and no one will be able to move them." In spite of the many threats surrounding Israel, we have to see that the Salvation is near and that G-d can transform the direst situations into moments of rejoicing, as He did with Bil'am's intentions, transforming them from curses into blessings.