

Many wonderful things have been said in praise of the Jewish people by our own holy prophets and sages. Yet, every morning, we begin our prayers with the words of the evil prophet Balaam, a man who would have cursed the Israelites for gold and silver, if G-d had permitted it. Some explanation is needed. And so, I'm going to tell you a story told by Rabbi Elimelech:

In another dimension of time, in a world beyond ours, is a forest filled with magnificent creatures. Of all the creatures there, the birds are the most spectacular, and of all the birds, the tzidikel bird is more beautiful than them all. And of all the tzidikel birds, one stands out with dazzling beauty, beyond anything words can describe.

Nu! Every morning in this splendid forest, all the creatures gathered before sunrise around the tree of this extraordinary tzidikel bird. As the sun reaches the tops of the trees, its rays shine down through the canopy and the tzidikel opens its wings in full glory. A panorama of colors glisten and sparkle in its feathers, dancing in the sunlight like so many magical stars and fairies to entertain the birds delighted audience. Each morning is a more glorious spectacle than the day before. Each morning all the creatures' ooh and ahhh! in wonder.

Now all of this occurred every day within that dimension of time, until, one year, a new bird came to the forest. And guess what! Pretty soon the creatures began to gather at the roost of the new kid on the block, leaving the tzidikel all but alone.

"Is she then more glorious than I?" demanded the tzidikel of her few remaining faithful admirers. "How could this be? There are no colors left in the universe that I do not possess!"

"But" her faithful muttered, their heads hanging from shame, "she has no colors. She is black."

Well, the fury of the tzidikel knew no bounds. She was the perfection of the art of beauty, and if black was to be beautiful then there was no beauty at all. In rage, she tore herself from her branch and flew to see her rival.

There stood the creatures of the forest in silent wonder. Perhaps it was the oils of the black bird's feathers that refracted the light of the sun as a prism into so many rainbows. Perhaps it was the mystery of her absolute blackness, or the contrast she held against the bright morning sky. All that could be said is that it was an intangible beauty, not of something that could be painted, or described or known in any way. It was beauty as indefinable as black is dark.

"Is she then more glorious than I?!" screamed the tzidikel from her perch above the crowd.

"We cannot tell," the animals explained, trembling. "For it is no longer dawn."

"Very well then," cried the tzidikel. "We will have a contest at dawn! But who will be the judge?"

No creature dared volunteer for such a task. And neither could the two birds themselves come to a consensus. So it was decided that the two would appear at dawn at a position known only to them and the first creature to appear would adjudicate their contest.

All night they prepared their feathers and rehearsed their movements, all night at their secret post in the forest. And as the sun began to rise, they ruffled their feathers and then with a dramatic swoosh spread them wide in the most glorious scene ever to come to the most glorious of forests. Yet there was no witness to that scene, none but the two birds themselves.

Until, from behind the bushes below, a sound was heard that almost toppled the tzidikel from her tree in horror. It was the grunt of a wild boar.

Covered in mud and smelling atrociously, the boar appeared, and yes, even he was delighted with the beauty he encountered. And the two birds spread their feathers and turned elegantly, displaying their pride to the pig below.

The grunted, snorted, and he coughed. He asked for a replay again and again, until after an hour or so, he finally set forth his verdict: The black bird was the most beautiful of them all.

"If so," cried the tzidikel, "my beauty is not beauty. There is no place left for me." And she flew away from the forest, never to be heard of again.

My friends, the tzidikel is the light G-d brings into His creation. Through miracles, through *tzaddikim*, righteous acts that have no tint of personal motives. And the black bird is the darkness. But when the darkness is turned to beauty, it is a beauty so great that light is dim and impotent before it.

And as for the pig, it is this lowly world, the world of action, which the Creator Himself has declared the final judge of truth and beauty.