

# JEWISH DWELLINGS

*by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner*

This week we, in Israel, read the parsha of Balak while those outside of Israel catch up by reading both Chukas and Balak. "Va'yar Balak ben Tzipur es kol asher asah Yisroel la'Emori [Balak the son of Tzipur saw all that Yisroel had done to the Emori]. [22:2]"

On the way to Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel], Bnei Yisroel [the children of Israel] had victoriously battled against two of the most powerful nations--Sichon and Og. Balak, the King of Moav, had relied on those two nations to defeat Bnei Yisroel and thwart their advance toward his kingdom. When he saw what Bnei Yisroel had done to those two nations, he became extremely frightened. Knowing that the strength of Bnei Yisroel was not in their physical and military prowess but rather in their mouths--in their ability to connect to Hashem through prophecy and prayer--he decided to fight fire with fire. He summoned Bilaam, the greatest prophet amongst the gentiles, to come and curse Bnei Yisroel.

Bilaam knew that this idea of cursing Bnei Yisroel went clearly against the will of Hashem. Nevertheless, blinded by his burning hatred toward Bnei Yisroel, he agreed to go, hoping that he'd somehow succeed in spewing his venomous curse.

In two different places Bilaam arranged altars and offered sacrifices hoping the prophecy that would divinely flow from his mouth would be a curse on Bnei Yisroel. Both times, Hashem instead placed words of bracha [blessing] into his mouth.

By the third time, Bilaam no longer went from place to place hoping to find the proper venue to curse. "And he lifted his eyes and saw Yisroel dwelling as tribes and there rested upon him the spirit of Elokim. [24:2]" Rashi explains that this spirit of G-d manifested itself in his deciding not to curse Bnei Yisroel.

What did Bilaam see that impacted upon him to such a degree?

The Nesivos Sholom writes that the forces of impurity that Bilaam tried to unleash could only affect lone, solitary individuals. Bnei Yisroel as a group and all those connecting themselves to that klal [nation as a whole] were immune.

That is what Bilaam saw--Yisroel dwelling as tribes. Peacefully, without jealousy, united as one large group with each sub-group contributing their unique talents and assets. When Bilaam saw that, there rested upon him the loving spirit of Hashem that translates itself into blessings, not curses.

What words then came from his mouth?

"Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishk'nosecha Yisroel [How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwellings, Israel.] [24:5]" The Sforno writes that these "tents" and "dwellings" refer to our learning centers and synagogues. The places where we join together as one and where every Jew feels himself as a part of the nation at large.

Ultimately, when Bilaam saw that he was unsuccessful in cursing Bnei Yisroel, he instead tried to harm the nation by leading it to sin. He advised Moav to send their daughters to seduce Bnei Yisroel, leading to adultery and idol worship.

The twenty four thousand people who succumbed to their desires and thus separated themselves from the nation all died. The Ariza"l writes that Rabi Akiva's twenty four thousand students who died because they didn't honor one another sufficiently had the souls of the twenty four thousand mentioned above.

How can we compare these two groups? One was involved in the gravest of sins while the other, according to the exacting standards demanded from people on their level, fell short in honoring one another!

The Nesivos Sholom explains that at their roots, both groups shared a common, fatal fault--they lacked the necessary unity needed to be part of Klal Yisroel.

This past week I was offered a glimpse into a very stark contrast between our "tents"--the learning centers, including the virtual one that we participate in and our "dwellings"--the synagogues wherein we worship.

The outpouring of love and unity toward the amazing person from Poland, expressed in letters I received has been heartwarming and inspiring. I forwarded all of them to my friend in Poland and he was very moved by the feelings of brotherhood that everyone expressed. These letters told of people praying for him, donating money to charity in his merit, offers to find a donor, to send him a tallit koton and even to fly to Poland to help him. Amazingly, right before I began to write this parsha, I downloaded a letter exploring the possibility of bringing him to the USA in order to get him top medical care. We are presently pursuing this as a possibility.

As a result of the letters and my urging, he has agreed to my posting his full Hebrew name, Yakov Aaron Meier-Tschurl ben Sarah, for prayers on his behalf, and his e-mail address, [uri\\_chone@hotmail.com](mailto:uri_chone@hotmail.com), for those who might want to write directly to him. Yakov doesn't know if he'll be able to reply to the letters but I'm sure they will be most appreciated.

That having been said on behalf of the unity of our "tents", in contrast, on a very disquieting note, I received an anguished letter this week from a wonderful young man, a self-described Jew of color. The following are excerpts from his letter, describing the 'welcome' he's received in some of our "dwellings."

"I am facing a tremendous amount of racism in the synagogues here in xxxxxx. All have treated me like an outsider. I find that whenever I attend services, the congregation stares at me as if I don't belong. I am always questioned about my heritage and even after a thorough explanation I am still shunned like I am not a real Jew. I hate the fact that my own Jewish brothers and sisters won't even accept me. I get racism from the gentile world and from the people of HaShem because of my black skin. I was writing you because I am at the point where I don't want to be a Jew anymore."

Tragic. The only way to describe it is tragic.

We are a nation of all hues and colors. Unity means lovingly accepting all of our members. That is our strength. That reversal of sin'as chinam [baseless hatred] is our hope for redemption. May the merit of warm, friendly acceptance in our "dwellings" lead to the rebuilding of our ultimate national dwelling, the Third Temple, speedily in our days.

Good Shabbos,  
Yisroel Ciner

---

Copyright © 2000 by [Rabbi Yisroel Ciner](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

---

The author teaches at [Neveh Tzion](#) in Telzstone (near Yerushalayim).

---