

# PARSHAS BALAK - IN PRAISE OF FAMILY VALUES

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## **In Praise of Family Values<sup>1</sup>**

*How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Yisrael[2]*

Tents and dwelling places can be strong, esthetically pleasing, well designed, fashionably equipped. But how can they be good?

Twice before, Bilaam had tried to curse the Jews. Twice he had failed.

He first contemplated their physical fortunes[3]. Bnei Yisrael break the rules, he concluded. They might be, at any one time in history, a small, modest Yaakov people. Alternatively, they might be a triumphant Yisrael, bursting at the seams with energy and a burgeoning population. Their numbers really would not make a difference. Their mission is all-important. G-d has a stake in it, and will therefore provide for their survival and development. Guaranteed.

Next, he turned to their spirituality. Balak wished to know about their inner life and resources. Are they blessed with special knowledge and insight? Do they have the foresight to see what changes are upon them? Do they have access to preternatural powers that provide them with short-cuts to important information? Can they manipulate cosmic, hidden powers, perhaps through magic and the occult? Do any of those contribute to their recent success? If we can find the source of their uncanny strength, we can work on a way of defeating it.

Bilaam had to disappoint Balak a second time. Don't even think of going there, he tells Balak. You are not going to find a chink in the armor, a way of out-maneuvering them. G-d Himself has blessed them, and that blessing is irrevocable and undefeatable.[4] You are looking for their inner vulnerability, their secret flaw? Stop your search. You will not find it. Hashem Himself has not found any fatal flaw in them that would make the power he invests in them conditional.[5] They need not work to be granted their power; it is hard-wired in them, and will not be diminished or taken back. In their days of national infancy, they lacked any kind of meaningful power. They overcame their Egyptian oppressors because G-d provided the power. He will continue to do so, lifting them higher yet.[6]

Others may look to the magical arts to change what they believe is their bleak destiny. Yisrael, however, finds omens and magic irrelevant. It doesn't find power or succor in such endeavors; it continues on the way of life sure-footed in depending on the Source of its power. While others

cringe in their helplessness in solving their Jewish "problem," Yisrael has knowledge at the moment, as events unfold, of the basic contours of what G-d is up to!<sup>[7]</sup>

Balak does not relent. Making no progress the first two times, he hits upon Plan C. While great physical and spiritual gifts have been vouchsafed unto them, the Jews could still stumble and fall. They could not only misuse their blessings, but could turn into people incapable of using them properly. In a fallen state, their blessings will become irrelevant! Immorality is a cancer that left unchecked, allows a person to yield himself to complete license and debauchery. Surely, thought Balak, the Jews are still human beings like the rest of us, and the vices of the flesh can turn all their blessings into curses.

Bilaam, on his first two attempts, had understood what he could not directly observe, through some sort of semi-prophetic experience. In addressing Balak this time, however, he actually "sees"<sup>[8]</sup> the truth. No longer trying to force the Hand of G-d, so to speak, only to become the unwilling conveyor of words put into his mouth, Bilaam now is treated to a much clearer vision.

He immediately realizes that Yaakov's tents are good tents. He does not find them beautiful, in the esthetic sense, but good. Behind the walls of each person's tent and habitation, unseen in the privacy of each person's private life, are the biological urges shared by all of mankind. Balak found in them hope for defeating the Jews. These urges are anything but automatically holy; they represent great potential for straying and transgression.

Bilaam sees the tents, arrayed in an orderly manner around the Sanctuary. The meaning of this dawned upon him. The tents are "good;" they project the goodness of the central morality and ethos of Jewish life. Each family's course of life may seem to be a different brook<sup>[9]</sup>, but eventually they all come together, because every person's journey is guided by the instruction of Mikdosh and Torah. The private life of every Jewish family rises above the coarseness of Peor. Understandable human passion, which so often runs wherever it wishes and often stops at nothing, yields to Hashem's Will. The realm of Yisrael's King is exalted above that of every other king<sup>[10]</sup> through an unseen victory achieved without fanfare, in the conduct behind closed doors of every Torah family. The seed of the Jewish people is planted deliberately and purposefully. Each new Jew comes into existence in a union consecrated by subordination to His wishes.

In all stable societies, people agree to limit their conduct in important ways. Those limitations concern, for the most part, interpersonal activity. The realm of the private needs yield to no one and nothing. Bilaam saw the centrality of the family in Jewish life, and the source of its vitality. He saw that the Torah guides all aspects of life, even what goes on inside the tent.

That made the tents good.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 23:28-24:7

2. Bamidbar 24:5
  3. Bamidbar 23:9-10
  4. Bamidbar 23:19-20
  5. Bamidbar 23:21
  6. Bamidbar 23:22
  7. Bamidbar 23:23
  8. Bamidbar 24:1
  9. Bamidbar 24:6
  10. Bamidbar 24:7
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