

## Parshat Balak 5779

**How good are your tents** In his third attempt to have Bilam curse Bnei Yisrael, Balak brought Bilam to Pe'or. Rashi (23:28) quotes Chazal and Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch elaborates saying that Balak thought he might find Am Yisrael's weakness in Pe'or. Rav Hirsch explains that Pe'or symbolized a cult which turns the animalistic side of human functions towards the gods; and asks of *man* 'why do you dream of decency and modesty and a higher calling. You are no better, and you are not designed for a higher calling, than an animal'. This is the question which Balak was posing. Rav Hirsch asks how *Am Yisrael stands with regard to decency and modesty and purity of morals in which the strength and flourishing of all nations have their root.*

Balak chose Pe'or because he thought he could find Am Yisrael's weakness there. Maybe they were lacking in basic morality. The Torah states (24:2) that Bilam saw that Am Yisrael was encamped according to its tribes, "*li'shvata*". Again, Rashi quotes Chazal and Rav Hirsch elaborates that here we find the answer to Balak's question. Rav Hirsch says that Balak asked how Am Yisrael stands regarding decency and morality. The answer is that the camp which Bilam saw before him, the "*ohalei yakov*" which he visualized, was "lishvatav", organised according to its tribes with each child knowing his father. That is the yardstick by which morality could be judged. In an immoral nation, a child cannot be sure who his father is. Am Yisrael passed the test; they were a morally upright nation.

This, according to Rav Hirsch, is the context of the main bracha which Bilam now gives to Am Yisrael, the famous pasuk of "*ma tovu ohalecha yaakov mishkenosecha yisrael*". Rav Hirsch points out that the pasuk reads '*ma tovu*' how "good", not how "beautiful." How good, how greatly do your homes correspond to the moral ideal and the true well-being of the nation. This is the essence of the bracha. Bilam was telling Am Yisrael that your houses are 'good'- they are moral, they are spiritual. This is the bracha which Bilam gave to Am Yisrael. It is much more important to have a spiritually good home than to have a physically beautiful home. Rashi points out that the way Am Yisrael positioned their tents also reflected modesty and moral sensitivity. Rav Hirsch continues to explain why the pasuk reads "*ohalecha yaakov*" and "*mishkinosecha*

*yisrael*". We know that Yaakov is the name which generally describes Am Yisrael when Am Yisrael is weak. The name Yisrael generally describes Am Yisrael when it is stronger. Rav Hirsch says that "*ohalecha*" refers to temporary tents of the wandering Yaakov and "*mishkenosecha*" refers to the stately mansions of Israel. It does not matter whether the Jews are living in temporary tents or in stately mansions. The challenge is to be good, moral, and spiritual. Whether a Jew will live in a more expensive (*mishkan* style) or less expensive (*ohel* style) home is up to Hashem. That is not the challenge that is facing us. The challenge we face and the bracha for which we are striving to be worthy, is not how beautiful our homes are, but rather how *good* our homes are.

**Sincere service** We read in Parshat Balak that as Bilam prepared to curse *Bnei Yisrael*. He asked Balak to build several altars and they offered sacrifices on them. Rashi (23:4), citing the Midrash, writes that Bilam built the altars and offered sacrifices on them in order to claim religious superiority for *Bnei Yisrael*. He told Hashem that the founders of the Jewish People, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, built for the Almighty a total of seven altars over the course of their lifetimes. Bilam offered that same number. The Midrash ([Bamidbar Rabba 23](#)) says that Hashem replied to Bilam by citing the verse in [Mishlei \(17:1\)](#), "*Dry bread amid serenity is better than a home filled with feasts of fighting.*" Hashem told Bilam that He prefers few and simple sacrifices over those offered by Bilam, "*for you seek to introduce a fight between Me and Israel.*" The sincere sacrifices of the Avot were far preferable to Bilam's sacrifices which were offered for the sake of arousing Hashem's anger on His beloved nation.

The Midrash here warns against using religious observance as a source of competition and one-upmanship. Hashem does not look kindly upon those who "build altars," and who perform special religious acts for the sake of introducing a fight, to show that they are better than others. Our service of Hashem must be geared towards uplifting and inspiring other people and not making us feel superior to others. Sacrifices offered for the sake of experiencing a sense of superiority is not an act of service of Hashem but rather an act of serving oneself by trying to boost one's ego. *Chazal* here teach us that all our "sacrifices" must be genuine and sincere and should never be made as cheap attempts to feel that we are better than the people around us.