

BALAK (NUMBERS 22:2-25:9)**How Good is YOUR Tent?**

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

How good your tents are, Jacob, your Tabernacles, Israel.” (Numbers, 24:5)

What’s so good about Jacob’s tents?

Balaam, the great Gentile prophet, the author of the above-quoted verse, hated Jacob. (Some commentaries say he had known Jacob personally – that he was Jacob’s uncle and father-in-law, Laban! See “Rocky Road”.) He hated Jacob and he hated the Nation of Israel. And he was committed to put that hatred to work.

Balak, the Moabite king, hired Balaam to curse Israel. Now why, you may ask, would an anti-Semite like Balak need to hire someone to curse Jews? Plenty of people would be happy to do it for free!

Cursing, you see, is a great talent. Some people do it better than others. Balaam was a pro:

“Behold! A nation has left Egypt; it has covered the face of the earth (Meaning: they have defeated other kings (see "The Bigger They Are ...") who we had hoped would protect us -- Rashi’s commentary.) and it sits opposite me. (Meaning: and are close by to destroy me -- Rashi) ... Please come and curse this nation for me ... perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed.” (Numbers, 22:5-6)

Anybody can curse. The hard part is cursing someone and having the curse “take.” Balaam was a professional curser; he really knew his business. As the king told him, “... *whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed.*” Balaam got the job.

Balak wanted to undermine G-d’s protection of Israel. He figured that a great sorcerer like Balaam could use his great spiritual powers to turn G-d against His people. And Balaam, that great hater of Israel, was more than happy to comply.

... Or, at least, to TRY to comply.

Much as Balaam wanted to collect his hefty fee for cursing his favorite enemy, G-d stopped him. Balaam kept trying, but the “curses” kept coming out as blessings. G-d just wouldn’t let him do it.

Why not? I think it was the tents:

Balaam saw that it was good in G-d's eyes to bless Israel ... Balaam raised his eyes and saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of G-d was upon him... he said ... "How good your tents are , Jacob, your Tabernacles, Israel." (Ibid. 24:1-3, 5)

What did Balaam see in those tents that made them so deserving of G-d's blessings?

Rashi tells us that the tents were set up in such a way that the entrances didn't face each other. One couldn't look out one's own window and see what was going on in the neighbor's tent. Balaam saw that and he was impressed. This recognition of Israel's respect for mutual privacy led G-d to place His spirit upon Balaam.

Where one finds genuine modesty, one finds holiness. It is none of my business what goes on in the privacy of your home. That is between you, your loved ones, and G-d. The tents faced away from each other to indicate that holy people don't involve themselves in other people's intimate activities.

That, perhaps, could be the meaning of the double expression of Balaam's blessing: *How good your tents are, Jacob, your TABERNACLES, Israel.*"

When a *TENT*, a home, is *GOOD*, i.e., respectful of the privacy of others, that home becomes a *TABERNACLE*. A home that is filled with modesty and mutual respect is a Tabernacle, a Temple where G-d can rest his Divine Presence. Balaam the prophet discerned the sanctity of the houses of Israel, and even he was overwhelmed by their holiness. He couldn't help but to proclaim praises for G-d and His beloved nation.

Have you ever noticed the garbage that they encourage you to buy at the checkout counter? Inquiring into people's private lives is a multi-million dollar industry. Trashy people sell trashy stories about allegedly trashy people to trashy papers and trashy TV talk shows. Every deed and misdeed is recorded by the paparazzi for posterity. Every comment uttered is quoted, misquoted, analyzed and misanalyzed by the self-appointed experts.

Is there no decency? Is there no respect? Is there no modesty?

Balaam realized that his efforts to curse Israel would fail as long as Israel lived a life of decency and modesty. That's why he eventually realized that the only way to effectively curse the Israelites was to corrupt their morals. (See "Of Television, Toilets, and Idolatry".) Then he would no longer have to curse them; they would curse themselves with their own actions.

Not only is our society decadent; it is worse than that. There is no shame. There is no embarrassment. Society revels in its own decadence. The more we can find out about other people's dysfunctional lives, the better. (Who knows, maybe people enjoy learning about other people's shortcomings so they don't have to feel guilty about their own deficiencies!)

"How good your tents are , Jacob, your Tabernacles, Israel" How good are OUR tents? How discrete are we in our private matters? How respectful are we of the privacy of others?

Balaam wanted to curse our nation. G-d wouldn't let him, due to the holiness of our homes.

How holy are OUR homes? If Balaam tried to peek into our windows, what would he see? What books would he find in our homes? What would he find in our computer memories?

What would G-d let Balaam say about us?

Have a great Shabbos

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2007 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.