

# Torah Table Talk

## Balaam's Blessings, Now and Then

### Parshat Balak Numbers 22:2- 25:9

The story of Balaam comes as close as any chapter in the Bible to what we think of as humor. Hired by representatives of the Moabite King Balak to curse Israel, Balaam sets out on his journey riding on his trustworthy donkey. Though Balaam is a prophet, he cannot see what the donkey sees: an angel is in the middle of the road with a sword in hand. Each time the donkey veers from the road to avoid the angel Balaam beats the poor animal. Finally the donkey turns to him and says, "Look I am the donkey that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I ever been in the habit of doing this to you? Only then does the angel appear to Balaam.

Duly chastised, Balaam continues on his journey with the understanding that he can only say that which God puts in his mouth. Instead of curses, Balaam utters a series of blessings much to the king's dismay. Best known, among these blessings is *Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov*, a verse that appears at the beginning of the prayer book. It is the only prayer in the Siddur attributed to a non-Jew.

#### **Numbers 24:5-6**

How good are your tents, O Jacob; your dwelling places, O Israel.  
Like palm groves that stretch out, like gardens beside the river,  
Like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the water.

1. Note that the repetition of expressions is typical of Biblical poetry. It is called parallelism. Are the parallel phrases exactly the same or do they add some insight or meaning to one another?
2. What do you think Balaam was referring to when he spoke about Israel's tents and meeting places? The Prophet was standing on a mountain top looking down on the camp of Israel. What do you think he saw?

#### **Rashi's Commentary on Numbers 24:5**

**How good are your tents O Jacob:** Balaam blessed Israel in this way because he saw that the doorways of their homes did not face one another (thus assuring the privacy of each family).

#### **Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 60a**

**Mishnah:** In a courtyard which he shares with others, a man should not build a door facing another person's door nor a window facing another person's window. If it is small he should not enlarge it.....

**Gemara:** Whence are these rules derived? Rabbi Yohanan said: From the verse of the Scripture: And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and saw Israel dwelling according to their

tribes. This indicates that he saw that the doors of their tents did not exactly face one another, whereupon he exclaimed, “Worthy are these that the Divine Presence should rest upon them!”

1. What was it about the situation of Israel’s homes that caused Balaam to bless the nation? What was so significant about making sure the doors or windows did not face one another?
2. In what ways can we insure the privacy of others as well as our own privacy in our day to day life? What type of things should we avoid sharing with others?
3. Public figures who are involved in politics and in the entertainment industry are often the subjects of scrutiny into the most personal aspects of their lives. Is it wrong for us to seek out such information from the perspective of Halachah and Jewish ethics? Why or why not.
4. When should we respect another person’s privacy and when should we be willing to ignore their privacy in our day to day interactions with them?

**Translation of Mah Tovu in the Sim Shalom Prayer Book:**

*a.* How lovely are your dwellings, people of Jacob;  
Your sanctuaries, descendants of Israel.

*b.* Your great love inspires me to enter Your House  
To worship in Your holy sanctuary, filled with awe for you.

*c.* Adonai, I love your house, the place of Your glory.  
Before my Maker I humbly bow in worship.

1. Note that while the first verse (*a.*) is taken from Numbers 24:5, the following two verses (*b.* and *c.*) are from Psalms, 5:8 and 26:8. Why were these two verses added to the passage in the book of Numbers? How do they change our understanding of Balaam’s blessing?
2. Why do you think the sages choose to include Balaam’s words at the beginning of the prayer book even though he had no love of the people of Israel? Should Balaam’s statements be considered a true blessing?
3. This passage is supposed to be recited each time we enter the synagogue. Why do you think the sages choose this combination of verses as an introductory passage to our daily visit to the synagogue? What does it teach us?

**Glossary**

**Mishnah:** The first codification of Jewish Law in the second century by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi. It is the basis of Halachah as well as the Talmud.

**Gemara:** A commentary on the Mishnah composed of the notes of the academies of Jewish learning. It is sometimes referred to as the Talmud. There are two versions of the Talmud: one edited in Babylonia and the other in Palestine. The Babylonian Talmud was edited at the beginning of the sixth century, CE.

**Sim Shalom:** The official prayer book of the Conservative Movement. This translation is taken from the most recent edition of the Siddur or prayer book.

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*

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