



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

**DISTRIBUTION DATE:**

**TUESDAY JUNE 30, 2009 / ח' תמוז תשס"ט**

**PARSHA:**

**CHUKAS - BALAK / חקת - בלק**

**SERMON TITLE:**

**LABELS ENABLE**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family  
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל אב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

## CHUKAS - BALAK LABELS ENABLE

There are many world maps on which “Israel” doesn’t appear—in its place one reads “Palestine,” or reads nothing at all. Unfortunately, it may be good policy to ignore Israel, as it is a very inflammatory subject—but I must admit that doing so is not a new development.

In the second part of this week’s double Torah portion, we read about Balak, the King of Moav, who was afraid that the Jewish Nation would annihilate him. He knew that he would not be able to fight them with the physical might of his army, as the Jews had already killed the mighty Sichon and Og. So he tried to discover the secret of the Jews’ power, coming to the conclusion that their power came from Moshe Rabbeinu. He then decided to fight them at that level—he turned to an evil prophet name Bilam, a man on the same level as Moshe but on the “Dark Side,” asking him to come and place a curse upon the Jewish Nation.

When we look into the first verses of this story, we find something very strange. The message Balak sends to Bilam goes, “Behold, the nation that has left Egypt... now, come curse this nation for me.” Balak mentions the nation, but not by name. They are some “nation,” nothing more and nothing less.

Even when G-d came to Bilam in a dream and asked him, “Who are these men with you?” he quoted Balak: “Behold, the nation that has left Egypt...” Again, “nation.” And even G-d used that phrase when He responded to Bilam: “Do not curse the nation.”

What’s going on here?

Did Balak not know the name of the nation? Why, 40 years earlier at the Splitting of the Sea, the Torah tells us: “...the mighty ones of Moav were seized with trembling...”! So they knew of the Jews, and trembled from them. The Pharaoh himself said, “Behold, the Nation of the Sons of Israel is great and powerful.” So the name “Israel” was sufficiently known—and certainly the name “Ivri,” or Hebrew, was known. Even when a single lonely lad named Yosef sat in an Egyptian prison, everyone called him “the Ivri,” the Hebrew, meaning that this name was in circulation at the time.

The approach of not mentioning someone or something by name is something that even Jews have incorporated. For example, Jews tend to refer to cancer as “yeneh machlah,” Yiddish for “that disease, or “hamachalah hayaduah,” Hebrew for “the known disease.” Why? Because that disease is so severe that Jews don’t even want to say its name, the same way Holocaust survivors and older Jews will say “the Germans”—they don’t want to repeat the word “Nazi,” and certainly not the name “Hitler.” Why is this? Because these people are so hated to us that we don’t even want their names on our lips.

We even find this approach in the Talmud. The Talmud tells us about one of the great Talmudic scholars of the Second Destruction era, a peer of Rabbi Akiva named Elisha ben Avuya who late in life repudiated his faith and became a heretic. From that point on, the Talmud refers to him as “Acher,” “the other.” Many stories are told of him in the Talmud, but they never mention his name.

Furthermore, the Talmud (Tractate Chagiga 15a) tells us that his disciple Rabbi Meir once said to him, “Reverse yourself!” It’s time to repent. But Acher replied, “I heard from behind the curtain,” meaning that he had heard a Divine voice, saying, “Return, O wayward sons, except for Acher.” So even G-d called him “Acher.”

There is another case in Judaism where a man is not called by name but rather, by the phrase “oto ha-ish” (that man.) In Yiddish, this man is referred to as “Yoshkeh,” but in the ancient Jewish books not even his name is mentioned. Why? Because we don’t want to acknowledge what they turned him into. As far as we are concerned, he does not exist, he is not the Messiah and he is not a prophet. He is merely “that man.”

The story is told of the Previous Rebbe (Rabbi Joseph I. Schneersohn, 1880-1950) that when he sat in Soviet prison during these days over eighty years ago, he only spoke to his captors in Yiddish despite being fluent in Russian. His interrogators were Russian Jews who became Communists and all understood Yiddish. But why not Russian? Because as far as the Rebbe was concerned, they simply did not exist as Communists.

Balak did not want to acknowledge the very existence of this thing called “the Nation of Israel” or “Hebrews.” These words acknowledge that there is a nation with special protection from G-d which makes it different than all other nations. They believe in one G-d and do not worship idols in any form. So it’s much easier and more pleasant to just call them “the nation” and that’s it.

Now, what actually happened? Bilam arrived to place a curse on the Jews and turned out to bless them instead. The finest and best blessings the Jewish People ever received actually came from Bilam’s mouth, and not just once but three times.

Not only that, but each time Bilam blessed them, he referred to them by two names: The lesser-known name “Jacob” and the more popular “Israel.”

In his first prophecy, Bilam says, “Who can number the dust of Yaakov and count the seed of Israel?”—who can count the number of mitzvos and children the Jewish Nation has? The Jews do so many mitzvos that just like it’s impossible to count dust particles, so too is it impossible to count how many mitzvos they do.

And in the second prophecy, Bilam repeats the two names: “G-d does not look at wrongdoing in Jacob, and He sees no vice in Israel”—G-d does not see anything bad in the Jewish Nation. This does not mean that they do nothing wrong but rather, that just like parents overlook their children’s faults because of their great love for them, so too does G-d not see fault in the Children of Israel.

Finally, in Bilam’s third prophecy, we read the famous verse which repeats the two names again: “Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkinosecha Yisrael”—how good are your tents, Jacob, your tabernacles, Israel. With this prophecy, Bilam praises Jewish family life and how the institution of family is the foundation for the continuity of the Jewish people throughout the generations.

The Rebbe teaches us that the saga of Balak is a story that inspires pride and hope in everyone who reads it. It’s a story of a man who wanted revenge and destruction, but gave the greatest blessings to the Jewish Nation instead.

This means that not only did G-d annul Balak’s evil wishes so that he failed to hurt the Jews, but just the opposite—by hiring Bilam he caused the Jews to get the highest blessings.

The lesson to us is: Should someone want to hurt us, not only does G-d protect us from him but even more so—G-d causes the very enemy himself to channel blessings upon the Jewish People.

## A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family  
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה אביר פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.