



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

**BALAK**

## **Two Views of Bilam**

What majesty and eloquence there is in Bilam's words: MA TOVU OHALECHA YAAKOV, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob: your dwelling-places, O Israel" (Bamidbar 24:5).

We take this as the ultimate compliment to the Jewish people. We recite it on entering the synagogue. The composers vie with each other to express it musically. It gives us nachas and inspiration.

The strange fact is that Bilam never meant to utter these words at all. He intended to curse Israel, not to bless them.

Nobody was as surprised as Bilam himself when the curse turned to blessing in his mouth. Balak, king of Moav, who had hired Bilam, was disgusted and angry.

The sages were not of one mind in deciding how to regard Bilam. One view saw him as "Bilam HaRasha", Bilam the Wicked; according to another, "There never arose philosophers amongst the nations like Bilam

and Oenomaus of Gedera".

Both hit upon the secrets of the Jew. Their intentions may have been malevolent, but they saw the truth. Bilam recognised two pillars of Judaism - the tent and dwelling-place, i.e. the home and synagogue. Oenomaus added "the school children chirping with their voices".

We can learn from both when it comes to charting a Jewish destiny. Over and above everything else in a Jewish community, the truly crucial elements are homes, synagogues and schools. If they are strong and effective, nothing can stand in the way of Jewish future. -OZ

**Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH**