



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Always start with a Compliment

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
Emil W. Herman  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Balak

## Always start with a Compliment

Good Shabbos!

According to legend, the President of the United States once decided he wanted to know what the "Chareidi," or "Ultra-Orthodox," religious Jewish community thought of him.

So he had a CIA linguist secretly teach him fluent Yiddish and a disguise technician from the FBI dress him like a Chasid, black clothing, sidelocks, beard and all.

Thus the President snuck out a side door of the White House 5:30 a.m. one fine morning in full Chasidic disguise and made his way to the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, a staunchly Chasidic area.

Before he left, he told exactly one Secret Service agent where he would be in case of emergency. And so now, the President of the United States of America, dressed as a Chasid, walks down Bedford Avenue, blending perfectly in.

Another Chosid is walking towards him, so he wishes him "Gut morgen!" (which needs no translation), and then says, "Ni? Voos tiet zich?" which translates to, "So what's up?"

And the other Chosid says: "Sshh! They say that the President is in Brooklyn!"

Because, as you know, Chasidic Jews know everything.

But this begs a question: How is it that Chasidic Jews know everything? How do they know what's going on in the world around them? As a general rule, they don't watch television, they don't surf the Internet, and some of them don't even listen to the radio! Yet they all somehow stay updated with all the latest news—sometimes even more so than people in the mainstream.

How does this miracle happen? Where do they get their news?

The answer is simple: "Mikvah News."

Chasidim have long had the custom of immersing themselves in the mikvah each morning before prayers for an added layer of spirituality.

The custom of going to the mikvah is one that many Jewish men, especially Chasidim, love. Your typical mikvah today is built like a gym locker room for a dressing area, with a large public shower area, fresh towels, and, of course, a large and often very hot rectangular pool that is about chest deep and not unlike a sauna. It's quite therapeutic on a physical level, not just a spiritual level, and the men tend to enjoy hanging around for a few minutes, especially during the winter when it's cold outside.

But the mikvah is also the closest thing the Orthodox Jewish community will get to a local neighborhood tavern or club. That's because before and after dunking in the mikvah, the guys will sit around on the dressing-room benches and pass on news of all the latest happenings in the world, including things that didn't happen but were supposed to happen.

And, of course, every mikvah has its resident experts. These are people who know everything about anyone and anything, and who will gladly provide expert and in-depth analysis on every single current event to anyone who cares to listen.

Some of them specialize in not knowing what they're talking about, but that's another issue.

Now the custom of men going to the mikvah each morning actually began well before the Chasidim burst onto the scene. It was decreed by Ezra the Scribe over 2,500 years ago—that men must immerse in the Mikvah before coming to study Torah. In actuality, though, the custom did not spread widely throughout the Jewish community. That's because during Ezra's time, there were no hot mikvahs like we have today—so men had to dunk in rivers.

This made things inconvenient, especially during the winter, when men who wanted to go to the mikvah would have to break the ice. And so the guys started getting lazy—as a result of which, they stopped coming to the beis midrash, the study hall, to study Torah.

When the Sages saw that Ezra's rule was causing men to not study the Torah, the rule was turned into a recommendation—we "suggest" that you go to the mikvah. But you don't have to.

But then, thousands of years later, the Chasidim came along during the era of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, and they adopted this recommendation by immersing themselves in the mikvah each day as part of their spiritual preparation for morning prayers. To them, a Jew approaching G-d, the King of all Kings, must purify himself first.

But there are other customs Chasidim have besides getting their daily news updates at the mikvah each morning.

The second custom that Chasidim have before morning prayers is to give charity. This is based on the verse in Psalms that says, "I will behold Your face with justice." This means that before a Jew "beholds Your face," before he approaches G-d in prayer, he gives charity, which in Hebrew is called tzedakah—which actually means "justice," – tzedek.

This is because prayer consists of asking G-d for your needs. But before you ask G-d for your needs, you must help another meet his needs. In other words, it's a give and take: Before you take, you first give. That's why there is the custom of tossing a few coins into the charity box in the synagogue before prayers each weekday morning. Some synagogues have several, or many, tzedakah boxes, and many Jews come to synagogue each morning with a bag full of coins, from which they drop coins into each box.

For the same reason, you'll find many tzedakah collectors at the Kotel, the famous Western Wall. Before you approach the Wall to pray by its side and ask G-d for what you need, you first give to another Jew.

So the next time you go to the Kotel and the collectors bother you, instead of getting upset and angry, the correct thing to do would be to show up with a bag of coins and to give each one at least a little something—and G-d will repay you measure for measure: When you give, G-d will give you in return.

These are all preparations for prayer. And now let's talk about prayer itself.

The first verse with which we open our prayers every day is a verse from this week's Torah portion, Balak: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!" (Bamidbar 24:5).

This means that when a Jew comes to synagogue in the morning, he recites a verse that praises the synagogue, saying how good are the tents of Jacob. (As a matter of fact, some prayer books actually contain a small line of instruction before this verse: "When one arrives at the synagogue, he should say...")

But what about someone who prays at home? Doesn't he also say this verse? What is he referring to?

There was a chazzan, a traditional synagogue cantor, who came by the Rebbe for his blessing before Rosh Hashanah. The chazzan told the Rebbe that he was going to be leading services on Rosh Hashanah morning. So the Rebbe replied, "You do know that the prayers begin with the verse, 'Mah Tov...'?"

And then the Rebbe added something amazing: "We start our prayers with saying something nice about the Jewish people – a compliment on the Jewish Nation."

Rashi explains: "How goodly are your tents, because he [i.e. Bilam] saw that their openings were not facing each other." Thus, Bilam praised the Jewish Nation because their front doors in the desert were not directly opposite each other—everyone lived modestly with their families.

What Bilam was really saying was that the secret of the Jewish Nation's strength was the "family portal"—the fact that every couple was loyal and responsible to itself. The family portal is the most important things to Jews, and we guard it in every possible way.

But what's the concept behind the words, "How goodly..."? The answer, my friends, is this: When you want a favor from a friend, you may wonder, what's the best and surest way to get your friend to really do you the favor that you want?

So here's what you do: When you start to talk to him, the first thing you say is something nice about his kid, like: "Hey, I saw your son yesterday. What a gentleman! He really acts like a mentch!" Or, "My kids told me that your boy is the sharpest kid in the class!"

That kind of comment opens the heart of every parent, no matter who they are. The greatest pride and joy for parents is when they hear a compliment about their kids. Once you do that, you'll get whatever you want from them.

And it's the same thing with G-d: Before we come to ask Him for our needs, we first must put in a good word on a fellow Jew—to speak of a Jew's merits. And then you can be sure that G-d will fulfill your request.

But as is the case with many Jewish customs, there are those who don't agree with this, and they don't include this verse in their prayer books. Instead of saying "MahTovu...", they begin with the verse immediately following it. Why? Because they claim that yes, it's a verse from the Torah—but that verse was spoken by Bilam, a hater of the Jewish people. So why should we start our day with a quote from some heathen? Is it so hard to find something good to say about the Jews that was actually said by a Jew?

But the answer to this comes from the Midrash. In the beginning of the Book of Devarim, Moshe Rabbeinu rebukes the Jewish Nation with harsh words, warning them to go in the Torah's ways. Says the Midrash: "The rebuke was fit to be spoken by Bilam and the blessings by Moshe—but if Bilam had rebuked them, the Jews would say, 'He who hates us is rebuking us!' And if Moshe had blessed them, the nations of the world would have said, 'He who loves them is blessing them!' So G-d said, 'Let Moshe who loves them rebuke them, and let Bilam who hates them bless them.' "

When somebody who doesn't love you criticizes you, you're not prepared to accept it. You will think to yourself, "He can't stand me—that's why he's always criticizing me." On the other hand, if someone who loves you sings your praises, no one will believe him—just like parents will say that their children are the most talented or the smartest.

And that's why the criticism of Moshe Rabbeinu, the man who did everything for the Jewish Nation, was accepted by the Jewish Nation, because they knew that it came from a heart filled with love.

But when it came to praises and compliments, if Moshe had been the one to give them, the world would not believe him. They would say that he wasn't being objective. Of course! He loves them—so of course he's praising them! So that's why G-d chose Bilam, a Jew-hater who came to curse them, to be the one to speak these wonderful blessings and praises of the Jewish Nation.

And that's why we start our morning prayers with praise of our people spoken by Bilam himself—because praise spoken specifically by the mouth of an anti-Semite has far greater credibility than praise spoken by a friend of the Jews.

So the lesson for us, my friends, is that before we begin praying, we need to get ready first. If we really want G-d to listen and fulfill our requests, we must at least do one of the three preparations: Either go to mikvah, or give tzedakah before davening, or, if we are too lazy to go to the mikvah and too stingy to give tzedakah, at least let us put in a good word on our fellow Jews before we pray :)

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