

Parashat Balak 5774, 2014

Understanding Mah Tovu

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!

(*Sefer Bamidbar* 24:5, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Nearly everyone who has entered a synagogue has encountered this *pasuk* (verse). The noted *posek* (halachic decisor), Rabbeinu Yecheil Michal ben Aharon Yitzhak Halevi Epstein (1829-1908), legitimized *mah tovu's* inclusion in the siddur in his work, *Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chaim* 46:17:

The text of *tefilah* (the prayer) to be recited prior to *Baruch She'amar* is printed in the prayer books. When one initially enters the synagogue he should say, *mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov...* ("How goodly are your tents Yaakov...")

Clearly, *mah tovu* has become one of the best-known verses of both our *parasha* and the Torah. How and why did it achieve this singularity? After all, *mah tovu* contains the words of the despicable diviner Balaam, whose two-fold goal was to lead the Jewish people away from Hashem and simultaneously destroy them. This was made manifestly evident in his machinations leading to our people's licentious behavior with the daughters of Moab and the subsequent punishing plague (*Sefer Bamidbar* 25:1-9 and 31:16). As such, it seems counterintuitive that Balaam's statement, regardless of its inspiring and

majestic content, would become one of the most recognized *pasukim* (verses) of the Jewish people.

Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 105b identifies the phrase, “*mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*,” with synagogues and houses of Torah study clarifies why it has achieved its well-known position in the thoughts and minds of our people:

R. Johanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man [Balaam] you may learn his intentions; he wished to curse them so that they [the Jewish people] should possess no synagogues or houses of study, [this is deduced from] “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob.” ... R. Abba b. Kahana said: All of them [the blessings] reverted to a curse, except the synagogues and houses of study, for it is written, “But the L-rd, your G-d, did not want to listen to Balaam, so the L-rd, your G-d, transformed the curse into a blessing for you, because the L-rd, your G-d, loves you” (*Sefer Devarim* 23:6) – the curse, but not the curses [i.e. only “*mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*” was completely fulfilled]. (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my underlining and explanatory emendations to enhance comprehension)

Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-194, son of Rabbeinu Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Yitzhak Halevi Epstein), in his commentary on the Torah, “*Torah Temimah*,” asks and answers a fundamental question on our Talmudic passage:

One of the curses was transformed into a permanent blessing – yet, it is not at all clear how R. Abba b. Kahana would know that it was solely this blessing (*mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*) that was never converted into a curse. Perhaps we can answer this question in the following manner. *Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah* 5a states in general, “Were it not for the Torah’s existence, the heavens and earth would cease to exist.” Therefore, since the continuation of the world is contingent upon the perpetuation of the Torah and its transmission through the synagogues and houses of study, perforce, they can never cease to exist. (Gloss on *Sefer Bamidbar* 24:5, note 9)

The great Chasidic Master, Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum of Lizhensk (1717–March 11, 1787), in his work of Torah analysis and explication, “*Noam Elimelech*,” takes a very different approach as to why *mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov* was the sole *bracha* (blessing) that was never changed into a curse, and the reason for its unique status:

This is the explanation of the verse: “Balaam saw that it pleased the L-rd to bless Israel; so he did not go in search of omens as he had done time and time again, but turned his

face toward the desert” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 24:1) – This means that Balaam fully understood that the Holy One Blessed be He desired to bless the Jewish people [through his prophetic utterances] and not just to nullify his curses alone... Therefore, Balaam decided that he, too, should bless the Jewish people and thus thought positive thoughts concerning them. As a result, the Holy One Blessed be He placed the blessing of mah tovu in his mouth. Consequently, it (i.e. *mah tovu*) alone, of all the blessings, retained its status, as a *bracha*, since it was the only one that did not have an evil intention inherent therein. (Brackets and underlining my own)

I believe that Rav Elimelech is teaching us a profound and powerful lesson. Beyond a doubt, the nefarious Balaam was essentially nothing other than a conduit through which Hashem’s *bracha* flowed. Yet, even he realized the singular nature of our people and our unique relationship with Hashem. As such, in a rare moment of introspective reflection and honesty, Balaam did “ ... what is proper and good in the eyes of the L-rd” (*Sefer Devarim* 6:18) and wholeheartedly delivered his eternal and immutable blessing to our nation. Thank G-d he did so, since the fulfillment of *mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov* is undoubtedly the reason we are here today. With Hashem’s help, may we always have the *zechut* (merit) to pray to Him in our synagogues and study His Torah in our houses of study.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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