

Parashat Balak 5778, 2018:

Why Did We Dwell in Tents?

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains one of the most famous *pasukim* (verses) in the Torah: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 24:5, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Basing himself on *Talmud Bavli*, *Baba Batra* 60a, Rashi (1040-1105) explains in his *Commentary on the Torah* that the phrase, “how goodly are your tents,” is referring to the thoroughgoing modesty of the fledgling Jewish nation: “For he (Bilam) saw that the entrances [of the tents] were not facing each other.” (Brackets my own)

The *Midrash* initially cites the explanation of the Talmud and Rashi, and then offers an additional intriguing interpretation of our *pasuk*:

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob” - In the merit of Jacob having sat in them, as the text states: “And Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 25:27) And because of this, the Jewish people merited to dwell in tents in the desert.” (*Midrash Aggadah*, S. Buber ed., *Sefer Bamidbar*, Parashat Balak 24:5, this and all Midrash translations, my own)

Why does the Midrash stress the merit of Jacob having sat in tents? Clearly, Jacob was not the only person of his day to dwell in tents, for this, after all, was the rule within his historical and cultural context. Both the *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10 and Rashi, therefore, teach us that these were not standard tents, but rather, “the tent of Shem and the tent of Eber.” (Rashi on *Sefer*

Bereishit 25:27) As we know from related Midrashic sources, Shem and Eber had the first “yeshiva” wherein the knowledge of Hashem’s omnipotence, justice and righteousness formed the essence of the curriculum. The Midrash’s thesis, therefore, may now be understood in this manner: Based upon “the merit of Jacob having sat in them [i.e. the tents of Shem and Eber] ... the Jewish people merited to dwell in tents in the desert.” I believe another section of the *Midrash Aggadah* sheds light upon the connection between the two parts of this statement:

Jacob was chosen by the Holy One blessed be He, as the text states: “But you, Israel My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham, who loved Me.” (*Sefer Yesheyahu 41:8*) In addition it is written, “For G-d chose Jacob for Himself, Israel for His treasure.” (*Sefer Tehillim 135:4*) Hashem, [it must be noted,] did not bring him (i.e. Jacob) close to Himself, rather, he brought himself close to the Almighty, as the text states: “And Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.” (*Sefer Vayikra*, Parashat Tzav VIII)

Two complementary ideas emerge from this passage, namely, Hashem chose Jacob and Jacob chose Hashem. Like his grandfather Abraham, Jacob was a seeker who would not rest until he had thoroughly explored and developed his relationship with the Master of the Universe. Little wonder, then, that Jacob is referred to in Rabbinic literature as the *bachir ha’Avot* (the Chosen One of the Patriarchs).

We can now understand why the Jewish people merited to dwell in tents during their 40-year sojourn in the desolate and foreboding wasteland of the Sinai Desert. I believe it is because Jacob, the founder of the Jewish people, whose second name, “Israel,” is the crown of our nation, reached out to the Almighty in order to know Him to the fullest extent that his finite human nature would allow. This is congruent with a celebrated *pasuk* in *Sefer Mishle*: “Know Him in all your ways, and He will direct your paths.” (3:6)

Like *Ya’akov Avinu*, the entire Jewish people are chosen by Hashem: “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation...” (*Sefer Shemot 19:6*) With Hashem’s help, may each of

us, in our own unique way, strive to emulate Jacob and reach out to Hashem, so that we, too, may dwell in the tents of Torah and grow each day in our knowledge and love of the Almighty. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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