

Parashat Balak 5779, 2019:

Mah Tov!

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 Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The most celebrated *pasuk* (verse) of our *parasha* is “*mah tovu:*” “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*) As early as the beginning of the 15th century, its recitation was common practice within the world of Ashkenazi Jewry: “When entering the synagogue in the morning, is there anyone who does not say ‘*mah tovu*’ and a few other verses?” (*Responsa Maharil*, 150:9, Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin, 1365-1427) Closer to our own time, Rabbi Yecheil Michal ben Aharon Yitzhak Halevi Epstein (1829-1908) provides further support for the inclusion of *mah tovu* in the morning service in his classic 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 Ya’akov* — “How goodly are your tents O Jacob...”

How and why did our verse achieve this singular placement? This question is particularly significant, since *mah tovu* contains the words of the sorcerer Bilam, whose goal was to lead the Jewish people away from Hashem, in order to destroy them. Therefore, it seems counterintuitive that Bilam’s statement, regardless of its inspiring content, would become one of the oft-quoted *pasukim* (verses) of the Jewish people. Indeed, the Maharshal (Rabbi Shlomo Luria, 1510-1573)

voiced just such an objection to its recitation: “When I come to synagogue I begin with the verse ‘But as for me, in the abundance of Thy lovingkindness...’ (*Sefer Tehillim* 5:8) and skip the first verse, *mah tovu ohalecha Ya’akov*, because Bilam first uttered it, and he said it as a curse...” (*Responsa Maharshal* 64)

Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 105b, identifies the phrase, “*mah tovu ohalecha Ya’akov*,” with synagogues and houses of Torah study; in so doing, it helps us understand why our *pasuk* has captured the hearts and minds of our people over the substantive objection of the Maharshal:

Rabbi Johanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man [Bilam] 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.”... Rabbi Abba bar 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 Bilam, 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 Ya’akov*” was completely fulfilled as a blessing].” (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my underlining and explanatory emendations)

The explanation of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana sheds light on exactly why *mah tovu* begins our daily morning synagogue experience: It is the one statement of Bilam that began as a curse, but ultimately became a total blessing, and infuses our synagogues and *batei midrash* (houses of study) with *kedushah* (holiness) until our own historical moment. Little wonder, then, that the Maharil declared, “When entering the synagogue in the morning, is there anyone who does not say ‘*mah tovu*’ and a few other verses?”

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra* 60a, offers a very different approach to *mah tovu*: “For he (Bilam) saw that the entrances [of the Jewish people’s tents] were not facing each other.” (With my emendations) On the *peshat* (direct) level, it appears that even

Bilam, the advocate of all manner and variety of salacious behaviors, recognized the *kedushah* that reigned supreme amongst the Jewish people. Their desire to protect their privacy and family modesty was so intense that they even concealed their tent entrances from one another.

The great Chasidic rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman HaLevi Epstein (1751-1823), in his work of Torah analysis, *Maor Va'Shemesh*, analyzes this Talmudic statement in a highly creative and original fashion. He suggests that the phrase, “the entrances [of the Jewish people’s tents] were not facing each other,” hides more than its direct meaning reveals:

We have an overarching rule [regarding the pursuit of authentic Torah-based religiosity]: Each *tzaddik* (righteous individual) must grasp [and develop] their own manner and approach toward *kedushah* and create their own unique opening [to the spiritual wellsprings of holiness] for himself (*u'patach lo petach l'atzmo*), rather than engage in a [mere] “command of the people that has been taught” [that is, someone else’s approach] (See *Sefer Yeshayahu* 29:13, this and the following translations and additions my own).

Rav Epstein further elaborates upon this metaphorical redefinition of the phrase, “the entrances [of the Jewish people’s tents] were not facing each other:”

This means that even though one may have seen their rebbe do something, or their friends perform certain actions and behaviors, and he at first glance thinks this is the manner in which he must proceed — this is certainly not the correct approach. Instead, each person must “open their own opening” [and find their own] gates of *kedushah* for themselves.

At this juncture, Rav Epstein explains that this approach to spirituality will, with the Almighty’s help, enable each person to have the holy *Schechinah* (Divine Presence) rest upon them:

This, then, is the meaning to the phrase, “And he (Bilam) saw that the entrances [of the Jewish people’s tents] were not facing each other:” In other words, no one “looked” to walk upon the path of *kedushah* that their friends had created for themselves. Instead, each person walked solely upon the path they had forged for themselves, and in this way, the spirit of Hashem would rest upon them — that is, the *Schechinah* rested upon them.

Each of us has the capacity to strengthen our relationship with Hashem, so that we, too, may feel His glorious presence in our lives. He is always waiting for us to do so, for as the Torah teaches us, no matter how far from Him we may be, He has promised us: “And from there you will seek the L-rd your G-d, and you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (*Sefer Devarim* 4:29) Beyond a doubt, the spiritual journey is the greatest and most important one of our lives. May each of us reach out to Hashem in our own unique manner so that we, too, can declare *Mah Tov! V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.