

Parashat Balak 5784, 2024:

Of Tents and Torah

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

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

The *Midrash Aggadah* offers an additional intriguing interpretation of our *pasuk*:

“How goodly are your tents, O Ya’akov” In the merit of Ya’akov having sat in them, as the text states: “And Ya’akov 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.” (S. Buber ed., *Sefer Bamidbar*, Parashat Balak 24:5, all Midrash translations, my own)

Why does the Midrash emphasize the *zechut* of Ya’akov having sat in tents? Both *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10 and Rashi maintain that these were not standard tents, but rather “the tent of Shem and the tent of Ever.” (Rashi, *Sefer Bereishit* 25:27) As we know from related midrashic sources, Shem and Ever had the first learning center wherein the knowledge of Hashem’s omnipotence, justice and righteousness formed the backbone of the curriculum. The Midrash may now be understood in this manner: Based upon “the merit of Ya’akov having sat in them [the tents of Shem and Ever] ... the Jewish people merited to dwell in tents in the desert.”

In my view, an additional section of the *Midrash Aggadah* further illuminates the connection between the two parts of this statement:

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

In sum, Hashem chose Ya'akov and Ya'akov chose Hashem. Like his grandfather Avraham, Ya'akov was a seeker who did not rest until he had thoroughly developed his relationship with the Master of the Universe. Little wonder then that *Chazal* named him, "the *Bachir Ha'Avot*"—the Chosen One of the Patriarchs.

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 we strive to emulate Ya'akov, so that we too may dwell in the tents of Torah and grow close to the Almighty.

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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