

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



BALAK

Building Spree

Back in the 60s so many new shuls and temples were being built in America that it was said that we had developed an 'Edifice Complex'. I feel that condition has struck here in Yerushalayim, but they're skyscraper buildings, not places of worship.

Rav Dov Begun, Rosh Yeshiva of Machon Meir, describes our discomfort over all the building going on as part of the IKVEI D'MESHICHEI (footsteps of Mashiach), the birth-pangs of Redemption. He recalls when they were building a new dorm at the Yeshiva, students complained about the noise. Rav Begun told them they were creating a symphony. The building sounds were the drums.

Anyway, it seems like the source of this burning desire to build shuls and yeshivot wherever and whenever we can is most likely connected to this week's Torah reading.

Bilaam, in his blessing spree, gets around to positive comments about the urban planning of our ancestors' encampment in the Midbar. He famously declares: How goodly are thy tents, O Yaakov; and thy

sanctuaries, O Yisrael (Bamidbar 24:5). Anyway that's the way I learned it growing up, but JPS renders it thus: How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel. I don't know, it seems to lack the class of the King James version.

Before we attempt to decipher this famous verse, I want to make a short comment about Bilaam himself. We, and the classic commentaries, are truly ambivalent about this apparent charlatan. I feel most comfortable just describing him as a fraud and a swindler (a 'flim flam man', like Harold Hill from the Music Man, like certain heads of state).

However, there is a large school of thought that believes that he truly was a prophet, perhaps approaching the status of Moshe Rabbeinu. It seems that the more mystical the source the more powerful his prophetic powers appear to be. To me, his venality (Blessings for Cash) seems to disqualify him from the ranks of God's appointed.

Personally, I would suggest that he was very smart with great powers of observation, which endowed him with the ability to make very astute observations about reality that to others seemed miraculous. I think it's similar to certain modern performers who seem to 'know' so much about people in their audience, but really they just notice things the rest of us miss.

Anyway, we are enamored of his declaration about the outstanding qualities of the Jewish settlement. Rashi follows the Midrash and describes how the Jews staggered the tent openings, for modesty purposes, so that no one could inadvertently glance into someone else's tent.

Rav Hirsch beautifully expanded upon this literal meaning of the blessing: How good are your 'houses', how aligned are they with morality and the well-being of the nation, whether as the tents during journeys, or as the permanent dwellings of Israel. The homes of Israel's families are 'as valleys', 'as gardens': like streams of water that bring blessing, and like gardens that are blessed. Each home and family branch passes down the blessings of material success and spiritual and moral goodness to the next generation, like a stream. At the same time, each one is itself a 'garden of man', blessed with material, intellectual, and moral abundance.

But over the great expanse of Jewish History, we stopped focusing on what Bilaam was actually marveling at. He was inspired by Jewish homes; we morphed those tents and dwelling places into religious institutions.

Here's the Likutei Maharan's (the collection of customs of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov) take: The idea behind 'How goodly are Your tents...'

is said about the Mishkan, the Beit HaMikdash, synagogues and study halls of Yisrael. These latter buildings are called BEIT MIKDASH M'AT ('a small Mikdash', from Yechezkel 11:16 as interpreted Megila 29a). The next verse says 'like gardens planted beside the stream'. This means that the verse hints that prayer and Torah study are like an ever flowing river and a fountain which grows ever stronger.

Ya'akov was the 'innocent man who dwelled in tents' (B'reishit 25:27). The Rebbe says that Bilaam was referring to those very tents in which Torah and prayer flourish. Bilaam saw the ever growing strength from these humble places of prayer and study.

The Chozeh MiLublin added that the terms 'tents' and 'dwellings' are discussing the protection which must be afforded to the scholars and institutions which spread Torah. We must spread our cloak of safety just as structures provide protection.

So popular is the connection between our verse and synagogues that (according to Open AI, which warned that there are no official statistics on synagogues world wide) there are around 500 synagogues with the word OHEL in their name (over half of them in Israel). Furthermore, another 150 or so Jewish places of worship contain the word Mishkan in their name (also, more than half in Israel).

Again, I must emphasize that P'SHAT in the verse is a marvelous idea concerning the nurturing nature of Jewish homes. However, over time our tradition has focused on the Midrashic approach that Bilaam's prophecy was so amazing that he foresaw a time (about 1500 years after his time) when we would have synagogues and study halls abounding.

It's true! Batei Knesset and Batei Medrash are critical to the spiritual survival of our people. Equally true is the necessity of our support for these institutions for them to flourish and do their work. It's so melancholy to witness abandoned shuls.

Like many great blessings, they work when we work hard throughout the generations to make them come true. This one from Bilaam is no exception. Support Shuls and places of Torah study by actually frequenting them. That keeps them vibrant and alive! 🙏