

Of Tents and Dwellings

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“How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel”

This verse included in Bilam’s third blessing pertains to some of the cornerstones of Jewish life.

What are the tents and dwellings mentioned in this verse? Several opinions can be found amongst the classic commentaries. Rashi in his first elucidation speaks of tents in a literal sense, the tents that serve as their homes in the desert. A different explanation suggests that tents and dwellings pertain to the Mishkan and Beit Hamikdash. Rabbi Ovadya Sefornu identifies the “tents” as Batei Midrash, study halls, and “dwellings” as Batei Kneset, Synagogues. The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin), suggests: “How fair are your tents... Two tents of the mass of Jacob”. Namely the tent of women and the tent of men. His understanding is that the verse is not speaking of physical structures but of the internal essence of the Jewish people.

Were this a mere mortal’s blessing we would be forced to choose a particular understanding. However, since this is the “Word of one who hears God’s speech”, a prophesy from God - it can be understood on multiple levels. Furthermore, the different elucidations can be seen as complementing and serving each other.

The tent is man’s home. In his home man can express his deepest and most intimate feelings. It is the place where he feels a sense of belonging and personal security. The Beit Midrash, in contrast, is a place intended for growth intellectually and spiritually. In the Beit Midrash man meets others and their interaction focusses and sharpens his perspectives. The Beit Hamikdash (or Beit Kneset) is the place of God’s dwelling, where man meets his creator.

In this prophetic blessing the different understandings of tent and dwelling interact with each other. “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel”, the verse is stated in the plural, tents and dwellings, home, Man, Beit Midrash and Beit Mikdash all interrelate. The man who develops a sense of security and comfort in his home can bring that comfort and security into the Beit Midrash for a more meaningful learning experience. In turn his development in the Beit Midrash accompanies him back home to create a richer more significant home and family life.

So too with the Beit Midrash/Kneset. Without the previous development of home and Beit Midrash man would enter the Mikdash and the encounter of God as a shadow of himself. By building a self-image at home and a spiritual personality in the Beit Midrash man faces God in a more significant and meaningful manner. The powerful impact of the encounter accompanies him back to his home and Beit Midrash and enhances his further development in all aspects of life.

Amongst the different elucidations Rabeinu Bachye’s stands out.

“How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel. By way of the simple understanding, he (Bilam) prophesized on the dwelling of Israelites in the land of Israel.”

The land of Israel is included in the terms tent and dwelling. The land of Israel has significance in deepening and reenforcing the other “houses”. The home of a Jew living in the diaspora is different than that of the Jew in Israel. The spirit of learning in the Beit Midrash in each place is different. Certainly, the encounter with God in His home, Beit

Mikdash/ Kneset is not comparable. Halachic sources differentiate between a Mikdash Meiat, Minor Mikdash – Beit Kneset built in Israel and that built in the diaspora. They differ both in their permanents and sanctity.

While to the Israeli Jew the connection of Eretz Yisrael and all forms of Bayit, house, is natural, it is less so to the diaspora Jew. It is this spirit and perception that the shlichim of Torah Mitzion bring with them to communities throughout the world.

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