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**Making the Grade**

We recently had the pleasure of receiving our five-year old son's year-end report card from school. Apparently, number grades are antiquated and even letter grades are old hat. To the contrary, each category - whether it be "I am respectful of others" or "I can hold a pencil/scissor correctly;" classroom participation, self-control and (my personal favorite) "I demonstrate appropriate attention span" (how many adults can boast of that accomplishment) - is associated with one of three "evaluations:"

- M = Most of the time
- S = Some of the time
- W = Working on it

I found this "grade scheme" a telling insight into the way one's progress can be gauged when assessed from the vantage point of love, encouragement and confidence-building as opposed to one of critique that frequently masquerades as "constructive" and yet so often leaves only bruised egos and crushed spirits in

its wake. Even those students who walked away with a report card of "straight W's" can remain in an optimistic state of mind knowing that he, too, is in the positive trajectory of "working on it." (Apparently they don't give out R as in Resigned to mediocrity).

I recently had the opportunity to hear some insights in the field of child development when an expert raised the following notion that, at the end of the day, one of the most valuable things that a parent can instill in a child is the deep-seated notion that Mommy and Daddy are deeply committed to your success, and believe in your capacity to achieve true progress (even when the child may not maintain confidence in him or herself). When parents don't throw in the towel but rather rise to the occasion with optimism and positivity that can produce tremendous trickle-down benefits for the child.

Apparently, this difficult-to-quantify X-factor looms large in a child's capacity to endure difficulties and ultimately persevere notwithstanding formidable obstacles to happiness that beckon for longer, sustained triumphs rather than the instant success (and gratification) with which our generation (and its youth) have become so smitten.

"God displayed anger because Balaam was so anxious to go and an angel of Hashem stood on the road to impede him..." (Num. 22:22)

Rashi: "He was an angel of rachamim (mercy) and he wanted to prevent Balaam from sinning so that he should not sin and perish."

This week it finally dawned on me that the "angel of mercy" was impeding Balaam's progress not for the purposes of saving Jewish lives from Balaam's diabolical scheme, but rather to discourage Balaam himself from falling into the abyss of such depraved conduct. God, in his boundless love and concern for every single one of his creatures (even those who have already exhibited behavior that is a far, far cry from righteousness), routinely demonstrates a patience, steadfast desire for each of us to ultimately succeed.

We all have flaws - true, they are not quite as abominable as Balaam's cold-hearted scheme to eradicate the Jewish Nation en masse - but flaws nevertheless. This being the case, Rabbi Braun

is wont to say, "It's not a imperfection to have a imperfection; but it is a imperfection not to do anything about it."

So whether it's a character flaw such as jealousy, greed, self-centeredness or flat-out pleasure-seeking. Or whether it's a shortcoming in one's spiritual work that manifests itself in inconsistent observance, uninspired davening or unjustified ignorance. Whether we rightfully belong to the "Most of the Time," "Some of the Time" or "Working on it" camp of Jewish growth, we can take a solace and a dose of inspiration that our Merciful Father is waiting for us, is hoping for us, is rooting for our success and is deeply whetted to our progress.

Indeed, the very first words that leave our lips in the morning, Jews proclaim that God's decision to allot us another day on the planet reflects his "abundant Faithfulness" in our capacity to live up to our responsibilities (despite our track record to the contrary). For God, too, seemingly allows for a mark of "Working on It."



## Wake-Up Calls: Are You Ready to Listen?

Time and again in this parashah we encounter the infinite compassion and loving-kindness of Hashem, who never gives up on anyone. Balak, the king of Moab, consumed by hatred of the Jewish people, is very much aware that the secret power of the Jews lies in their prayers, in their devotion to God. To counteract this energy, he appoints a delegation to invite Bilaam, the heathen prophet, to curse the Jews. Bilaam sanctimoniously answers that he would have to ask God for permission, which, at first glance, appears to be a righteous response, but which in fact, is an indictment of his character, for how could a decent

human being even consider undertaking such an evil deed? What sane man would ask God for permission to do evil?

Just the same, God, in His boundless mercy, does not punish Bilaam, but sends him his first wake-up call. In a dream, God speaks to him and asks a simple question: "Who are these men with you?"[1]

This question is difficult to understand, for surely God knows who these people are; but throughout the Torah, we find that God sends His wake-up calls by prodding man with similar gentle questions. For example, when Adam and Eve sin, God asks, "Ayekah? - Where are you?"[2] When Cain kills his brother, Abel, God asks, "Where is Abel, your brother?"[3]

These questions are meant to challenge man, to make him realize how low he has sunk, and to motivate him into taking control of his life before it is too late and he perishes. What God is really asking Bilaam is to consider what has happened to him. "Who are these people with you? How do you come to associate yourself with such evil? How low can you sink?"

### WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

Bilaam just doesn't get it! He is so full of his own self-importance that he never hears the deeper question of God. Again and again God sends messages to Bilaam to prevent him from following this disastrous course. Sadly, however, when a man is bent upon evil, God's warnings fall upon deaf ears. Man has this uncanny ability to rationalize, to twist and turn reality to suit his desires. As obvious and as pointed as God's messages may be, they are all to no avail if a person chooses to disregard them. So it is that, despite God's warnings, Bilaam sets out on his journey. Still, God doesn't give up on him and places obstructions in his path. Perhaps as a result of these hardships, Bilaam will re-think his malevolent plan and come to realize the catastrophic consequences of his undertaking. But Bilaam continues on his blind course, and when he encounters new difficulties, he blames outside forces and strikes the donkey he is riding, believing that the donkey is at fault.

At this point God performs an open miracle that cannot possibly be taken for coincidence. The donkey actually opens its mouth and speaks, an occurrence that would shock any normal person! "What have I done to you that you struck me these three

times?" the donkey asks.[4] But Bilaam remains obstinate and continues to ignore God's call.

There are several lessons that we can learn from all this. The most important message that we should absorb is how disastrously self-destructive human nature can be. This realization should give us all pause. How sensitive are we to God's wake-up calls? When difficulties befall us, do we search for scapegoats? Like Bilaam, do we blame the "donkeys" in our lives? Do we hold others responsible for our failings and difficulties, or do we have the courage to examine our own hearts and determine where and how we strayed? These are painful questions, but if we are to lead meaningful, purposeful lives, we must answer them candidly.

### **NEVER GIVE UP ON ANYONE**

An additional lesson to be gleaned from this story is that we should try to emulate the ways of Hashem and never give up on those who are bent upon a disastrous course. Despite everything, Hashem continues to appeal to Bilaam to change his ways. Similarly, we too must try to persuade people whom we see embarking upon a ruinous path to come to their senses before it is too late. We are never to give up on anyone.

### **WE CHOOSE THE PATH**

In a dream, God tells Bilaam not to go with those who want him to curse the Jewish people, but when a second delegation arrives, God gives His permission. A superficial reading of this text would suggest that God is sending contradictory messages.

At first glance, this appears rather paradoxical. Does God change His mind? Of course we realize that changing one's mind is a human trait, so how are we to understand this passage? There is a Talmudic teaching that "the path that a man chooses to follow is the path on which he is led." [5] God grants us free will: There is life, there is death; there is blessing, there is curse; there is good, there is evil. It is for us to choose the good, but God cannot force us to do so without depriving us of our free will and rendering us robots. If we will it, there are no external forces that can prevent us from choosing the right path. If we will it, there is nothing to inhibit us from becoming better and kinder people. It's all in our hands, and we can't blame fate or the stars for our actions. We are all responsible!

God warns Bilaam not to go with Balak's emissaries, but when he insists on doing so, God gives him permission to accompany them, but at the same time, Bilaam is warned not to join them in their evil scheme. This warning is evidenced in the use of the Hebrew word, itam - with. In the Hebrew language, there are no redundancies; thus, the two words for "with" have different connotations. Imahem, derived from the word "am - nation," implies a common ideology, while "itam" is more objective, implying being physically in the same place as others (i.e., on a plane or a train with many passengers) but having no common purpose with them.

In Bilaam's first dream, God warns him not to go "imahem" [6] - "Do not be one in purpose with them." In the second dream, when Bilaam persists in his desire to go, God gives His consent with the word "itam," meaning that if Bilaam was determined to go, he could physically accompany them, but he could not join forces with them. [7] But once again, despite God's clear warning, Bilaam refuses to listen and he goes "im," joining them in heart and mind. [8] Later, when he was already on the way, God warned him again that he could go only to pronounce what he would be commanded to say. [9]

The sad lesson that we learn from this incident is that even when God gives us a specific warning, even when His messages are crystal clear and cannot possibly be misinterpreted, even then, man can pervert and twist God's command.

But the sad lesson does not end there. There is a kabbalistic teaching that Bilaam was a gilgul of Laban, the treacherous father of Rachel and Leah. Like Bilaam, Laban was bent upon destroying the Jewish people. He too was warned by God in a dream to stay away from Jacob and refrain from speaking either good or bad to him - informing us that even his apparent good was bad. However, just as Laban refused to heed God's warning, Bilaam repeated the same evil. Generations may pass, conditions may change, but man's perverse nature remains the same. How very sad!

### **THE SECRET POWER OF THE JEW**

Bilaam was bent upon cursing the nation, but God placed a blessing on his lips. When Bilaam beheld the beautiful, modest family life of the Jewish people, despite himself he proclaimed the timeless prayer that has become the identifying characteristic of our people throughout the centuries: "Ma tovu

ohalecha Yaakov ... - How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." [10] This is the first prayer that we pronounce upon entering the synagogue, and it is the prayer that some people chant under the chuppah as a new Jewish home is created.

What is the significance of this blessing? What exactly did Bilaam see? Indeed, there are many dimensions to this prayer. Bilaam was awed by the sanctity and modesty of Jewish family life, as evidenced by the manner in which the tents of the Jewish people were placed. To assure the total privacy of each family, the doors of the tents were set up so that no one had a view of the other.

The "tents" and the "dwelling places" are also references to the synagogues and the study halls. It is this threefold bastion of strength that guarantees the Jewish people's invincibility and eternity:

The modesty and sanctity of Jewish family life.  
The nation's devotion to prayer and the service of God.  
The people's commitment to Torah study.

These three pillars guarantee our Jewish survival, but if they are compromised, then the very life of our nation is at risk. Bilaam intended to invoke a curse on our Jewish people by declaring that our study halls and synagogues be empty and that our homes and family lives be infiltrated by foreign influences. But despite himself, he had to declare praise, for God granted him vision, and he saw that for all of eternity there would be Jewish people who would cling tenaciously to these three foundations upon which Jewish life is built.

Indeed, no matter to what corners of the earth destiny may have propelled us, no matter how much suffering, pain, and persecution we may have experienced, no matter how the ravages of assimilation may have eaten away at us, there have always been and shall always be committed Jews who are prepared to sacrifice and adhere to this threefold formula: the sanctity of the Jewish family, devotion to prayer and the service of God, and our study of Torah.

Indeed, "how goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel."

## NOTES

1. Numbers 22:9.
2. Genesis 3:9.
3. Ibid. 4:9.
4. Numbers 22:28.
5. Makkos 10b.
6. Numbers 22:12.
7. Ibid. 22:20.
8. Ibid. 22:21.
9. Ibid. 22:35.
10. Ibid. 24:5.



## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The most popular electronic weekly in the Jewish world with over 300,000 readers.

**Rabbi Kalman Packouz**  
Aish HaTorah

The story is told of Napoleon walking through the streets of Paris one Tisha B'av (the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, a day of fasting and mourning for the destruction of the two Temples). As his entourage passed a synagogue he heard wailing and crying coming from within; he sent an aide to inquire as to what had happened. The aide returned and told Napoleon that the Jews were in mourning over the loss of their Temple. Napoleon was indignant! "Why wasn't I informed? When did this happen? Which Temple?" The aide responded, "They lost their Temple in Jerusalem on this date 1700 years ago." Napoleon stood in silence and then said, "Certainly a people which has mourned the loss of their Temple for so long will survive to see it rebuilt!"

If we know our history and understand it, then we can put our life in perspective. We can understand ourselves, our people, our goals, our values. We will know the direction of our lives, what we want to accomplish with our lives and what we are willing to bear in order to fulfill our destiny. Friedrich Nietzsche put it well, "If you have a 'why' to live for, you can bear with any 'how'."

We are now entering the Three Weeks, the time between the 17th of Tamuz (observed Sunday, July 21st) and the 9th of Av (starting Saturday day night, August 10th). This is a period when many tragedies happened to the Jewish people. Why do we mourn the loss of the Temple after so many years? What did and does it mean to us?

The Temple was a central focal point of the Jewish people. Three times a year -- Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot -- the Jews living in the Land of Israel came to worship and celebrate at the Temple. It offered us the ultimate opportunity to come close to the Almighty, to elevate ourselves spiritually. It represented the purpose of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel -- to be a holy people united with the Almighty in our own land ... a Jewish state. That is what we seek to regain and that is why we mourn and remember the loss of what we once had.

What can one read to gain knowledge, get perspective, to understand who the Jewish people are and what we are about? Certainly, reading the Five Books of Moses is the place to start. I recommend the Artscroll Stone Edition. Nineteen Letters by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch will give a tremendous understanding of the Jewish purpose. Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism and Why the Jews -- The Reason for Anti-Semitism by Praeger and Telushkin address central issues of the Jewish people. And then there is Judaism in a Nutshell: God by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf for people who are long on curiosity, but short on time. For a fascinating read, Non-Orthodox Jew's Guide to Orthodox Jews -- why we do what we do, wear what we wear and think what we think by David Baum.

In Jewish cosmology, the Three Weeks are considered to be such an inauspicious time period that one is not allowed to get married. From the 1st of Av (August 2), one is even advised to push off court cases until after the 10th of Av (August 11th). We refrain from hair-cutting, purchasing or wearing new clothing, listening to music and pleasure trips. It is a time for self-reflection and improvement.

On the 17th of Tamuz, five calamitous events occurred in our history: 1) Moshe broke the first Tablets of the Ten Commandments when he descended from Mt. Sinai and saw the worshipping of the Golden Calf, 2) the Daily Sacrificial Offerings ceased in the First Temple due to lack of sheep, 3) the walls of Jerusalem were breached during the siege of the Second

Temple, 4) Apustumus-the-Wicked burned a Sefer Torah, and 5) an idol was placed in the Sanctuary of the Second Temple.

The 17th of Tamuz is a fast day. The fast begins approximately an hour before sunrise and continuing until about an hour after sunset. The purpose of the fast is to awaken our hearts to repentance through recalling our forefathers' misdeeds which led to tragedies and our repetition of those mistakes. The fasting is a preparation for repentance -- to break the body's dominance over a person's spiritual side. One should engage in self-examination and undertake to correct mistakes in his relationship with God, his fellow man and with himself.

It is interesting to note that Saddam Hussein was a student of Jewish history. He named the nuclear reactor (from which he planned to create a bomb to drop on Israel) -- you guessed it, Tamuz 17! (Want the source? Two Minutes Over Baghdad by Amos Perlmutter). I also highly recommend [aish.com/holidays](http://aish.com/holidays). There are many excellent articles and insights on our website.

**Torah Portion: Balak**

This week's portion is one of the most fascinating psychologically-revealing portions in the whole Torah! Bilaam, a non-Jewish prophet, was granted a level of prophecy close to Moshe's level of prophecy. The Almighty gave Bilaam these powers so that the nations of the world could not say at some point in the future, "If we had a prophet like Moshe, we too would have accepted the Torah and would have lived according to it." Bilaam is an intriguing character -- honor-driven, arrogant and self-serving. Unfortunately, not too unique amongst mankind.

Balak, the king of Moav, wanted to hire Bilaam to curse the Jewish people for a fortune of money. It is interesting that Balak believed in God and the power of invoking a curse from God, yet thought that God would change His mind about His Chosen People. (God is not a man who changes his mind). Bilaam was very desirous to accept the assignment to curse the Jews -- more for the profit motive than the prophet motive.

The Almighty allowed Bilaam to go to Balak (cautioning him to only say what God told him). The Almighty gives every person free-will and allows us to go in the direction that we choose.

Three times Bilaam tried to curse us and three times the Almighty placed blessings in his mouth. Balak was furious! So, Bilaam gave him advice with hopes of collecting his fee -- "If you want to destroy the Jewish people, entice the men with Moabite women and tell the women not to submit until the men bow down to an idol." Balak followed the advice and consequently the Almighty brought a plague against the Jewish people because the men fell for Bilaam's plot. We see from this that the Almighty hates licentiousness and idol worship.

**Dvar Torah**  
based on **Growth Through Torah** by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin

The Torah states:

"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his" (Numbers 23:10).

What did Bilaam mean when he said this?

We see from this statement of Bilaam that he realized the truth that one should lead a righteous life. Why then did he himself not live righteously and only wished that he could die and be rewarded as the righteous?

Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm explained that although Bilaam had an intellectual awareness of the proper way to live, in his own life he found this too difficult. Because he had faulty character traits, he was not able to live according to the ideas and principles he knew were true. (Chochma Umussar, vol. 1, p. 78)

We see from here the importance of correcting one's character traits. Without an awareness of what is proper and what is improper one cannot live righteously. However, even after one has studied and knows what is good and what is evil, he must be able to follow through in his daily behavior. A person needs to be in control of his impulses. Having this mastery over one's natural tendencies will enable a person to live according to his ideals. Lacking this, one will do all kinds of improper actions.

The problem is not one of knowledge, but of self-discipline. For this reason we must work on improving our character traits for only then will we be able to act righteous. The only way to die

as a righteous person is to live as one, and to do this takes much self-discipline.

**QUOTE OF THE WEEK:**

It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice.



**The Family Parsha**  
By Nesanel Yoel Safran  
Lessons, stories and discussion questions for parents and kids

**Different Beings**

There's nothing wrong with being different from the crowd. In this week's Torah portion (23:9), the Jewish people are told that their values and world role are often going to set them apart from the crowd. We can learn from here to accept people who seem 'different' (even if that person is us).

In our story, some kids discover that it's possible to see being different in a different light.

**THE RIGHT FIELD**

"Mason, you'll take right-field, okay? But pay attention!" barked Jim, the captain of the junior-division camp softball team, at the skinny boy.

Mason shrugged and slowly ambled to the outfield. He knew they always stuck him in right field because it was the place the other team was least likely to hit the ball. But Mason didn't mind. He was only even playing in this softball game because he had to - it was a mandatory camp activity.

Unlike the rest of the guys in his bunk, who seemed to love all competitive sports, Mason found these kinds of games to be

pointless and boring. He liked things like arts and crafts, canoeing (as long as they didn't make him race) and most of all, just exploring and enjoying the beauty of nature.

Of course it could cause him problems - like during last week's softball game, when he was so busy checking out all the interesting looking plants and insects by the edge of the right-field fence that he hadn't even noticed that someone had hit a ball his way. Since then had been really teasing him for being so different; calling him 'weird' and 'space case.'

Though it hurt his feelings, there wasn't much Mason could do about it. It wasn't like he wanted to be different. He just was different. Well at least tomorrow's all-day hike would take off some of the pressure. After all, there was nothing competitive about walking through the woods...

AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT MASON THOUGHT...

"Okay, guys! Whoever gets to the top of the next hill first is the man! Let's gooooo!" Jim yelled out and began to charge, with the rest of the guys racing behind ... except for one.

"Ughh!" Mason groaned. "Why does that kid have to turn everything into some sort of war-game?"

When he finally got to the top of the hill, which had a beautiful view, Mason found that the guys had all spread out and were eating their boxed lunches, and the counselor was lying down on the grass, passing out.

He grabbed his lunch and started to relax, taking in the amazing scenery. It was so nice and calm up here and even Jim wouldn't be nuts enough to jump up and declare a lunch-eating race! Mason took a bite out of his sandwich, when a voice boomed out:

"Boys, we've got a big surprise for you!" the counselor suddenly stood up and smiled. "To help make this hike more 'interesting', before you got here, I hid nine silver tickets - and one gold one..."

All the kids started perking up, as he went on. "Whoever finds a silver ticket, gets a free double-dip ice-cream cone from the camp canteen. And whoever finds the gold one..." he paused... "gets a free ice-cream every night of the WHOLE SUMMER!"

Immediately the calm forest clearing turned into a beehive of activity as the guys all jumped up from their half eaten lunches and started to turn the place upside-down - lifting rocks, climbing trees, combing through the grass - in fierce competition to find the coupons.

Here we go again. Mason sighed and walked over to the edge of the clearing. Just when I was starting to have a good time - and now this!

Trying to stay clear of the frenetic activity around him, Mason leaned over to get a better look at some beautiful orange tiger-lily flowers. He had just brought one to his nose to smell, when he heard a voice behind him:

"Hey, weirdo, haven't you got something better to do with your life than waste it smelling flowers?" It was Jim. "Get a life, man..."

Mason wished the kid would just leave him alone. He was just being who he was. As he was trying to ignore the boy's stinging comments Mason noticed something shiny at the base of the flower he'd been smelling.

"Unless you wake up and start being like everyone else," Jim said, "you're gonna spend you whole life as a loser!"

Mason turned around and said, "Or maybe you mean ... a winner." He smiled, waving the shiny, gold grand-prize coupon he'd just found in front of the boy's shocked eyes.

### Discussion Questions

#### Ages 3-5

Q. How did Mason feel about the types of games the other kids liked to play?

A. He didn't like them and enjoyed doing different things.

Q. Is it bad not to be like everyone else?

A. No. A person should try to be happy with the way God made him.

#### Ages 6-9

Q. What life-lesson do you think someone could learn from this story?

A. Everyone is unique. Some people, though, tend to stand out as 'different' from the people around them. We should know that whoever we are, we are that way because that's how God made us and that's fine.

Q. Does that mean a person should never try to change?

A. If there are things about us that are destructive to ourselves or others, or that go against our true values, we should try to change and improve. But besides from this we should accept ourselves and try to make the most of who we are.

### Ages 10 and Up

Q. Is it a value to go along with the crowd? Is it a value not to?

A. It depends on what the 'crowd' is doing. If they are doing something positive - why not go along? If they are doing something negative - stand apart. And if it's neither, then we can do what feels right.

Q. What do you think the Torah means when it says the Jewish people are to "dwell alone"?

A. Like every people, the Jewish People has its special role in the world. Our role is to live an especially ethical and spiritual life according to the values of the Torah, and serve as an example to help the rest of the world move closer to peace and spirituality. There are times that this role will make it necessary to stay apart from certain activities that run counter to it -thus 'dwelling' alone.



## The Most Important Institution for Jewish Life

What are the key institutions of Jewish life? What are the structures that not only maintain Jewish life, but nurture it and

enable it to thrive? The answer lies in the words that God placed in the mouth of Bilam in this week's Torah portion. The Torah relates how Bilam is hired by the king of Moab to curse the Jewish people, and how that curse is transformed into words of blessing: "How good are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel," says the parsha. "Stretching out like brooks, like gardens by a river." (Numbers 24:5-6).

Clearly the "tents" and "dwelling places" of the Jewish people are fertile, life-giving places. They are compared to gardens and rivers and brooks. But what are they exactly? The Talmud explains that these "tents" and "dwelling places" refer variously to the three great institutions of Jewish life: the home, the shul and the Beit Midrash or "house of learning" (Bava Batra 60a, Sanhedrin 105b).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch focuses on the Jewish home. Citing this verse, he says that whether in humble tents or stately mansions, whether in turbulent exile or peaceful existence in Israel, it is the Jewish home that is the source of the vitality of the Jewish people. When the verse states "How good are your tents Jacob", the essential quality we are talking about is goodness. It is not about the externalities of the house, but the tranquil atmosphere and strong values of the home. These values are the life force of the Jewish people, and it is in the home that they are shaped and reinforced and transmitted from one generation to the next.

What our children are exposed to within our homes as they grow up is what they will regard to be normal and natural. If our homes are suffused with acts of kindness, and words of encouragement; with the beauty of Shabbat and the festivals and of living a Jewish life; with the values of love and compassion, gratitude and simple decency; with the celebration of wisdom and study, faith and spirituality - then our children will grow up to value these things as well. If, on the other hand, these values are absent from our homes, they will be absent from our children's worldview. The choice is ours to mould the homes we want.

The Sforno follows the other approach in the Talmud: that the "tents" refer to the Beit Midrash - the house of learning, and the "dwelling places" refer to the shul - the house of prayer. Both are places of spiritual inspiration through which we come close to G-d, the one through learning Torah the other through praying, both of which are cited by Pirkei Avot (1:2) as among



the three spiritual pillars holding up the world. And both are a source of eternal blessing that have seen the Jewish people through the most turbulent and prosperous periods of our history and sustained us as a people and allowed us to thrive.

Prayer forms the basis of our emotional and spiritual connection to God, and the shul is the space in which we nurture that relationship. There is an interesting paradox when it comes to Jewish prayer. While undoubtedly an intensely personal experience, the concept of a minyan - of a community coming together to pray - is central to Jewish prayer. That is why a shul is called a beit kneset, a "place of gathering". When we enter the shul to pray as a community, rather than just getting by on our own, we approach God with the collective merit of being part of Am Yisrael - the Jewish people. And it goes further. When we pray in a minyan, we connect ourselves not just to the people around us, and to other Jews around the world, but to generations of Jews throughout the ages.

When it comes to the Beit Midrash - the tents of Jacob - the verse's comparison to rivers of water has added significance. The Talmud (Berachot 16a) says that the verse is teaching us about the purifying waters of the Beit Midrash. In the same way a river, which in certain circumstances can perform the function a mikveh, transforms a person from impurity to purity, so too does Torah learning have a transformative effect, uplifting our soul, purifying our heart, clarifying our mind. The transformational, life-giving nature of Torah learning has been borne out by Jewish history; communities connected to the institution of the Beit Midrash - and to Torah learning in general - are communities that survive and thrive, and transmit the values and traditions of Judaism from one generation to the next.

Pirkei Avot (6:1) states that a person who learns Torah for its own sake "becomes like an ever-increasing spring of water, and like a river that does not cease." Rav Chaim of Volozhin says that the analogy is to a spring which pumps fresh, life-giving water and is able to clear away mud and dirt. In a similar way, the power of learning Torah clears away the debris of our lives, giving us a pristine space in which to connect with G-d and allowing us see the world through His eyes.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook offers a different perspective on the analogy with water, and its purifying effect. He says that water is a stark reminder of the temporary nature of this world.

Though we do venture into the water on occasion, human beings are creatures of the land. We can't survive in water for any length of time. Water is not our natural habitat, and not somewhere where we can relax and feel comfortable, and when we do find ourselves in water, it takes effort to stay afloat. And just like a human being was created to spend only a limited period of time in water, so too we were created to spend only a limited time on this physical plane. Our true, essential existence lies beyond this world. He further points out that the tents mentioned in the verse are another allusion to the temporary nature of this world.

Rav Kook says that the key to achieving greatness in this world is to recognise its transitory nature; to be constantly aware that our stay here is limited, and that the purpose of our life is simply to do as many mitzvot as possible, avoid bad, and in so doing to build that true, essential existence for ourselves in the next world. If we see ourselves as merely passing through this world that will alter our whole perspective. From that we will understand what the ultimate purpose of life is, which is to accumulate mitzvot and good deeds in this world in this world of free choice and challenge and to take it back with us to the eternal world - to olam habah. When people see this world as a permanent world, and as an end in and of itself, then it causes us to make our priorities the accumulation of the goods of this world rather than those of the next world; it causes us to pursue only the physical and material opportunities of this world and to ignore the spiritual and the moral ones. When we understand that we are just passing through and that our ultimate destination is the next world which is permanent, we then focus on the things of permanent and lasting value from the perspective of the world of eternity, and those things are God's mitzvot.

When we understand that we are just passing through, and that our ultimate destination is the next world, we are able to focus on the pursuits that bring permanent, enduring value, the pursuits laid out in the Torah, which is the framework for building eternal life within a temporary frame of existence.

Learning Torah is the most potent reminder of what is lasting and what is temporary. When we sit down to learn in the Beit Mrash, we enter a portal in which we see the world through the eyes of G-d. Through learning Torah, we define and clarify our true purpose in life, what our priorities should be, what we are here to do.

The home, the shul, the house of learning. The three keystones of Jewish existence. Rich and fertile, the source of our inspiration, the basis of our identity. They flow with life-giving, purifying waters, helping us reach the heights we are all capable of, the greatness that God expects of us.

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