

THE GOOD TENTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." [24:5]

As we know, Bilaam wanted to curse Israel, but G-d prevented him from doing so -- by putting blessings into his mouth instead. In the Talmud [Sanhedrin 105b], Rebbe Yochanon tells us that if we read the blessings carefully, we can find within them the curses which Bilaam wanted to deliver.

Bilaam wanted to curse Israel to deny them houses of prayer and study, but HaShem forced him to say "how goodly are your tents" (as we see in Genesis where Yaakov is referred to as a "dweller in tents," which means that he sat constantly in the House of Study). Bilaam wanted to say that the Divine Presence should not rest upon Israel, but he was forced to say "your dwelling places, O Israel" (the word for "dwelling places" is Mishkanos, from the root Mishkan, the Tabernacle -- the place where the Divine Presence rested). And in this vein Rebbe Yochanon analyzes the verses which follow as well.

Rebbe Aba bar Kahana says in conclusion: "all of these reverted to curses, with the exception of the blessing for Houses of Prayer and Study, as it says [in Deuteronomy 23:6] '...and G-d reversed the curse to a blessing, for HaShem your L-rd loved you' -- curse, and not curses." Although Bilaam's curses were many, all of the other curses -- save the one for Houses of Prayer and Study -- eventually came to pass. The Temple was destroyed, and Israel was left with neither kings nor kingdom. Houses of Prayer and Study, however, are with us always.

Why is this true? Why was it that G-d preserved this blessing above all the others?

R. Shabsay ben Meir HaKohen, author of the Sifsei Kohen commentary on the Code of Jewish Law, says that as long as Israel has Houses of Prayer and Study, as long as Israel makes requests and trusts HaShem to hear their prayers and remains devoted to Torah study, then the other curses are very limited. They can damage, but they cannot destroy.

This one curse was "everything" -- by comparison, all the others are nothing! By reversing this one curse, G-d prevents the others from having terminal impact (Heaven forbid!). Torah study and prayer keep us alive as a people.

What happens to peoples whose kings are dethroned, and who are exiled from their lands? They assimilate into their new surrounding culture, and disappear as a distinct population.

For 2000 years of exile, Israel has proven the exception. For Israel, Torah study and prayer keep us

alive, far more so than land or rulership. [As we see so sadly in our own era, when we have our land but not study of Torah, nothing prevents young Jews from moving to other countries and disappearing from the Jewish community. With the current grave situation, 'yeridah' -- leaving Israel -- is only likely to get worse. Even in the Land of Israel, we need the Torah of Israel.]

As we say in our prayers, "we will rejoice in the words of Your Torah and your Mitzvos for all eternity, for they are our lives and the length of our days!"

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken