

Spotlight on...Mah Tovu

Background:

Parashat Balak tells the story of King Balak of Moav's attempts to hire a non-Jewish prophet named Bilaam to go and curse the Jews. Balak saw that the Jews were strong, and he was afraid of them. He thought that if Bilaam could curse them it would weaken the Jews and Moav would be safe from them. However, much to Balak's fury, every time Bilaam opens his mouth he blesses Israel instead of curses them! One of Bilaam's blessings even makes it into our davening:

מה־טבו אה־לִיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!

Bilaam seems to praise the Jewish people for their tents, and their structures. However, he doesn't elaborate on this praise, so we don't know what exactly he meant. Here are three different opinions:

Rashi: Bilaam praised the Jews' tents because they were arranged in such a way that one tent's window didn't look into the window of the tent next to it. This made it possible for them to be modest because they couldn't see into their neighbors' homes.

Seforno: Bilaam was praising the Jews' batei midrashot. We know this because the word ohel, or tent, often refers to a beit midrash.

Chizkuni: This is just language that Bilaam used to describe the Jews because Yaakov is referred to as an "איש תם יושב אוהלים", or "a simple man who sat in tents."

Questions:

1. According to Rashi, what was Bilaam praising about the Jews? Why do you think this was important enough to be mentioned?
2. According to Seforno, what was Bilaam praising about the Jews? Why do you think this was important enough to be mentioned?
3. According to Chizkuni, is mah tovu a special praise about the Jews? How does the Chizkuni's opinion change our understanding of this phrase?