

This Week in Torah *Balak*
Rabbi Matt Cutler
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One of my favorite jokes in the book involves Mr. Cohen and Mr. Goldberg, regular *minyan* goers (meaning they pray together daily at the synagogue). One morning, as Mr. Cohen is hemming and hawing about going to synagogue, his wife asks: “Why do you even bother going? You don’t even believe in God!” His answer: “Goldberg talks to God—I talk to Goldberg.” Yup--- there is a need for community; prayer is a combination of solitary activity, done in the presence of others as well as with others. Sound confusing? Cohen and Goldberg get it!

Traditional morning worship [*shacharit*] begins with a line from this week’s *parasha*: “*Mah Tov u’ohalecha Ya’akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael...* How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel.” Why is that? Many good reasons—Mr. Cohen would say it is because there are people to schmooze with and connect to; community. But Goldberg would cite a classic *midrash*, in which the prophet Balaam who was hired to curse the people actually blesses them. Gazing down on them from a higher vantage point, he sees that their tent openings are staggered so that one tent doesn’t look into the other, giving a sense of privacy. The *midrash* states that Balaam was so overcome by the respect and the modesty of a people, he could do nothing other than to bless the people.

Worship in the communal setting, according to Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, is just that—a dance between the sacred and the ordinary as well as personal and the communal. Moving with grace between the different realms, respecting each as one lifts the soul to express a connection with God.

The Talmud also reenforces this. The High Priest, and later the rabbis, never were left alone to go from one place to another. They were accompanied by others to give them a sense of respect as well as the opportunity to pray/teach along the way if they were so moved to do those. In a way, the disciples of a Rabbi were like *malachei haSharit*, administering angels from God on a sacred mission.

But there is another reason—fear. Fear of being alone. Perhaps one would be so enthralled by prayer that they would not hear encroaching danger—like a robber or a demonic presence. Thus Cohen had Goldberg’s back when he *davenyed*. This is serious—don’t minimize it! According to Rabbi Hoffman, by the 11th century in Germany and Northern France, the most important lines of the opening song for worship “*Mah Tovu...*” was not the lines from this week’s portion but the next 2 lines which started with “*Rav Chasidicha... In Your abundant loving kindness.*” For these worshippers, God was the protection that surrounded them when the climate of superstition was rife. These people feared demons and evil angels who sought opportunity to infect human society. *Mah Tovu..* the tents were clustered around a central point in close proximity—to give security and offer privacy at the same moment.

A quick side note of worthless trivia: It was in this realm that it became impolite to point! Some communities even had laws making it a criminal act to do so. The fear that by pointing at another, one would draw attention to another as prey for a demonic presence.

Mah Tovu was not merely words of welcome. These words helped give the security in the sanctuary as people gathered. Security that they were with others, but safety to offer their most personal prayers. Cohen and Goldberg both were performing sacred acts that brought them closer to God.

“*Mah Tovu ohalecha Ya’akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael...* How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel.”