

Chukat-Balak 5780, Rabbi James Proops

With the onset of July and already in Tammuz, we are firmly into our fifth calendar month of lockdown and highly limited shul attendance. While the building is open for minyan every day, the capacity, the number of services and the *ruach* are but a shadow of their former selves. We are still only offering shiurim, social and learning programs online and our Youth rooms remain empty and silent. While we continue and strive to stay connected with the community and keep our religious observance and spirituality at the highest possible level, we are all in some way still missing the vital role that the shul itself plays in each of our lives. Over the years many may have questioned the importance of formally ‘belonging’ to a shul and part of a community structure. Yet we, for whom the shul signifies a crucial component in our lives, can certainly testify to the truth of the adage “absence makes the heart grow fonder” as we long for the shul’s return to prominence in our daily lives.

One person who seemingly understood the critical function that a *Beit Knesset* plays in the life of a Jew was Bilaam. We read in the second of this week’s double *parasha* of Chukat-Balak, that Bilaam was hired by Balak, King of Moav, to curse the Jewish People. Instead of course Hashem prevented him from uttering his words of destruction and replaced them with the immortal words of blessing “מה־טֹבוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ יִעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל - How goodly are your tents Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel”. The *gemmara* in Sanhedrin 105b teaches us that the “tents” referred to by Bilaam are references to our shuls and houses of study and as such, we customarily recite this verse as we enter shul each morning. From these words of the blessing, we gain an insight as to the curse that Bilaam originally intended to say. We learn that he planned to place a curse on those very structures, the *Beit Knesset* and the *Beit Midrash*, that he in fact blessed. He wished to destroy the centrepieces of our communal life.

What was it about the shul and *Beit Midrash* that Bilaam sought to curse? He had been employed by Balak to destroy the Jews not merely impede their ability to pray with a minyan and learn Torah in groups. Would destroying the basis of

Jewish communal life really have achieved his purpose? Are we not able to survive spiritually without our shul?

This year, we are in a position to answer these questions on Bilaam's originally intended curse from a unique perspective. On the one hand we can attest that surely he was misguided. We have proven that without our shuls to attend or *Batei Midrashot* to study in, we Jews do not go gently into the night. On the contrary, following the lockdown we immediately sought out new and innovative ways to join together in prayer, in learning and in community gathering. Many of us seized the opportunity to make the most of the isolation by turning corners of our homes into places of prayers and our tables or desks into places of Torah study.

However, despite our best efforts, we are all painfully aware that something is missing. Whether it is the inability to recite those parts of *tefillah* that require a *minyan*, the live experience of a shiur that can only be felt in person or the excitement that is missing from the children's faces as they anticipate another Shabbat morning away from groups. While we have proven that we can survive religiously without shul, it has also become clearer than ever what a huge role it plays in our lives. In this way we can understand Bilaam's insight all too well. He was not looking for a 'quick-fix' way to destroy Bnei Yisrael, but he sought to undermine our very existence as a people.

The questions we are all asking now are, 'how much longer can we cope with being kept apart?' 'How will we have the fast approaching Yamim Noraim with no fully functioning shul?' 'Without regular attendance and interaction how can we realistically maintain our spiritual growth?' Following these the most daunting of all must be posed, 'how will our community survive without the mainstay of religion playing it's vital role?'. Never before in recent memory have we had to face the reality of Bilaam's intended curse. Never before have we, the current generations, had to contemplate a future with ongoing restricted access to the "ohalecha Yaakov". The role our shul plays has never before been so greatly highlighted and yet its existence has never before been under such threat.

We must heed the lesson of Bilaam's insight more than ever before. Our survival and ability to thrive as a community and a people is tied to the foundations of shuls, schools and places of learning. While each Jewish home serves as the foundation for Jewish life, it is our institutions that enable us and our families to flourish as a part of something bigger, a community, a people. We should all do our utmost to connect as much as we can, to take advantage of the array of online programming available and to reaffirm our commitment to the important role the community plays in our life. In that way may we once again see the fruition of blessing "מֵה־טֹבוֹ אֱהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכַּנְתֶּיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל".