DAVVENOLOGY 101:

Exploring *Ma Tovu*

מה טבו אהליך יעקב, משכנותיך ישראל

How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwellings, O Israel!
Numbers 24:5

Parashat Hukat-Balak 5769
Temple Beth El
Stamford CT

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

שֶׁהֶחֱזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי — **for restoring my soul to me.** Upon awakening we feel that we have been restored to life. Each day is a new beginning.

רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתֶךָ — **You are faithful beyond measure.** This phrase is taken from Lamentations 3:22–23: "The kindness of Adonai has not ended, His mercies are not spent. They are renewed every morning — You are faithful beyond measure."

עַל נְטִילַת יָדָיִם — **to rinse our hands.** The first formal blessing of the day. Ritual washing of the hands, which is also done before partaking of bread, is symbolic of purity. The *Kohanim* were required to wash their hands (and feet) when entering the sacred precinct to offer sacrifices (Exodus 30:19–21). Since we are to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), we too follow similar practices that help us to achieve a sense of sacredness, purity, and closeness to God.

מַה טֹּבוּ אׇהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב — **How lovely are your dwellings, people of Jacob.** Numbers 24:5. This is the first verse of a blessing pronounced by Balaam, a pagan prophet, who was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. However, Balaam blessed them instead. The words are appropriate for recitation when entering the synagogue since the Sages interpreted the word "dwellings" as referring to synagogues and houses of study (Sanhedrin 105b). Five biblical verses have been brought together here to create an appropriate prayer for the individual to recite when entering the synagogue.

וַאֲנִי בְּרֹב חַסְדְּךָ — **As for me, O God.** Psalm 5:8. Another verse that speaks of coming to God's house. In the psalm the reference is to the Temple, but each synagogue is also God's house, "a small sanctuary" in rabbinic terminology.

יהוה, אָהַבְתִּי מְעוֹן בֵּיתֶךָ — **Adonai, I love Your house.** Psalm 26:8. Another verse speaking of the Temple, the house of God.

BIRKHOT HA-SHAḤAR

PRELIMINARY PRAYERS

Prayer begins in the home,
as we arise each morning with our acknowledgment
of God's presence and compassion.

I am grateful to You, living, enduring Sovereign,
for restoring my soul to me in compassion.
You are faithful beyond measure.

Upon ritual washing of hands:

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe,
instilling in us the holiness of mitzvot
by commanding us to rinse our hands.

MAH TOVU

Upon entering the sanctuary:

Based on verses from NUMBERS and PSALMS

Mah tovu ohalekha Ya'akov, mishk'notekha Yisra-el.
Va'ani b'rov ḥasd'kha avo veitekha,
eshtaḥaveh el heikhal kodsh'kha b'yir-atekha.
Adonai, ahavti m'on beitekha, u-m'kom mishkan k'vodekha.
Va'ani eshtaḥaveh v'ekhra-ah, evr'khah lifnei Adonai osi.
Va'ani t'filati l'kha, Adonai, et ratzon.
Elohim, b'rov ḥasdekha, aneni be'emet yish-ekha.

How lovely are your dwellings, people of Jacob,
your sanctuaries, descendants of Israel.
As for me, O God,
Your great love inspires me to enter Your house,
to worship in Your holy sanctuary,
filled with awe for You.
Adonai, I love Your house, the place of Your glory.
Before my Maker I humbly bow in worship.
May this be an auspicious time, Adonai, for my prayer.
Your love, O God, is great;
answer me with Your true deliverance.

1

וַאֲנִי אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה — **I humbly bow.** Adapted from Psalm 95:6. The original verse in the psalm is in the plural. Although most of our public prayers, such as the Amidah, are phrased in the plural to emphasize our collective responsibility, this is a personal prayer. Therefore the verses selected are in the first person singular and this verse (which is in the plural in its original biblical setting) has been changed to the singular to fit that pattern.

וַאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי — **for my prayer.** Psalm 69:14. Three of the lines of this prayer begin with the word *ani,* "I," emphasizing the personal nature of this prayer. We are part of the people Israel and of all humanity, but each of us is also an individual, with personal feelings and needs. Prayer enables us to come before our Creator individually and to establish a personal relationship with God.

בְּרֹב חַסְדֶּךָ — **Your love . . . is great.** This same phrase is found in the second line of this collection of verses. We begin our day emphasizing the thought that *ḥesed* — love, mercy, faithfulness — is the basic quality of God upon which the world and all of human life is based.

JPS TORAH COMMENTARY
MILGROM

Balak, "Build me here seven altars, and have seven bulls and seven rams ready for me here." 30Balak did as Balaam said: he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

אֶל־בָּלָק בְּנֵה־לִי בָזֶה שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהָכֵן לִי בָּזֶה שִׁבְעָה פָרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים: 30 וַיַּעַשׂ בָּלָק כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר בִּלְעָם וַיַּעַל פָּר וָאַיִל בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ:

24 Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased God to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. 2As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. 3Taking up his theme, he said:

כ״ד וַיַּרְא בִּלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא־הָלַךְ כְּפַעַם־בְּפַעַם לִקְרַאת נְחָשִׁים וַיָּשֶׁת אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו: 2 וַיִּשָּׂא בִלְעָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לִשְׁבָטָיו וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים: 3 וַיִּשָּׂא מְשָׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמַר

toward the wilderness Hebrew *'el ha-midbar*, synonymous with *yeshimon* (23:28) and the steppes of Moab (22:1), where Israel was encamped (v. 2). Note also that Beth-jeshimoth (33:49) is in the Jordan plain. The meaning here is clear: Rather than timorously catching a glimpse of the edge of the Israelite camp, Balaam now boldly steps forward so that he can see all of Israel.

The midrash associates *midbar*, "wilderness," with Sinai, meaning that evil Balaam perniciously recalled Israel's apostasy of the golden calf (see the Targums and Excursus 56).

2. encamped tribe by tribe Once Balaam is convinced that God intends only blessing for Israel (23:20), he no longer needs to follow Balak's precaution that he see only a portion of Israel (v. 1) lest the curse be ineffectual (see the Comment to 22:40). He can now view the entire Israelite encampment with impunity. Tradition interprets the fact that Balak's sacrifices are repeated to mean that they are not magical in purpose but are for predisposing the deity to the wishes of the petitioner.[4]

the spirit of God came upon him The assumption here is that instead of seeking God in a dream (22:9,20) or having God's words "put into his mouth" (23:5,16), Balaam is now invested with the divine spirit and falls into an ecstatic state (vv. 3–4),[5] the mark of a prophet (11:25–29). "Spirit of God" should be understood as "divine spirit," as in Exodus 31:3 and 35:31, since in the narrative of this chapter only the Tetragrammaton is used.

3–9. Balaam introduces himself—now that he is invested with the divine spirit—as one who is privy to God's direct revelation. He compares Israel with well-watered trees and gardens, whose king is mightier than Amalek's Agag and whose divinely endowed leonine strength will crush all its enemies and deter future aggressors. Indeed, not only is Israel blessed and not cursed but the blessing and curse of others will be empowered to redound to those who utter them.[6] In the opening and closing phrases of this third oracle, Balaam addresses Israel directly for the first time (vv. 3a*α*,b), a fitting frame for the oracle. The mention of the Amalekite king (v. 7; see 1 Sam. 15:8; 2 Sam. 8:12) and the crushing of Israel's enemies (v. 8; see 2 Sam. 12:31; 1 Chron. 20:13; Ps. 18:38–43) apparently refer to the time of Kings Saul and David. This oracle is the climactic one: In the first, only God determines blessing and curse (23:8); in the second, God's blessing cannot be revoked (23:20); in this, the third, those who bless or curse Israel will themselves be blessed or cursed.

3. Word of Balaam Hebrew *ne'um bil'am*. A self-introduction would have been expected at the beginning of a poem, not in its third stanza (e.g., 2 Sam. 23:1). However, in contrast to the prior oracles, God does not this time "put words in his mouth" (see 23:5,16). Thus, Balaam can say that these are truly his words; God has inspired the message, but it is he, Balaam, who has put it into words.[7] The divine origin of his message is made explicit in the next verse. Similarly, King David, after opening his poem with the same formula of self-introduction (*ne'um*), also immediately identifies its divine origin: "The word of David son of Jesse, the word of the man whom God raised up[8] . . . the Spirit of the LORD has spoken through me, His message is on my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:1–2). Indeed, the choice of *ne'um* for "word" is probably deliberate; it nearly always indicates a divine utterance.

son of Hebrew *beno*; see the Comment to 23:18.

2

Word of Balaam son of Beor,	נְאֻם בִּלְעָם בְּנוֹ בְעֹר
Word of the man whose eye is true,	וּנְאֻם הַגֶּבֶר שְׁתֻם הָעָיִן:
[4]Word of him who hears God's speech,	4 נְאֻם שֹׁמֵעַ אִמְרֵי־אֵל
Who beholds visions from the Almighty,	אֲשֶׁר מַחֲזֵה שַׁדַּי יֶחֱזֶה
Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:	נֹפֵל וּגְלוּי עֵינָיִם:
[5]How fair are your tents, O Jacob,	5 מַה־טֹּבוּ אׇהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב
Your dwellings, O Israel!	מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
[6]Like palm-groves that stretch out,	6 כִּנְחָלִים נִטָּיוּ
Like gardens beside a river,	כְּגַנְּת עֲלֵי נָהָר
Like aloes planted by the LORD,	כַּאֲהָלִים נָטַע יְהוָה
Like cedars beside the water;	כַּאֲרָזִים עֲלֵי־מָיִם:

whose eye is true Hebrew *shetum ha-ʿayin*.[9] Two other renderings have been suggested: (1) "Whose eye is open," the root *sh-t-m* in rabbinic Hebrew meaning "be open,"[10] supported by the parallelism with "eyes unveiled" (v. 4) and by a medical text from Nimrud: "If someone falls to the ground with his eyes wide open, he has been possessed by a *gallu*-demon." (2) "Whose eye is closed" (see Lam. 3:8), where *shatam* is equivalent to *satam,* "close"[11]; that is, Balaam was heretofore blind to God's revelation or he was actually physically blind, which would account for God's having to open his eyes to see the angel.[12] However, this latter interpretation faces the objection that in 22:41 and 23:13, Balaam had to see the Israelites in order to curse them, a fact that he confirms in his oracles in 23:9.

4. speech Perhaps the Hebrew words *ve-yodeaʿ daʿat ʿelyon*, "who obtains knowledge from the Most High" (see v. 16aβ), should be inserted here (as in one manuscript) in order to balance the verse.

beholds visions Hebrew *maḥazeh . . . yeḥezeh*. The visions are really auditions, judging by the frequent association of the root *ḥ-z-h* with *davar*, "word," as in Isaiah 2:1 and Amos 1:1 (also Mic. 1:1; cf. Hab. 1:1).

Almighty Hebrew *shaddai* (so rendered in the Septuagint), an ancient name for Israel's God. In Genesis 49:25 it is in parallelism with *ʾel*; and according to a biblical tradition in Exodus 6:4, the patriarchs knew Him only by this name. Its etymology is unknown. It may derive from Akkadian *šadû*, which has two meanings: (1) "mountain" (the gods Asshur and Bel are called *šadû rabû*, "great mountain," i.e., almighty)[13] and, most likely, (2) "steppe" (analogous to Heb. *sadeh*, "field," which in 14-cent. Ugarit was pronounced *šd*). The god of the Amurru in upper Mesopotamia (the homeland of the patriarchs) was called *bēl šadê*, "the Lord of the (Syrian) Steppe."[14] However, like the parallel form *ʾel*, "God," it may not even be a proper name but a generic name for deity, god. Elsewhere too *shaddai* is parallel with *ʾel/ ʾeloah*, "deity" (Job 5:17; 6:4; 8:3,5; 9:7, etc.). In the Deir ʿAlla inscription (1.6; see Excursus 60), *shaddai*, indeed, occurs in the plural, meaning "gods" (so also Job 19:29).

Prostrate An act of acknowledgment of and homage to the presence of God, as in Genesis 17:3 and Joshua 5:14.[15] Balaam remains in full possession of his faculties and testifies that he has seen and heard; there is therefore no need to posit that he fell into a trance.[16]

but with eyes unveiled His eyes were either literally "opened" or, more likely, he was figuratively "enlightened"; that is, he saw with his inner eye.[17]

5. fair Hebrew *tovu*, that is, "pleasing" as in Genesis 3:6, 24:16, and Song of Songs 4:10.[18]

dwellings Hebrew *mishkenotekha*, plural of *mishkan*, "Tabernacle." The term designates a temporary structure, as indicated by its parallel, "tents." Tradition refers "dwellings" to the Tabernacle and "tents" to the tent of the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 25:27)—the tent in which he prayed.[19] The midrash sees in this verse the ideal of the Jew in his home and synagogue, and for this reason it was placed at the opening of the daily morning service.

7Their boughs drip with moisture,
Their roots have abundant water.
Their king shall rise above Agag,
Their kingdom shall be exalted.
8God who freed them from Egypt

7 יִזַּל־מַיִם מִדְלָיו
וְזַרְעוֹ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים
וְיָרֹם מֵאֲגַג מַלְכּוֹ
וְתִנַּשֵּׂא מַלְכֻתוֹ׃
8 אֵל מוֹצִיאוֹ מִמִּצְרַיִם

*6. **Like palm-groves*** Its meaning in Arabic. Others render "canyons, wadis," but then the lush greenery intended by this verse would be missing.

that stretch out Hebrew *nittayu*. So Israel's tents appeared from the heights from which Balaam beheld them. It has also been suggested that this word should be read *natah y(h)w*, "that the Lord stretched out," which would complement the next line in structure and rhythm.[20] The name *yhw* for the Tetragrammaton appears on an eighth-century B.C.E. stone bowl found at Kuntilet ʿAjrud, 50 kilometers (30 mi.) south of Kadesh-barnea.

gardens beside a river A reminder of the Garden of Eden as described in Genesis 2:10.

aloes Hebrew *'ahalim*. A word play with *'oholim*, "tents" (v. 5). A sweet-smelling tree whose sap is used as a perfume.[21] It is an exotic plant not found in Israel and, hence, imported.

cedars beside the waters Since cedars grow on mountains and not by waters, the suggestion has been made to transpose aloes and cedars, yielding: "Like cedars planted by the Lord," exactly as in Psalms 104:16. But it is possible that *'erez* is generic for a variety of evergreens that do not bear fruit. Such appears to be the case in Psalms 148:9. In rabbinic Hebrew a number of coniferous trees are subsumed under this term.[22]

*7. **Their boughs*** Hebrew *dalyav*. The usual form of the plural is *daliyotav*, as in Jeremiah 19:13 and Ezekiel 17:7. Ibn Ezra and Shadal explain the image as that of trees (mentioned in the previous verse) so drenched that their boughs drip water; that is, the vegetation will be watered from above and below (see Gen. 49:25). Rashi says that the form of the word is dual and can mean "buckets." The image would be of "Israel's prosperity under the figure of a man returning from his abundant springs with water dripping over the two full buckets carried over his shoulders."[23] In support, Akkadian *dalû* means "irrigate with water drawn from a well."

drip Hebrew *yizzal*. The singular is used, although "water" is a plural, as in 19:13. Water is a common metaphor for prosperity.[24]

Their roots Hebrew *ve-zarʿo*. This word can be interpreted in two ways. It may be a reference to posterity (see the translation) or taken literally as "roots." The image tells us that "it was beautiful in its . . . branches [*daliyotav*], because its stock stood by abundant waters" (Ezek. 31:7). Since the antecedent is the coniferous tree of verse 6, the possibility also exists that "seed" could refer to the cones borne by the branches, which, like its boughs, will also be drenched with water.[25]

Their king Thrice promised by God to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:6,16; 35:11).

Agag The king of Amalek in the time of Saul (see 1 Sam. 15:8).[26] Amalek was Israel's most dreaded enemy during the time of Moses (e.g., Exod. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17–18). Agag may remind the poet of *gag*, "roof," hence his wording "rise above Agag."[27] The Septuagint and Samaritan read "Gog," the legendary future antagonist of Israel mentioned in Ezekiel 38–39, thereby giving the oracle an eschatological thrust.

Their kingdom shall be exalted Rashi says that this description applies to David rather than to Saul, as the latter's kingdom was under incessant Philistine harassment and domination. Indeed, Targum Onkelos and Targum Jonathan render "taken away," referring to the transfer of the kingdom from Saul to David. Other versions give this line a messianic interpretation.[28]

*8. **freed them***[29]

Is for them That is, Israel; see the Comment to 23:22.

Psalms Chapter 5

א לַמְנַצֵּחַ אֶל-הַנְּחִילוֹת, מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד.

1 For the Leader; upon the Nehiloth. A Psalm of David.

ב אֲמָרַי הַאֲזִינָה יְהוָה; בִּינָה הֲגִיגִי.

2 Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my meditation.

ג הַקְשִׁיבָה, לְקוֹל שַׁוְעִי--מַלְכִּי וֵאלֹהָי: כִּי-אֵלֶיךָ, אֶתְפַּלָּל.

3 Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God; for unto Thee do I pray.

ד יְהוָה--בֹּקֶר, תִּשְׁמַע קוֹלִי; בֹּקֶר אֶעֱרָךְ-לָךְ, וַאֲצַפֶּה.

4 O LORD, in the morning shalt Thou hear my voice; in the morning will I order my prayer unto Thee, and will look forward.

ה כִּי, לֹא אֵל חָפֵץ רֶשַׁע אָתָּה: לֹא יְגָרְךָ רָע.

5 For Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness; evil shall not sojourn with Thee.

ו לֹא-יִתְיַצְּבוּ הוֹלְלִים, לְנֶגֶד עֵינֶיךָ; שָׂנֵאתָ, כָּל-פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן.

6 The boasters shall not stand in Thy sight; Thou hatest all workers of iniquity.

ז תְּאַבֵּד, דֹּבְרֵי כָזָב: אִישׁ-דָּמִים וּמִרְמָה, יְתָעֵב יְהוָה.

7 Thou destroyest them that speak falsehood; the LORD abhorreth the man of blood and of deceit.

ח וַאֲנִי--בְּרֹב חַסְדְּךָ, אָבוֹא בֵיתֶךָ; אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֶל-הֵיכַל-קָדְשְׁךָ, בְּיִרְאָתֶךָ.

8 But as for me, in the abundance of Thy lovingkindness will I come into Thy house; I will bow down toward Thy holy temple in the fear of Thee.

ט יְהוָה, נְחֵנִי בְצִדְקָתְךָ--לְמַעַן שׁוֹרְרָי; הוּשַׁר (הַיְשַׁר) לְפָנַי דַּרְכֶּךָ.

9 O LORD, lead me in Thy righteousness because of them that lie in wait for me; make Thy way straight before my face.

י כִּי אֵין בְּפִיהוּ, נְכוֹנָה--קִרְבָּם הַוּוֹת: קֶבֶר-פָּתוּחַ גְּרוֹנָם; לְשׁוֹנָם, יַחֲלִיקוּן.

10 For there is no sincerity in their mouth; their inward part is a yawning gulf, their throat is an open sepulchre; they make smooth their tongue.

יא הַאֲשִׁימֵם, אֱלֹהִים--יִפְּלוּ, מִמֹּעֲצוֹתֵיהֶם: בְּרֹב פִּשְׁעֵיהֶם, הַדִּיחֵמוֹ--כִּי-מָרוּ בָךְ.

11 Hold them guilty, O God, let them fall by their own counsels; {N}
cast them down in the multitude of their transgressions; for they have rebelled against Thee.

יב וְיִשְׂמְחוּ כָל-חוֹסֵי בָךְ, לְעוֹלָם יְרַנֵּנוּ--וְתָסֵךְ עֲלֵימוֹ; וְיַעֲלְצוּ בְךָ, אֹהֲבֵי שְׁמֶךָ.

12 So shall all those that take refuge in Thee rejoice, they shall ever shout for joy, and Thou shalt shelter them; {N}
let them also that love Thy name exult in Thee.

יג כִּי-אַתָּה, תְּבָרֵךְ צַדִּיק: יְהוָה--כַּצִּנָּה, רָצוֹן תַּעְטְרֶנּוּ.

13 For Thou dost bless the righteous; O LORD, Thou dost encompass him with favor as with a shield. {P}

Psalms Chapter 26

א לְדָוִד: שָׁפְטֵנִי יְהוָה--כִּי-אֲנִי, בְּתֻמִּי הָלַכְתִּי; וּבַיהוָה בָּטַחְתִּי, לֹא אֶמְעָד.	**1** [A Psalm] of David. Judge me, O LORD, for I have walked in mine integrity, {N} and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.
ב בְּחָנֵנִי יְהוָה וְנַסֵּנִי; צרופה (צָרְפָה) כִלְיוֹתַי וְלִבִּי.	**2** Examine me, O LORD, and try me; test my reins and my heart.
ג כִּי-חַסְדְּךָ, לְנֶגֶד עֵינָי; וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי, בַּאֲמִתֶּךָ.	**3** For Thy mercy is before mine eyes; and I have walked in Thy truth.
ד לֹא-יָשַׁבְתִּי, עִם-מְתֵי-שָׁוְא; וְעִם נַעֲלָמִים, לֹא אָבוֹא.	**4** I have not sat with men of falsehood; neither will I go in with dissemblers.
ה שָׂנֵאתִי, קְהַל מְרֵעִים; וְעִם-רְשָׁעִים, לֹא אֵשֵׁב.	**5** I hate the gathering of evil doers, and will not sit with the wicked.
ו אֶרְחַץ בְּנִקָּיוֹן כַּפָּי; וַאֲסֹבְבָה אֶת-מִזְבַּחֲךָ יְהוָה.	**6** I will wash my hands in innocency; so will I compass Thine altar, O LORD,
ז לַשְׁמִעַ, בְּקוֹל תּוֹדָה; וּלְסַפֵּר, כָּל-נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ.	**7** That I may make the voice of thanksgiving to be heard, and tell of all Thy wondrous works.
ח יְהוָה--אָהַבְתִּי, מְעוֹן בֵּיתֶךָ; וּמְקוֹם, מִשְׁכַּן כְּבוֹדֶךָ.	**8 LORD, I love the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thy glory dwelleth.**
ט אַל-תֹּאסֵף עִם-חַטָּאִים נַפְשִׁי; וְעִם-אַנְשֵׁי דָמִים חַיָּי.	**9** Gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with men of blood;
י אֲשֶׁר-בִּידֵיהֶם זִמָּה; וימינם, מָלְאָה שֹׁחַד.	**10** In whose hands is craftiness, and their right hand is full of bribes.
יא וַאֲנִי, בְּתֻמִּי אֵלֵךְ; פְּדֵנִי וְחָנֵּנִי.	**11** But as for me, I will walk in mine integrity; redeem me, and be gracious unto me.
יב רַגְלִי, עָמְדָה בְמִישׁוֹר; בְּמַקְהֲלִים, אֲבָרֵךְ יְהוָה.	**12** My foot standeth in an even place; in the congregations will I bless the LORD. {P}

Psalms Chapter 95

א לְכוּ, נְרַנְּנָה לַיהוָה; נָרִיעָה, לְצוּר יִשְׁעֵנוּ.	**1** O come, let us sing unto the LORD; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.
ב נְקַדְּמָה פָנָיו בְּתוֹדָה; בִּזְמִרוֹת, נָרִיעַ לוֹ.	**2** Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout for joy unto Him with psalms.
ג כִּי אֵל גָּדוֹל יְהוָה; וּמֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל, עַל-כָּל-אֱלֹהִים.	**3** For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods;
ד אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ, מְחְקְרֵי-אָרֶץ; וְתוֹעֲפֹת הָרִים לוֹ.	**4** In whose hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are His also.
ה אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ הַיָּם, וְהוּא עָשָׂהוּ; וְיַבֶּשֶׁת, יָדָיו יָצָרוּ.	**5** The sea is His, and He made it; and His hands formed the dry land.
ו בֹּאוּ, נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִכְרָעָה; נִבְרְכָה, לִפְנֵי-יְהוָה עֹשֵׂנוּ.	**6 O come, let us bow down and bend the knee; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;**
ז כִּי הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ-- וַאֲנַחְנוּ עַם מַרְעִיתוֹ, וְצֹאן יָדוֹ: הַיּוֹם, אִם-בְּקֹלוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ.	**7** For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the flock of His hand. {N} To-day, if ye would but hearken to His voice!
ח אַל-תַּקְשׁוּ לְבַבְכֶם, כִּמְרִיבָה; כְּיוֹם מַסָּה, בַּמִּדְבָּר.	**8** 'Harden not your heart, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness;
ט אֲשֶׁר נִסּוּנִי, אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם: בְּחָנוּנִי, גַּם-רָאוּ פָעֳלִי.	**9** When your fathers tried Me, proved Me, even though they saw My work.
י אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה, אָקוּט בְּדוֹר-- וָאֹמַר, עַם תֹּעֵי לֵבָב הֵם; וְהֵם, לֹא-יָדְעוּ דְרָכָי.	**10** For forty years was I wearied with that generation, and said: It is a people that do err in their heart, {N} and they have not known My ways;
יא אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְאַפִּי; אִם-יְבֹאוּן, אֶל-מְנוּחָתִי.	**11** Wherefore I swore in My wrath, that they should not enter into My rest.' {P}

Psalms Chapter 69

א לַמְנַצֵּחַ עַל-שֹׁושַׁנִּים לְדָוִד.	1 For the Leader; upon Shoshannim. [A Psalm] of David.
ב הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי אֱלֹהִים-- כִּי בָאוּ מַיִם עַד-נָפֶשׁ.	2 Save me, O God; for the waters are come in even unto the soul.
ג טָבַעְתִּי, בִּיוֵן מְצוּלָה-- וְאֵין מָעֳמָד; בָּאתִי בְמַעֲמַקֵּי-מַיִם, וְשִׁבֹּלֶת שְׁטָפַתְנִי.	3 I am sunk in deep mire, where there is no standing; {N} I am come into deep waters, and the flood overwhelmeth me.
ד יָגַעְתִּי בְקָרְאִי, נִחַר גְּרוֹנִי: כָּלוּ עֵינַי--מְיַחֵל, לֵאלֹהָי.	4 I am weary of my crying; my throat is dried; mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.
ה רַבּוּ, מִשַּׂעֲרוֹת רֹאשִׁי-- שֹׂנְאַי חִנָּם: עָצְמוּ מַצְמִיתַי, אֹיְבַי שָׁקֶר-- אֲשֶׁר לֹא- גָזַלְתִּי, אָז אָשִׁיב.	5 They that hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head; {N} they that would cut me off, being mine enemies wrongfully, are many; should I restore that which I took not away?
ו אֱלֹהִים--אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ, לְאִוַּלְתִּי; וְאַשְׁמוֹתַי, מִמְּךָ לֹא-נִכְחָדוּ.	6 O God, Thou knowest my folly; and my trespasses are not hid from Thee.
ז אַל-יֵבֹשׁוּ בִי, קֹנֶיךָ-- אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה, צְבָאוֹת: אַל-יִכָּלְמוּ בִי מְבַקְשֶׁיךָ-- אֱלֹהֵי, יִשְׂרָאֵל.	7 Let not them that wait for Thee be ashamed through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; {N} let not those that seek Thee be brought to confusion through me, O God of Israel.
ח כִּי-עָלֶיךָ, נָשָׂאתִי חֶרְפָּה; כִּסְּתָה כְלִמָּה פָנָי.	8 Because for Thy sake I have borne reproach; confusion hath covered my face.
ט מוּזָר, הָיִיתִי לְאֶחָי; וְנָכְרִי, לִבְנֵי אִמִּי.	9 I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children.
י כִּי-קִנְאַת בֵּיתְךָ אֲכָלָתְנִי; וְחֶרְפּוֹת חוֹרְפֶיךָ, נָפְלוּ עָלָי.	10 Because zeal for Thy house hath eaten me up, and the reproaches of them that reproach Thee are fallen upon me.
יא וָאֲבַכֶּה בַצּוֹם נַפְשִׁי; וַתְּהִי לַחֶרְפּוֹת לִי.	11 And I wept with my soul fasting, and that became unto me a reproach.
יב וָאֶתְּנָה לְבוּשִׁי שָׂק; וָאֱהִי לָהֶם לְמָשָׁל.	12 I made sackcloth also my garment, and I became a byword unto them.
יג יָשִׂיחוּ בִי, יֹשְׁבֵי שָׁעַר; וּנְגִינוֹת, שׁוֹתֵי שֵׁכָר.	13 They that sit in the gate talk of me; and I am the song of the drunkards.
יד וַאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי-לְךָ יְהוָה, עֵת רָצוֹן-- **אֱלֹהִים בְּרָב-חַסְדֶּךָ;** **עֲנֵנִי, בֶּאֱמֶת יִשְׁעֶךָ.**	**14 But as for me, let my prayer be unto Thee, O LORD, in an acceptable time; O God, in the abundance of Thy mercy, {N}** **answer me with the truth of Thy salvation.**
טו הַצִּילֵנִי מִטִּיט, וְאַל-אֶטְבָּעָה; אִנָּצְלָה מִשֹּׂנְאַי, וּמִמַּעֲמַקֵּי מָיִם.	15 Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink; let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters.
טז אַל-תִּשְׁטְפֵנִי, שִׁבֹּלֶת מַיִם-- וְאַל-תִּבְלָעֵנִי מְצוּלָה; וְאַל-תֶּאְטַר-עָלַי בְּאֵר פִּיהָ.	16 Let not the waterflood overwhelm me, neither let the deep swallow me up; {N} and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me.
יז עֲנֵנִי יְהוָה, כִּי-טוֹב חַסְדֶּךָ; כְּרֹב רַחֲמֶיךָ, פְּנֵה אֵלָי.	17 Answer me, O LORD, for Thy mercy is good; according to the multitude of Thy compassions turn Thou unto me.
יח וְאַל-תַּסְתֵּר פָּנֶיךָ, מֵעַבְדֶּךָ: כִּי-צַר-לִי, מַהֵר עֲנֵנִי.	18 And hide not Thy face from Thy servant; for I am in distress; answer me speedily.

בִּרְכוֹת הַשַּׁחַר

מַה טֹּבוּ אׇהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַאֲנִי בְּרֹב חַסְדְּךָ אָבוֹא
בֵיתֶךָ אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֶל הֵיכַל קׇדְשְׁךָ בְּיִרְאָתֶךָ: יהוה אָהַבְתִּי מְעוֹן בֵּיתֶךָ
וּמְקוֹם מִשְׁכַּן כְּבוֹדֶךָ: וַאֲנִי אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְאֶכְרָעָה אֲבָרְכָה לִפְנֵי יהוה
עֹשִׂי וַאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי לְךָ יהוה עֵת רָצוֹן אֱלֹהִים בְּרׇב חַסְדֶּךָ עֲנֵנִי בֶּאֱמֶת
יִשְׁעֶךָ:

Mah tovu ohaleḥa ya'akov mishkenoteḥa yisra'el. Va'ani berov hasdeḥa avo veyteḥa eshtaḥaveh el heyḥal kodsheḥa beyirateḥa. Adonay ahavti me'on beyteḥa umkom mishkan kevodeḥa. Va'ani eshtaḥaveh ve'ehra'ah evreḥah lifney adonay osi va'ani tefilati leḥa adonay et ratzon elohim berov ḥasdeḥa aneni be'emet yisheḥa.

KAVANAH. It is only a true and close community that develops associations, traditions and memories that go to make up its soul. To mingle one's personality with that soul becomes a natural longing. In such a community one experiences that mystic divine grace which, like radiant sunshine, illumines our lives when joyous and, like balm, heals them when wounded or stricken. Then all questions about saying this or that become trivial, for the real purpose is attained in having each one feel with the Psalmist: "One thing I ask of God that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life, to behold the graciousness of God."

M.M.K. (ADAPTED)

ואני תפילתי / as for me, my prayer is for you. The Hebrew text has often been creatively misread to mean "I am my prayer." All I have to offer in prayer is myself. We begin our prayers with a feeling of humility, knowing that the vaunted words we are about to speak are no greater than the person who speaks them. Most of the prayers in our liturgy are phrased in the first person plural, in which *we* as a community stand before the Divine presence. But here they are introduced in the halting and somewhat unsure voice of the individual, expressing some of that inadequacy that each of us feels as we enter the place and hour of prayer. A.G.

BIRḤOT HASHAḤAR / MORNING BLESSINGS

This translation can be sung to the same melody as the Hebrew.

How lovely are your tents, O Ya'akov,
how fine your encampments, Yisrael!

And as for me, drawn by your love,
I come into your house.

I lay me down in a humble surrender,
before your holy shrine in awe.

GREAT ONE, how I love your house's site,
adore your Glory's dwelling place.

And as for me, I fall in prayer,
my body I bend down,

I greet, I bless, I bend the knee,
before THE ONE who fashions me.

And as for me, my prayer is for you, GENTLE ONE,
may it be for you a time of desire,

O God, in the abundance of your love,
respond to me in truth with your help.

NOTE. The *Mah Tovu* prayer is composed entirely of biblical verses: Numbers 24:5; Psalms 5:8, 95:6 and 69:14.

COMMENTARY. *Mah Tovu* begins with a historical progression—the tents of our earliest ancestors, then the sanctuary of the years of wandering in the wilderness, then the Temple in Jerusalem. Each of these is linked to the synagogue, for it too is "your house." And I, the contemporary soul, seeking the right moment to encounter the divine there, am thus not alone. I am a link in the chain of tradition bearing the truth of your salvation. D.A.T.

THE WEEKDAY SIDDUR - JACOBSON

I. VERSES RECITED ON ENTERING THE SYNAGOGUE

An Introductory Note:

In his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch *(Magen Avraham,* 46,1), R. Abraham Gombiner rules: "Before commencing his morning devotions, one should accept upon himself to fulfill the mitzvah of 'And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' " Among the practices observed by the *Ari* (R. Isaac Luria) listed in the *Sha'arei Zion,* this one is mentioned: "Before a person begins to pray, and especially in the morning, he should accept upon himself the obligation to fulfill this mitzvah: 'And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' In this way his prayer, included among the prayers of all Israel, will ascend, and so be able to reach aloft, and be effective and successful" (Lublin ed. [1922], p. 118).

Kabbalistic doctrine connects our relationship to our fellow man with our relationship to God, and indicates the importance of group participation in rendering prayer effective. Although our ritual seems to accord no explicit recognition to this practice, it is nevertheless fitting to stress this principle as being basic to our engaging in prayer.

The Siddur of R. Amram Gaon has already taken it for granted that certain verses should be recited upon the worshipper's entry into the synagogue, that he should say: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your dwelling places, O Israel (Num. 24.5). As for me, in the abundance of Your lovingkindness, will I come into Your house; I will bow toward Your holy Temple in awe of You" (Ps. 5.8). For leaving the synagogue, this Siddur ordains the recital of (*Ibid.* v. 9): "O Lord, lead me in Your righteousness because of them that lie in wait for me; make Your way straight before my face" (ed. A.L. Frumkin, Part II, p. 204). The Machzor Vitri lists eight preliminary verses (see ed. S. Horowitz, p. 56).

Our editions of the Siddur contain six verses, one of which is recited twice: (1) Ps. 5.8; (2) Num. 24.5; (3) Ps. 5.8; (4) Ps. 26.8; (5) Ps. 95.6, although in this last instance the plural of the original has been changed into the singular, to adapt the verse for individual recitation; (6) Ps. 69.14.

In his *Randbemerkungen zum Täglichen Gebetbuche* (Berlin, 1909), R. Abraham Berliner explains why one verse (Ps. 5.8) appears twice: "The praises uttered upon entering the synagogue, the first of which is 'And as for me...' (Ps. 5.8), are not only recited as one first enters, but also after one has come inside. There is a specific purpose in this. According to the Geonim (quoted in *Sefer Hapardes,* Laws of Shabbath, Chap. 99), this verse, comprised of ten words, was selected for counting the worshippers, to determine whether the quorum for group prayer was present. Here is the explanation of the astonishing fact that even in contemporary editions of the Siddur, this same verse appears twice" (p. 11).

Objections were raised to the recital of the verse, "How goodly

10

are your tents." R. Abraham Berliner observes *(ibid.)* that "R. Solomon Luria vehemently protested against its recital, in his responsa, since it was originally uttered by Balaam, an idolater." The Talmud, however, regards the verse as applying to synagogues and houses of Torah study (Sanhedrin 108b).

As for the three expressions: "I will worship, and bow down; I will bend the knee," R. Zeev Yaavetz points to the Yalkut Shim'oni (Ps. 852) which takes them to apply to the three daily services respectively *(Siddur Avodath Halevavoth)*.

In endeavoring to discover the structure of this set of five verses, we must first bear in mind that three begin with the word *va-ani* ("And as for me"). Once the worshipper has duly acclaimed the significance of the synagogue, he proceeds in the next sentence to express his appreciation of the Divine mercy through which it is possible for him to come to the synagogue altogether: "As for me, in the abundance of Your lovingkindness will I come into Your house." Thereafter he becomes filled with love for the synagogue. "O Lord, I love the habitation of Your house" and so "I will worship and bow down; I will bend the knee." The concluding verse consists of two petitions; that the time be propitious for prayer and that God in the abundance of His lovingkindness grant the worshipper's request. "As for me, may my prayer unto You, O Lord, be in an acceptable time; O God in the abundance of Your lovingkindness, answer me with Your sure salvation."

II. TWO MEDIEVAL HYMNS OF PRAISE

Beside the various chapters of the Psalms, our liturgy also contains songs or hymns *(Piyyutim)* composed in the Middle Ages, among these: *Yigdal, Adon Olam, An'im Zemiroth, Ma'oz Tzur.* Biblical poetry is distinguishable mainly by its use of parallelism; medieval poetry, on the other hand, is rhymed and sometimes even has meter.

(1) Yigdal

In his monumental *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry*, the basic reference work in the field, Israel Davidson has subjected all conjectures on the identity of the author of the poem to critical examination. He has come to the conclusion that "after all has been said, we must perforce accept the evidence of the manuscript and ascribe this *piyyut* to Daniel b. Yehudah (Italy, c. 1300), even though he is not known to have been a composer of *piyyutim*" (Vol. II, No. 195, pp. 266-267).

As for the meter of the hymn, each line consists of two *tenu'oth* (a *tenu'ah* consists of a vowelled consonant which may or may not be followed by a consonant with a *sheva nach)* followed by a *yathed* (a consonant pointed with *sheva na'* preceding the vowelled consonant, which in turn may or may not be followed by a consonant with

***Balak*, 5765**

LIVING TORAH תורת חיים TORAT CHAYIM

July 16, 2005 **vol. 9, no. 41** **9 Tammuz 5765**

***Balak*, Numbers 22:2–25:9**
***The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, pp. 1,173–1,194; *Revised Edition*, pp. 1,047–1,067**
Haftarah, Micah 5:6–6:8

Curses and Blessings

Lesley Silverstone

FOCAL POINT | נְקֻדַּת מוֹקֵד

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel!
(Numbers 24:5)

D'VAR TORAH | דְּבַר תּוֹרָה

Each morning, as we enter the santuary, we hear the famous verse from *Parashat Balak*, often sung to a beautiful melody: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk'notecha, Yisrael*, "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel." This prayer is part of the *Birchot HaShachar*, the "Morning Blessings," and consists of several biblical verses that express worshipers' joy at coming into the sanctuary and their reverence for the Divine Presence.

The *parashah* tells the story of Balak, king of Moab, and Balaam, a sorcerer. When Balak sees the Israelites' victory over the Amorites, he is alarmed. Fearing that the Israelites are too powerful to defeat in battle, he sends for Balaam and instructs him to curse the Israelites. At first, God forbids Balaam to accept this mission, but later God allows him to go if he agrees to obey God's commands.

In Moab, Balaam tells Balak to build him seven altars. Balak does as Balaam bids, and they sacrifice a bull and a ram on each altar. Then Balaam speaks with God and proceeds to bless Israel. Enraged, Balak takes Balaam to two other places and repeats the sacrificial process each time. But in each place, when Balaam opens his mouth to curse the people of Israel, only blessings emerge.

Why did God prevent Balaam from cursing the Israelites? Why was it necessary to turn the curse into a blessing? According to Nehama Leibowitz, "Some commentators suggest that this was done to teach Balaam a lesson, that he was not his own master. No magic rites (build me seven altars, etc.) could prevail over the Supreme Master. He had no choice but to utter the words the Almighty had put into his mouth" (Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* [Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1981], p. 304).

Another reason for God's turning the curses into blessings was to benefit Israel. Since the Israelites grew up in Egypt, where there was considerable superstition and sorcery, they might take Balaam's curses seriously and be demoralized. They might also feel uplifted by his blessings. Joseph ibn Kaspi compares God to a friend: "A true friend will spare his friend mental anguish and concern, even if he knows no danger will ensue" (ibid., p. 304).

Isaac Abravanel, a fifteenth-century commentator, also suggests that God was concerned for Israel's safety. He states, "Had Balaam cursed Israel, the surrounding nations would have plucked up the courage and gone to do battle with Israel on the strength of his curses. But when they heard how God had turned them into blessings, they would then realize who was Master . . . and would lose all desire to fight His people. From this point of view, the turning of Balaam's words into blessing served a very useful purpose" (ibid., p. 305).

Finally, according to *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez*, "Balaam did not have it in his power either to bless or to curse. The blessing was redundant—God had already blessed—and the curse was ineffective. Why then did God prevent him from cursing? Because having foreseen Israel's future sins and punishments, God did not want the nations to say, 'It was Balaam's curse that caused it,'" (quoted in The *Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition, ed. W. Gunther Plaut [New York: URJ Press, 2005], p. 1,066).

It's important to note that "among ancient and primitive peoples, a curse was more than an expressed wish for evil, it was also considered a method of translating such harmful efforts into reality" (ibid., p. 1,061). The Babylonians believed in the power of curses and relied on professional sorcerers to curse their enemies before battle. The Israelites also believed in curses. Even God was troubled by Balaam's potential actions and decided to compel him to bless the people instead. In this way, the Torah reflects the serious nature of pronouncing curses and blessings.

When we hear *Mah Tovu* during the worship service, it reminds us of Balaam's blessings of the Israelites. We often come to services with much on our minds—the stresses of the day, our worries, the tragic events in the world. As a result, we might think of cursing. May we be like Balaam and hear God's words so that we, too, may turn our curses into blessings.

BY THE WAY | דֶּרֶךְ אַגַּב

- Balaam praised the tents of Jacob because the arrangement of the entrances made it impossible for a family to see inside the tents of others, showing respect for privacy. This became the source for the ruling that one may not build a door directly opposite the door of a neighbor or make a window in line with a neighbor's window. (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 60a)

- How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel . . . "Your tents"—your external appearance must be that of Jacob, a lower level, while "your dwelling places"—your interior—must be of the level of Israel. (Ba'al Shem Tov, cited in Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, *Torah Gems*, vol. 3 [Tel Aviv: Y. Orenstein, Yavneh Publishing House, 1998], p. 128)

- According to the Rabbinic interpretation, the 'tents' are the 'tents of Torah', and the 'tabernacles' (lit. 'homes') are the Synagogues. There loomed up before Balaam's mental vision the school-houses and synagogues which have ever been the source and secret of Israel's spiritual strength. (*Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, ed. J.H. Hertz [London: Soncino Press, 1950], p. 678)

- The rest of the *Mah Tovu* prayer is composed of a number of verses from Psalms: Psalms 5:8, 26:8, and 69:14. (Lesley Silverstone)

YOUR GUIDE | מַדְרִיךְ

1. What are the blessings in your life?

2. How do you turn your curses into blessings?

Nehama Leibowitz

ANATOMY OF BLESSING

In this chapter we follow Balaam's ascent from common sorcerer to a prophet "who hears the words of God" and may note how these changes in his character and mood are reflected in the preparations attending each poetic effusion of his. His first endeavours are directed at invoking divine aid through magical means,[1] striving to accommodate the divine will to his interests rather than to achieve closer communion with Him. Only after the first two perorations in which he blessed Israel against his will, his tongue being bridled by the Almighty, did he leave all his wiles and whole-heartedly give himself up to the divine prophetic urge:

וַיַּרְא בִּלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְלֹא־הָלַךְ כְּפַעַם־בְּפַעַם לִקְרַאת נְחָשִׁים
וַיָּשֶׁת אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו׃
וַיִּשָּׂא בִלְעָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לִשְׁבָטָיו
וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים׃

And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness.
And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe;
and the spirit of God came upon him.

(24, 1—2)

Let us compare here the content of Balaam's three poetic musings

regarding Israel. (1) Numbers 23, 7—10; (2) 18—24; (3) 24, 5—9.

The first blessing of Balaam constitutes a prologue in which the prophet introduces his theme and mission. He has been charged with a mission and he explains what a mortal king has demanded of him and what, in contrast, the King of Kings, the Almighty, desires of him. But he is not only prevented from cursing by the promptings of the divine spirit, but also by the spectacle of the holy people itself spread out before him. He is forced to appreciate their unique character in spite of himself, as Rashi observes:

"כי מראש צורים אראנו": אני מסתכל בראשיתם ובתחילת שרשיהם ואני רואה אותם מיוסדים וחזקים כצורים וגבעות הללו על ידי אבות ואמהות.

"For from the *top* of the rocks I see him, and from the *hills* I behold him": I look at their beginnings and their first origins and see them firmly founded and as strong as these *rocks* and *hills* through their forefathers.

Balaam was impressed by the historic continuity of the Jewish people, the vigour and firm foundations of its traditions initiated by the Patriarchs and Matriarchs.

In his second blessing Balaam replies to the arguments and importunings of the king who had engaged his services, countering Balak's indignant ranting:

מֶה עָשִׂיתָ לִי
לָקֹב אֹיְבַי לְקַחְתִּיךָ וְהִנֵּה בֵּרַכְתָּ בָרֵךְ׃

What hast thou done unto me? — I took thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast blessed them with a vengeance!

(23, 11)

Balaam in his retort no longer addresses Balak by his kingly title as at the beginning, neither quotes his sovereign orders, but merely

refers to him as just another mortal. In contrast to the transitory nature of human desires caught in the toils of its own falsehood, he cites the unchanging standards of his true Provider and Guardian, the Holy One blessed be He Who is affected by no charms and Who accompanies His people in triumphant sovereignty.

In the third blessing there is, however, no hint of any polemic. Balak disappears completely from the picture along with his demands, machinations and arguments. Without any preliminary invocation the prophet plunges into his panegyric of Israel. We have here neither vindication nor denunciation but pure prophecy. This third blessing is characterised by a more sublime note, richer and more imaginative language than the previous ones. From the linguistic point of view we may note that there are no figures of speech in the first blessing and there is only one taken from the animal kindgom in the second. The third is rich in figurative description, beginning with the vegetable and ending with the animal kingdom.

The three blessings are also differentiated in their relation to the time factor; the first one refers to the immediate present, to the generation of the wilderness facing him, the second to the immediate future, to the generation which would conquer the land, whilst the third concerns the distant future, to an era when wars and conquests will be no more and when the lion will lie down to rest after it has finished its task.

Let us study the third blessing a little closer. It begins with a reference to the ideal picture of Jewish life in the Promised Land "how goodly are thy tents". According to the Midrash the adjective "goodly" refers to moral, ethical goodness:

"מה טובו" — על שראה פתחיהן שאינם מכוונים זה מול זה.

"How goodly" — that he saw that the doors of their tents were not directly facing each other.

(Rashi)

According to Rashi, Balaam, who had been reared amongst the idolatrous and immoral practices of his home country, is here praising the purity and chastity characteristic of the Jewish people. But the plain meaning of the term "goodly" is perfection in all respects — beauty and charm, simplicity and purity.

In verses 6—7 we may also note the recurring of the "water" motif. This is a favourite symbol in the Bible for abundance, freshness and vital life. The simile of the water is followed by the plants with which it is integrally connected. We may recall in this context the employment of a similar figure in the Bible as a symbol of upright living:

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל־פַּלְגֵי מָיִם

And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water . . .
(Psalms 1, 3)

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל־מַיִם
וְעַל־יוּבַל יְשַׁלַּח שָׁרָשָׁיו

For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters,
and that spreadeth out its roots by the river . . .
(Jeremiah 17, 8)

וְהָיִיתָ כְּגַן רָוֶה
וּכְמוֹצָא מַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יְכַזְּבוּ מֵימָיו׃

And thou shalt be like a watered garden,
and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.
(Isaiah 58, 11)

וְהָיְתָה נַפְשָׁם כְּגַן רָוֶה
וְלֹא־יוֹסִיפוּ לְדַאֲבָה עוֹד׃

And their soul shall be as a watered garden,
and they shall not pine any more at all.

(Jeremiah 31, 11)

The plants and the water similes are followed by a reference to fragrant spices:

כַּאֲהָלִים נָטַע ה׳

As the tree of aloes which the Lord hath planted

(24, 6)

which led naturally to the association of the divine planting of a garden at the creation of the world:

וַיִּטַּע ה׳ אֱלֹהִים גַּן בְּעֵדֶן . . .
וַיַּצְמַח ה׳ אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־עֵץ נֶחְמָד לְמַרְאֶה . . .

And the Lord God planted a garden . . . in Eden . . .
And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight . . .

(Genesis 2, 8—10)

The prophet after recalling the pristine purity of the perfect world in the Garden of Eden proceeds to dwell on the theme of abundance. But we are not treated here to a description of artificial riches, palaces, urban magnificence, but rather to natural abundance of fields and vineyards.

The blessing then abruptly switches to another aspect of good — that which emerges from the freedom of the people from bondage and its impending conquest of the land. The people stand on the threshold of gaining their patrimony and aspire to inherit a fertile and well watered land, each man under his vine and fig tree. The final

verse conjures up a picture of peace using the figure of the lion lying down to rest. This same blessing is referred to directly and without recourse to figurative illustration in the blessing at the end of Leviticus:

וְנָתַתִּי שָׁלוֹם בָּאָרֶץ
וּשְׁכַבְתֶּם וְאֵין מַחֲרִיד

And I will give peace in the land,
and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid . . .

(Leviticus 26, 6)

This is indeed a universal aspiration expressed in modern parlance as the "freedom from fear". But the blessing does not conclude with this negative assurance of security against sudden disturbance but rather on the positive note of perfect blessing for all who bless us, in accordance with the divine promise to Abraham:

וַאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ
וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר
וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה׃

And I will bless them that bless thee,
and him that curseth thee will I curse;
and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

(Genesis 12, 3)

These same sentiments are repeated in the following words by one of the last in the line of the Hebrew prophets, Zechariah (8, 13):

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר הֱיִיתֶם קְלָלָה בַּגּוֹיִם
בֵּית יְהוּדָה וּבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל
כֵּן אוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם וְהֱיִיתֶם בְּרָכָה

אַל־תִּירָאוּ
תֶּחֱזַקְנָה יְדֵיכֶם׃

And it shall come to pass that, as ye were a curse among the nations,
O house of Judah and house of Israel,
so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing;
fear not,
but let your hands be strong.

NOTE

1 See previous chapter.

BALAAM AND HIS ASS

This sidra abounds in difficult passages but undoubtedly the most puzzling is Balaam's encounter with the ass and its vocal performance. The ass' opening of its mouth to speak has provided an easy target for scoffers and sceptics. It is an extreme instance of deviation from the laws of nature, in which speech which was exclusively bestowed on man, is here granted to the beast.

Our Sages in the Ethics of the Fathers included the "mouth of the ass" among those things which were created "on the Sabbath eve at twilight" (Avot 5, 6). What is the meaning of this Rabbinic dictum? The author of the Mishnaic commentary *Tiferet Israel* makes the following comment:

> This was on the first Sabbath eve after the Creation. But this does not imply that they were actually created then. It cannot be assumed that the ram for the sacrifice of Isaac discovered by Abraham and Balaam's ass existed, on the basis of this, for thousands of years and that Scriptures would not even mention this great miracle. What is meant is that creation had been invested by God with the power of bringing forth these wonders at the appropriate time.

This approach is based on Maimonides' explanation of miracles, which he himself refers to, in the same context:

> We have already mentioned that our Sages did not believe in the continued operation of Divine creativity. Rather they maintained that He implanted in nature, as the very beginning, the potential power of bringing forth all that was necessary, whether the event was something continuous which we call natural, or something of rare occurrence, which we term a miracle.

BRETTLER (BIBLE)

[1] *"How wonderful are Your tents"* From the third prophecy of Balaam (Num. 24:5), and an introduction to a mosaic of Bible verses taken to refer to the synagogue. In its biblical context, "tents" and "abodes" denote the Israelite encampment. In the singular, they refer specifically to the Tabernacle (the *mishkan*) in the wilderness and thus serve as an appropriate reference for a prayer upon entering the synagogue.

[2] *"I* [va'ani] *by Your great love, enter"* From Psalm 5:8, a lament asking God to let the worshiper pray at the Temple. The word "I" predominates, as it comes first in the sentence. Stylistically, three of the five verses here begin with *va'ani*, emphasizing intense personalism. *(p. 52)*

DORFF (THEOLOGY)

[1] *"How wonderful are Your tents"* It is hard to enter a space where we meet other people, let alone where we meet God. Our opening prayer thus piles on synonyms for places of worship ("tents," "abodes," "house," "holy shrine," "house of dwelling,") to makes us feel *(p. 52)*

ELLENSON (MODERN LITURGIES)

[1] *"How wonderful are Your tents"* As a prayer for private recitation upon entering the synagogue, this has been a staple element in virtually all liberal

FRANKEL (A WOMAN'S VOICE)

[1] *"How wonderful are Your tents"* How peculiar that we Jews begin our morning prayers by reciting the blessing forced from the mouth of the pagan prophet Balaam by divine fiat! For when the Moabite king Balak commanded Balaam to curse the Israelites who were threatening to overrun his territory, Balaam found himself compelled to bless them instead. Perhaps we are to take this as an object lesson, surrendering ourselves to praise God whether we will it or not. *(p. 53)*

A. ENTERING THE SYNAGOGUE: *MAH TOVU*

[Upon entering the synagogue:]

[1] How wonderful are Your tents, Jacob, Your abodes, Israel! [2] I, by Your great love, enter Your house, and bow down reverently before Your holy shrine. [3] Adonai, I love Your house of dwelling, the abode of Your glory. [4] I will humbly bow down low before Adonai, my Maker.

J. HOFFMAN (TRANSLATION)

[1] *"How wonderful"* The Hebrew word *mah,* though literally "what," is commonly used the way we use "how" in English, and so it can start an exclamation (as here), not just a question. ("What good are Your tents?" is obviously wrong.)

As for "wonderful": Others, "goodly" or "good." "Great" is tempting, too. The Hebrew word

[2] *"I, by Y*
put "I" first
lines, as in th
lines are tak
original con
contrast. In
5:8), the co
abhorrent to
love...." Ot
Hebrew cou
who...."

[2] *"Reverer*
"revering Yo
You."

ל. [2]וַאֲנִי בְּרֹב
זְיכַל קָדְשְׁךָ
מְקוֹם מִשְׁכַּן
כָה לְפָנֵי יְי

[3] *"House*
seems to be t
the first line
Balaam's fam
the Temple.
reference to th
"tent," but
kodsh'kha ("
term, and *e*
proper sac
generalized to

MY PEOPLES PRAYER BOOK VOL. 3
L HOFFMAN

[2] *"I, by Your great love"* We purposely put "I" first in this and two following lines, as in the Hebrew. But the Hebrew lines are taken out of context. In their original context, the "I" is included for contrast. In this case (taken from Ps. 5:8), the context is: "An [evil] man is abhorrent to God, but I, by Your great love...." Out of context, the "I" in Hebrew could mean "I am the one who...."

[2] *"Reverently"* More literally, "revering You" or "with reverence for You."

[Upon entering the synagogue:]

[1]מַה טֹּבוּ אׇהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב, מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל. [2]וַאֲנִי בְּרֹב חַסְדְּךָ אָבוֹא בֵיתֶךָ, אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֶל הֵיכַל קׇדְשְׁךָ בְּיִרְאָתֶךָ. [3]יְיָ, אָהַבְתִּי מְעוֹן בֵּיתֶךָ, וּמְקוֹם מִשְׁכַּן כְּבוֹדֶךָ. [4]וַאֲנִי אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְאֶכְרָעָה, אֶבְרְכָה לִפְנֵי יְיָ עֹשִׂי.

[3] *"House of dwelling"* The point seems to be to create a parallel between the first line (which is the beginning of Balaam's famous blessing to Israel) and the Temple. So here we have *bayit,* a reference to the Temple, in parallel with "tent," but also (above) *heikhal kodsh'kha* ("holy shrine"), a similar term, and *et ratson,* a reference to proper sacrificial times (later generalized to times of prayer too).

Below, we find *mishkan [k'vodekha]* ("abode [of Your glory]") in parallel with "abode," above. Admittedly, *(p. 54)*

L. Hoffman (History)

In itself, the Birkhot Hashachar *is preparatory to the rest of the morning service. It begins, however, with its own internal preparation, consisting of:* Mah Tovu *(a prayer for entering the synagogue); prayers for putting on* tallit *and* t'fillin; *and two morning poems,* Adon Olam *and* Yigdal.

"How wonderful are Your tents" Fine irony accompanies the prayer that is said upon arriving at synagogue: a line from the biblical story of Baalam (Num. 24:5), an idolatrous prophet hired by King Balak, Israel's enemy, to curse the Israelites *(p. 54)*

Kushner & Polen (Chasidism)

[1] *"How wonderful* [mah tovu] *are Your tents, Jacob"* Karen Kushner once offered the following observation. These are the words of the non-Jewish prophet Balaam, while overlookinging encamped tribes of Israel spread out below him. In its biblical context (Num. 24:5), Balaam must be speaking what amounts to a poem of praise, as if to say, "All the Jews are together, and the scene is wonderful to behold." Now we see why *Mah Tovu* occurs at the very beginning of the morning liturgy. We should understand its imagery in light of what is physically happening in the sanctuary at the time of its recitation. Everyone is putting on his or her *tallit.* And this ritual customarily begins by draping *(p. 54)*

Tradi

My P
volur
Jewis
resou
most
of th
spiritu
sages
Sc
prisin
Peopl
standi
to off

This f
comp
Birkh
surro
Morn
establ
all ou
under
praye
new d
affirm
Vo
Blessin
with a
exactl
explai
and hc
meani
from e
mover
Hasha
Rabbi
myriac
Ev
prayer
richne
Prayer
denon
tion t
with tl

[5] I offer my prayer to You, Adonai, at this time of favor, God, in Your great mercy: answer me with Your saving truth.

[5] וַאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי לְךָ, יְיָ, עֵת רָצוֹן; אֱלֹהִים,
בְּרָב־חַסְדֶּךָ, עֲנֵנִי בֶּאֱמֶת יִשְׁעֶךָ.

BRETTLER (BIBLE)

[3] *"Adonai, I love Your house of dwelling"* Psalm 26:8, another lament, requesting God's help based on the worshiper's past piety, namely, he loved going to the Temple.

[4] *"I will humbly bow down low"* A modification of Psalm 95:6, but with tense and person changed to fit the context.

[5] *"I offer my prayer"* A final lament (Ps. 69:14) that transitions the worshiper from the setting of prayer (Temple/synagogue) and ancillary rituals (bowing) to the core issue: prayer and its efficacy. It also echoes God's "love" *(chesed)* of verse 2.

DORFF (THEOLOGY)

at home. Still, it is not *our* home, but God's, a frightening possibility, perhaps. So the possessive pronouns are given in the second person, "Your," not the third person, "His," to indicate that even God can be addressed familiarly.

The many houses of worship listed here suggest also that the accidental features of this specific "house" for prayer matter less than what takes place there. And what is that? "I enter Your house" that "I love." There "I will bow down low before Adonai, my Maker." I will also "offer my prayer," hoping that it is "at this time of favor," and that "[You will] answer me with Your saving truth." The verbs, then, describe the *process* of prayer, and its purpose—to acknowledge God's dominion, to praise God for the gifts in our lives, and to pray for deliverance from the many things and conditions that limit us. We trust that our prayers at a "time of favor" will help us do what is necessary to experience God's deliverance.

Judaism prefers communal worship because, as the Rabbis see it (Ber. 53a; R.H. 32b; Meg. 27b), "A numerous people is the glory of the king" (Prov. 14:28)—meaning that since public prayer gives more honor to God, it will likely be more effective than private prayer. The Talmud, therefore, interprets a "time of favor," as a "time of public worship" (Ber. 8a), and most prayers refer to worshipers in the plural, as part of a

community. Here, however, all the verbs are in the first person singular: *I* will "enter Your house" that "*I* love"; *I* "will bow down low" and "offer *my* prayer to You" there; and *I* hope that You "answer *me* with Your saving truth." Our first morning prayer thus teaches us that we begin our communal journey as individuals. As Martin Buber held, we must recognize our own unique "I" before entering into a relationship with a "Thou"—whether with God or with other human beings.

ELLENSON (MODERN LITURGIES)

Einhorn *(Olath Tamid)* offered it in German only. Geiger, *UPB,* Mordecai Kaplan (1963 edition of the Reconstructionist *Daily Prayer Book*), the Dutch *Tov L'hodot,* and the British Liberal *Siddur Lev Chadash* supply an additional introductory paragraph, "At the dawn I seek You," a Sephardi poem by eleventh-century Solomon Ibn Gabirol.

FRANKEL (A WOMAN'S VOICE)

In this prayer, we assume a posture of humility as we prepare to enter the physical and spiritual dwelling-place of God's *k'dushah* ("holiness"). No fewer than six synonyms for "place" are found within this short paragraph: *ohel* ("tent"), reminiscent of the *ohel mo'ed,* the Tent of Meeting that housed the ark in the desert; *mishkan* ("dwelling-place"), the term used for the portable Tabernacle; *bayit* ("house"), an intimate domestic space sheltering families from the elements; *heikhal* ("palace"), the abode of a king; *m'on* ("refuge"), where wild beasts seek safety from predators; and *makom* ("place"), one of the many names of God, omnipresent in our lives and experience. We begin our formal worship by orienting ourselves in space, for if we are disoriented, we will fail to direct our prayers with appropriate *kavvanah* ("direction") and miss the mark.

We get not only spatial markers to prepare our entry into the place of prayer, but emotional compass points as well. Into this special place we are to bring with us *yirah* ("reverence") and *ahavah* ("love"), as well as humility (through bowing) and blessing (in returning to God what we receive). In assuming these different postures, each placing us in a different relationship to God—as subject, peer, and benefactor—we prepare ourselves to enter the full experience of prayer, wherever it takes us.

And yet, despite all this preparation, we also acknowledge that our success in this venture will depend on more than our will or willfulness. We end our prelude—as we began it—with an appeal for *chesed* ("unconditional love"). For no matter how hard we try to adopt an appropriate attitude to prayer, no matter how ready we think we are to express our gratitude and praise, we will always fall short because we lack *emet yishekha,* that "redemptive truth" that only God can risk.

21

ISBN

J. HOFFMAN (TRANSLATION)

"house of dwelling" doesn't mean much more than house. But we lack sufficient words for "house" in English ("residence," "berth," "pad," etc., all miss the mark).

[3] *"Abode of Your glory"* More literally, "place of the abode of Your glory."

[4] *"Humbly bow down low"* Three words in Hebrew each meaning "bow" are used in a row here. The last comes from the root that also means "bless," and so an alternative here is "bow down low and offer blessing."

[5] *"I offer my prayer to You"* See Volume 4, *Seder K'riat Hatorah (The Torah Service)*, p. 69.

L. HOFFMAN (HISTORY)

on the eve of battle. On a cliff overlooking the Israelite camp, however, he is unable to curse them. Instead, he says, "How wonderful are Your tents, Jacob...." The Rabbis understand "tents" to mean "synagogues," prompting them to reinterpret Balaam's messages: How wonderful are our synagogues!

[2] *"I, by Your great love"* Manuscripts tell fascinating tales. A scribe of *Machzor Vitry*, the primary French medieval prayer manual, accentuates this sentence, by writing it in especially large script. Since it contains ten Hebrew words, Jews used it to establish the presence of a *minyan* (a quorum of ten) for prayer. Believing (as many do, even now) that pointing to people attracts the "evil eye," they had each individual recite one of the words of the sentence. When the last word was reached, they knew ten people had gathered.

KUSHNER & POLEN (CHASIDISM)

the entire prayer shawl over one's head. But, since everyone is busy with his or her own private ritual, people rarely have an opportunity to survey the entire scene. To someone watching it (from above) however, all those Jews would appear to have literally made their own personal tents! "How wonderful are Your tents, Jacob!"

22

S'FAT EMET
LANGUAGE OF TRUTH
GREEN

3

On the verse: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!" (Num. 24:5). Holiness follows Israel wherever they may be, as Scripture says: "In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I shall come unto you and bless you" (Ex. 20:21). Now the Land of Israel and the Temple have a permanent and unique relationship with the Jewish people. This is referred to in "your dwelling-places, O Israel." But wherever else Israel happen to be, even in a temporary way, there, too, holiness is revealed to them. [The following verse reads:] "Like streams that flow," for the wellsprings of Torah indeed flow with them wherever they dwell. This is why Scripture refers here to Jacob, who wandered outside the Land. The same was true in the wilderness, when they had not yet entered the Land. . . .

4:163f.

Offered in 1896, the very year when Theodor Herzl's The Jewish State *was published, the Sefat Emet here as elsewhere in these teachings is seeking to confirm a hasidic point of view on the Holy Land and the Jews' relationship to it. Ger was in fact less opposed to Zionism than were many other hasidic groups, and a number of its followers were to settle in the Land of Israel between the two world wars. But this sermon makes it clear that while Israel and the land are indeed spiritually bound together, holiness is found in the temporary "tents" of Jacob in Poland and elsewhere as well as in the permanent "dwelling-places" of Israel in Jerusalem or on the Temple Mount.*

4

. . . It is taught that "the broken tablets lie in the Ark." Surely the gift God gave us was not for naught. If we were not yet ready to receive that gift, it was hidden away in the Ark.

Contemporary Reflection

In the midst of our book of wandering, we read of how a Moabite sovereign engages a seer from a distant land in the hopes of cursing and thus defeating the Israelites. In the central irony of a fanciful tale that opens with "[he] saw" (22:2), neither King Balak nor his hireling Balaam are able to "see" the Israelites. Balaam and Balak position and re-position themselves in an attempt to assess the multitude that "hides the earth from view" (22:5). The two travel from point to point without gaining the perspective they seek.

Only when the Holy One opens his eyes can Balaam see more than a portion of the people he has been sent to curse. He sees the tents that are the homes and the gathering places of the women, children, and men who live as a community marked by care and mutual respect. Seemingly stunned by his newfound perspective on the Israelite compound, Balaam describes the people in language that evokes Eden: "Like palm-groves that stretch out, / Like gardens beside a river, / Like aloes planted by יהוה, / Like cedars beside the water; / Their boughs drip with moisture, / Their roots have abundant water" (24:6–7). Have the eyes of the desert diviner cleared sufficiently so that he can see a people who one day would have the power to make the desert bloom? Do his words reflect dreams of cities with palm-lined boulevards and garden neighborhoods that would, in the future, challenge and transform the arid landscape?

For a moment, Balaam sees a community as it can be: a society of mutual dependence and trust, a community where each person is treated with dignity, and he exclaims: *Mah tovu ohalecha, Yaakov / mishk'notecha, Yisrael* ("How fair are your tents, O Jacob, / Your dwellings, O Israel"; 24:5). But when Balaam extends his description, the utopian vision fades, and the people become just like any other who seek domination over their foes. He concludes, "Blessed are they who bless you, / Accursed they who curse you!" (24:9). As in the beginning of this portion, the world is divided into two: those who seek to maintain power, and those who attempt to usurp it—the victors and the vanquished, the blessed and the cursed.

The concluding story of this portion (25:1–9) illustrates the tragedy of seeing the world dichotomized in this way. Exhausted from a journey that seems to have no end, the Israelite men forget who they are. They forget their privileged relationship with the One who brought them out of slavery.

Let's move beyond the dichotomous thinking that blinded Balaam in this portion.

Balaam's recognition of Israel's goodness has become part of our liturgy known as the *Mah tovu* (literally "how good are"): *Mah tovu ohalecha, Yaakov / mishk'notecha, Yisrael* ("How fair are your tents, O Jacob, / Your dwellings, O Israel!"). The Rabbis who created our liturgy recognized the power of this sentence, and so they intentionally positioned it as the opening of a daily prayer sequence that fixes the individual in the context of the community of Israel. They expand Balaam's blessing with four verses from Psalms written in the first person. In so doing, they enable each worshipper to claim a place as a member of the collective.

> I, through Your abundant love, enter Your house;
> I bow down in awe at Your holy temple (Psalm 5:8).
>
> יהוה, I love Your temple abode,

The dwelling-place of Your glory (Psalm 26:8).
Let me bow down and kneel before God my maker (Psalm 95:6).
As for me, may my prayer come to You, O יהוה,
At a favorable moment;
O God, in Your abundant faithfulness,
Answer me with Your sure deliverance (Psalm 69:14).

With these phrases, the Rabbis transform Balaam's God of war into a God of *chesed* (loving-kindness), and each Jew who utters these words becomes the prayer. In the parashah, Balaam follows his original utterance of the verse with two descriptions of Israel: an Israel that lives in a lush and verdant world, and a nation that is victorious against enemies. But Balaam's utterance is also incomplete, which is why our liturgy expands it—and also shifts the focus to the relationship of the individual with God.

I propose a third reading, one that returns to the evocation of the community as a source of power and that extends it, connecting the people with God and with their unique challenge.

Consider the following combination of 24:5 with the words from the book of Isaiah:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwelling places, O Israel! (24:5)
I, the Holy One, have called you in righteousness,
and taken you by the hand.
I am the One who created you
and made you a covenant people,
a light to the nations:
to open eyes that are blind,
to bring the captive out of confinement (Isaiah 42:6–7).

This clear challenge invites us to move beyond the narrow, dichotomous thinking that blinded Balak and Balaam in this portion. These verses from Isaiah anticipate—and fulfill—the subsequent prophetic call about tents and dwellings: "Enlarge the space for your tent (*oholech*); / do not spare the canvas for your dwelling-place (*mishk'notayich*)" (Isaiah 54:2). Here the prophet urges Jerusalem—personified as a woman—to widen her tent with joy and make room for the multitudes who will enter the capital city. An expanded tent in a gracious and open city reflects the utopian and achievable goal of moving beyond oppositional concepts of native/stranger, friend/foe, chosen/rejected, male/female.

Are we ready to open our tents and our hearts to those who wish to dream—and then to build sacred communities that not only tolerate diversity and difference but also celebrate them? Can we move beyond narrow, divisive definitions and descriptions that are no longer useful? Might we transform our communities by welcoming those who come into our houses of worship with words that describe what our community can be? When our dwelling places become sanctuaries for all seekers of peace and justice, when our homes welcome all who no longer objectify the other, then we can truthfully declare, *Mah tovu*—how good, how fair, are our tents. —*Sue Levi Elwell*

25

Balak

Mah Tovu as the Psychological Introduction to Prayer

Rabbi Reuven Kimelman

Prayer without preparation is like exercise without limbering up. Not only the body but also the mind and emotions have to be attuned to prayer. The Jewish prayerbook understood the task sufficiently to focus on bodily movements as a way of limbering up for active prayer.[1] But what about the emotions and the mind? Is there an emotional or intellectual, indeed theological introduction to prayer in the prayerbook itself? Happily both are available. As we shall see, the opening prayers of the morning liturgy—the *Mah Tovu* and the *Adon Olam*—serve as the emotional and intellectual introductions to prayer.

Mah Tovu forms the opening prayer of most traditional rites as well as of all modern denominations.[2] It runs as follows:

מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנותך ישראל 1.
How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!
(Numbers 24:5)

ואני ברב חסדך אבא ביתך 2.
As for me, by virtue of the abundance of Your Grace, I enter your house.

אשתחוה אל היכל קדשך בידאתך 2a.
I shall prostrate myself to Your sanctuary in awe of You(Psalm 5:8)

יי אהבתי מעון ביתך 3.
Adonai, I love Your house.

ומקום משכן כבודך 3a.
The place where Your glory dwells (Psalm 26:8)

ואני אשתחוה ואכרעה אברכה 4.
I shall prostrate, bow and kneel

לפני יי עשי 4a.
Before Adonai, my Maker (Psalm 95:6?).

ואני תפלתי לך יי עת רצון 5.
And as for me, may my prayer [come] to you Adonai at a favorable time.

אלהים ברב-חסדך 5a.
God, in the abundance of your grace

ענני באמת ישעך 5b.
Answer me with your unfailing help (Psalm 69:14).

There are so many questions we have about this prayer. Why, does it come at the beginning of the liturgy? Why, of all prayers, does it have a special locus in the synagogue? What is its function in the liturgy? And above all, what does it mean? The answers to the latter questions help also explain the former ones. Mah Tovu is not only the prelude to prayer, but primarily an entrance prayer to the synagogue. In antiquity, entrance to a temple was an awesome event. Those religions in which cultic procedures were paramount required special entrance preparations such as ritual cleansing, reciting pledges, or undergoing examinations for physical defects. In criticism of the demanding only these requirements, the psalmist asks:

(1)

> Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
> Who may stand in His holy place?

One answer is:

> He that has clean hands and a pure heart,
> Who does not long after what is worthless,
> And has not taken an oath in deceit (Psalm 24:4).

Another is:

> He who lives without blame,
> Who does what is right,
> And in his heart acknowledges the truth:
> Whose tongue is not given to evil;
> Who has never done harm to his fellow,
> Or borne reproach for [his acts toward] his neighbor.
> (Psalm 15:2-3)

All ancient sanctuaries had entrance requirements, be they ritual, be they moral. The synagogue entrance liturgy—Mah Tovu—makes no such pretense despite the overwhelming presence of psalmist ingredients. Its concern with inclusion overrides any exclusionary considerations. As we shall see, Mah Tovu serves as a threshhold prayer which seeks to help the to-be worshipper overcome his diffidence upon entering the Lord's house. As such, it does not open as invitingly as the Kabbalat Shabbat service with a psalm such as 95 saying:

(2)

> Come, let us sing joyously to the Lord,
> Raise a shout for our rock and deliverer;
> Let us come into His presence with praise;
> Let us raise a shout for Him in song.

or as exuberantly as Psalm 100:4.

> Enter His gates with praise,
> His courts with acclamation.
> Praise Him! Bless His name!

Mah Tovu, as presently constructed, opens with a verse from the Book of Numbers followed by selections with some alterations, of Psalms. Note that none of the verses are juxtaposed in their biblical context. The biblical elements have been reconstituted to create a new poetic piece. It will no longer do to discover their biblical meaning. The rearrangment of notes produces a new symphony. What was the liturgist's aim in recontextualizing the biblical material to orchestrate a new liturgical threshhold of prayer? Since this is a prayer expressed poetically we must inquire not only about its

content, but also about its form. Let us attempt to trace the flow of both the feelings and ideas by a line-by-line analysis.

The opening line is strange not only because it alone derives from the Book of Numbers, but also because its formulator was none other than the soothsayer Balaam who had been hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel encamped in the wilderness. One medieval authority found this so outrageous, he simply skipped over it. [3] Why did our poet select it?

From the Bible, all we know is that Balaam, swept away in rapt admiration of the Israelite encampment, could not utter the curse. The Talmud adds: it was upon perceiving their tents so pitched that no one might see what was going on in the homes of the others that compelled him to burst into praise of Israel. Since the theme of modesty has little to do with what follow, commentators have been drawn to the talmudic view which understands the tents as schools and synagogues.[4] Once the verse had been so overhauled, synagogues and academies crop up so high on the horizon that the ancient desert tents disappear from view. Having been updated to incorporate contemporary institutions, the verse can serve to introduce the worshipper to the two places of prayer—the academy and the synagogue. It is not unusual in liturgy for biblical verses to become disengaged from their original meaning and assume talmudic ones. Liturgically, *midrash* becomes *pshat*!

Still the question remains: Why allude to Balaam when there are such exquisite openers from the Psalms as "I rejoiced when they said to me we are going to the House of the Lord." (Psalm 122:1)?[5]

The genius of the selection becomes evident after understanding the function of the whole prayer. In the meantime, let us continue our analysis with the second verse. "As for me, by virtue of the abundance of Your grace I enter Your house." While the opening verse is focused on the "synagogue," this one is centered on the self as if to say, It is all very well that the synagogue is so lovely, but what am I doing here? How do I fit in? Am I able to leave mundane reality and cross into sacred space? It is out of awareness of God's ever-present graciousness, responds the verse, that one dares to cross the threshhold knowing full well that by entering the synagogue he is coming into "*Your house.*"

But, if it is not my house, why do I not feel more estranged? It is as if I knocked on someone's door, only to find a party in progress. Such an excruciating self-consciousness! Suddenly, the host appears smiling and while placing an arm warmly over my shoulder, apologizes saying "If I only knew you were in town, I would have invited you." Here God's abundant kindness whispers to me, the would-be worshipper, "It is My home, come in." So, relieved, I bow down in the direction of the holy sanctuary (line 2a). While biblically, God's house and sanctuary allude to the ancient Temple, liturgically they refer to the synagogue and ark. Indeed, having wavered at the entrance of the synagogue, I now take my first step forward, gratefully prostrating myself towards the Holy Ark, which is located across from the entrance.[6]

Finding myself prostrate before the ark, my feelings are buoyed by an enveloping sense of God's awe almost as Jacob of old who upon envisioning God's presence,

blurted, "How awesome is this place!" (Genesis 26:17).[7] Overwhelmed by such stirrings of awe, I realize how inadequate my previous gestures were and redouble my efforts not only of prostrating, but also of bowing and kneeling as did King Solomon in the ancient Temple.[8] The first of the three synonyms in Hebrew אשתחוה repeats the previous bowing. Piling up synonyms compounds the effect so that I am bowing, on my knees, flat on my face. But now I am no longer bowing *towards the ark*, but "before Adonai, my Maker." Heretofore, the ark was the available symbol of God. Prior to feeling God's awe, that sufficed. Now having given myself totally over to God, the opaque symbol of the ark gives way before the transparent presence of God. In talmudic parlance, I no longer "stand in awe of the Temple, but in awe of He who commanded with regard to the Temple."[9]

So why am I not praying? True, I feel in the presence of God, but is this the opportune moment? Should I be importuning God now? Are there not times for prayer? Even King David, fretting over this, entreated:

> "Master of the world, when I pray to you may it be a favorable time," as it is written, "And as for me, may my prayer to you Adonai be at a favorable time."[10]

Just as diffidence about being in the right place was overcome by awareness of the"abundance of Your grace," ברב חסדך so here doubts about timing are resolved by awareness of the "abundance of your grace." Once getting through, there is no being put on hold.

My apprehensions with regard to the place and the moment have been met. By the grace of God, I can finally begin to pray.[11] So please, "answer me with Your unfailing help." Awareness of God's presence intensifies the desire for His closeness. It is such intimacy which allows me to believe that my needs could be His concerns.

Of the whole *Mah Tovu*, only the last three Hebrew words consist of prayer. The rest constitutes prayer therapy. It outlines a strategy for working through the psychological inhibitions with regard to prayer. It is an intensely personal activity. We do *Mah Tovu* a disservice by underscoring its public function. Those who see in line 2 only ten words for ascertaining the presence of a minyan;[12] or those who find it adequate to attribute the three-fold repetition of genuflection terms to an allusion to thrice-daily prayer[13] or who see in the expression "favorable time" עת רצון a reference to the hour of public prayer[14] miss the point.

The decisive factor in selecting the verses from Psalms was that they begin by mentioning "I/me." So overriding was this consideration that line four (Psalm 95:6) not only has its biblical plural form subverted into the singular,[15] but its own beginning "Come" is lopped off in favor of "I." Indeed, the Hebrew word for "I" is the leitmotif of the whole composition. No wonder that the first liturgical attestation of the beginnings of Mah Tovu are included under "private prayers."[16]

The crux of the problem of prayer according to Mah Tovu is the all-pervasive sense of self. The word "I" constantly reverberates out of the aperture of the mouth. So much of our prattle is nothing more than mouthing various forms of the word "I" The transition

from self-centered consciousness to divine-centered consciousness is made through the repeated reference to "bowing" and to "Your abundant grace," which serve as pulleys going up and down, raising the focus from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Release from the self allows for attentiveness to the divine.

#3

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Prayer comes to pass...(in) the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts...(when) we forget ourselves and become aware of God."[17] *Mah Tovu* never succeeds in in achieving that self-trancendence which totally disregards the self, but in struggling with the problems of self it limits the ego's stranglehold on consciousness allowing for the divine to come into focus.

To return to the question of Balaam—why does his encomium open the composition? It is, of course, one thing if we testify about ourselves; another if wicked Balaam does.[18] On the other hand, if Mah Tovu is showing us a way to wrestle with the issue of prayer when crossing the threshhold of a synagogue, what better example than a man who through coming to curse, surveyed Israel's places of worship and ended up blessing! The gap we have to traverse is so much smaller.

References:

1. See Reuven Kimelman, "The Blessings of Prayerobics," *The B'nai B'rith International Jewish Monthly* (February 1986) pp 12-17.
2. For the various rites, see A. Hilvitz, *Sinai* 78 (5736) pp. 263-278. For the denominations, see the Reform prayerbook, *Gates of Prayer*, p. 51; the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Sabbath Prayer Book*, pp. 4-5; the Conservative prayerbook, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, pp. 2-3; and the Orthodox prayerbook, *The Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals*, pp. 101-102.
3. Maharshal, *Responsa* 64.
4. *B. Sanhedrin* 105b.
5. This verse does follow Numbers 24:5 in the medieval rite of Mahzor Vitry 89, p. 56.
6. So *Beit Yosef ad Tur Shulkhan Aruch, Orakh Hayyim* 150, see Saul Lieberman, Vol 5, p. 1200.
7. For present purposes, line 3 is excluded from the analysis. The formal reason is because of its exclusion in some rites. The informal reason is because of its mention of "love," albeit of God's house, which seems too facile at this juncture. Its inclusion may be due to the theological tendency which underscores the compatibility of awe and love—a combination which is deemed unique to the divine-human relationship (*Sifre Deuteronomy 32*). It is not uncommon to seek to have the awe and love of God placed in our hearts. In fact, the morning prayer before the Sh'ma alludes to Ps. 86:11 by saying, "Unite our hearts in awe and love of your name" even though the original makes no mention of love.
8. 1 Kings 8:54.
9. *B. Yevamot* 6b. Otherwise it is problematic to bow down to an ark, see M.M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah*, vol 19, pp. 310f.
10. *J. Makkot* 2:7.
11. So Ibn Ezra to Psalm 66:20.
12. Rav Hai Gaon, *Otzar HaGeonim alYoma* 22a, Responsa #18, pp. 8f. and subsequent authorities.
13. Following *Midrash Tanhuma, Kee Tavo* 1.
14. Following *B. Berakhot* 8a.
15. In opposition to the ruling of the *Tur, Shulkhan Aruch, Orakh Hayyim*, 116. Cf., however, Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshutah*, vol. 5, p. 1222f.
16. *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, ed. Goldschmidt, p. 182.
17. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, p. 15.
18. *Midrash Songs of Songs* Rabbah 6.9.5.

• Reprinted from *Perspectives*, a publication of CLAL, by permission of the author.

MyJewishLearning

THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Parashat Balak

Seeing Their Faces But Not Their Doors: Housing, Homelessness, A

The Israelites' dwellings in the wilderness provide us with a model for ensuring the existence and dignity of adequate housing for all members of society.

By ashat Balak

The following article is reprinted with permission from SocialAction.com.

What is a good place to live?

"*Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'acov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*--how good are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel." This famous line from Parsahat Balak, spoken by a non-Jewish prophet about Israel, seems simple enough. The great medieval commentator Rashi, however, sees another level of meaning in it. He tells us that Balaam spoke these words because the entrances to the homes of the people were not aligned with one another.

It seems odd that of all the things that a prophet could praise about Israel, especially since he is praising them against his will, Balaam decided to praise the fact that they cannot see into each other's homes. But perhaps it is not so strange that what makes a dwelling place "good" is the ability to have privacy within it.

Indeed, this idea is so important to Rashi that it appears twice in his commentary on this portion: Just a few lines earlier, in chapter 24, verse 2, Rashi explains that the words, "Balaam raised his eyes and saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes," actually mean that he saw that their entrances were not aligned with one another, so that one could not peek into the tent of his friend.

We know that conditions in the desert must have been very difficult. Nevertheless, Israel was able to ensure that every family had a space of their own, a place that was theirs.

It is enlightening to contrast this with modern conditions of poverty in the U.S.A. The U.S. government, claiming to respond to the demands of the people, has made it more and more difficult for the poor to have a decent place to live.

Not long ago, Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York provided us with an excellent example of how this sort of policy works: If a person refuses to go to a homeless shelter, they can be sent to jail. If a person does go to a shelter for the homeless when sent there by police, but once he or she is there refuses to do anything asked by the shelter, they can be thrown back onto the street--where,

presumably, the problem will be taken care of by an arrest shortly afterwards.

It is curious that a modern city, with an enormous amount of resources--certainly far more than a tribal people wandering through the desert--is nevertheless far less able to provide a decent place to live to all its community. Oddly enough, it is not even a matter of money: Case after case has shown that with programs that encourage ownership of housing, the conditions of people's lives materially increase--along with the safety of their neighborhood--and for far less money than running a sting operation against homelessness. (Habitat for Humanity is only one example of how successful a program like that can be.)

Yet, instead of attempting to provide decent housing for the poor, the little money that is spent is directed toward creating homeless shelters, which are, in addition to physically dangerous places at times, extremely demoralizing to individuals, and often inhumane to families trying to stay together.

Why is this? It seems that we need to punish people for being poor. The ideology behind such laws understands poverty as the obvious result of slothfulness and greed. It insists that no one could be poor by accident, that those who are poor are of color, are "welfare queens" or perhaps are one of the "crazy" people who got dumped during the deinstitutionalization of mental hospitals.

Even this last notion is somewhat of a concession for one who holds this ideology, who often believes that these are people who probably prefer to live on the street anyway, and besides, what we really need to do, for their own good, is to lock them up, where we can't see them.

Even when people are provided with homes to live in that are not shelters, modern welfare housing is a disgrace. Private companies fail to do repairs on their properties to create a space that is even minimally livable: plumbing ceases to work, vermin move in, walls and doors sometimes have gaping holes. It is small surprise that the people who live in these places despair of a better life.

Rashi's comment strikes so deeply to the heart of what it means to have "a good place to live." The people Israel were moving forward toward their own land, and though not yet there, they made, as a community, homes that created an atmosphere of respect for one another.

Just as in every other community, there were undoubtedly those who were richer, and those who were poorer; yet every family in Israel had a space in which to live, a place that was respectable, and respected. From these homes, they were able to envision a brighter future, one in their own land, which they could work to build with their own hands, and to improve both it and themselves. The decency of their homes was the base from which they built our future.

*"**Sadness and joy are not opposites**," Michaelson writes. "They exist as two notes of a sometimes dissonant, sometimes harmonious, **chord of quiet awareness**. Learning to experience and **accept one's sadness** as part of the unfolding perfection of Being is to make the darkness visible, and beautiful. It is a gate into deeply knowing that all is God."*

The Gate of Sadness

Jewish and Buddhist Teachings on the Broken Heart

by Jay Michaelson

Sometimes a crumb falls from the tables of joy
Sometimes a bone is flung.
To some people love is given,
To others, only heaven.
Langston Hughes

In the Jewish tradition, becoming filled with the Divine is described in many ways, including *devekut* (cleaving, or merging with, God), *achdut* (unifying), and others. Since ontologically, we are always nothing but God, these terms must represent primarily epistemological or psychological states. God is always here; but sometimes our attention is not.

It is tempting to wax rhapsodic about becoming filled with the *shechinah*, the immanent Presence of God. But how do we regard these other times? The times at which our illusory wills and selfish interests seem to us to be the entirety of life's meaning?

Traditional Jews begin every morning's prayer service with the words of a non-Jewish prophet, Balaam, who had been sent to curse the Israelites by Balak, an idolatrous king. On his journey, Balaam had been blind to the reality of God's presence, but when he arrived at the Israelite camp he was filled with insight, and in his joy uttered this well-known line: *mah tovu ohalecha ya'akov, mishkenotecha yisrael. How good are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling places, Israel.*

In the parallel structure of Balaam's speech, we can see a microcosm of the mind states of gadlut (great mind, when we know we are filled with God) and katnut (small mind, when we do not think we are). The "tents of Jacob" represent katnut – grasping mind; Ya'akov, whose first act was to grasp the ankle of his twin brother Esau; Jacob, who stole his brother's blessing and tried to live his life; mere tents. The "dwelling places of Israel" are gadlut; Yisrael, he who wrestles with, embraces God; the person who has become transformed; dwelling places made into mishkenot for the shechinah.

Yet Balaam does not say that only Israel's mishkenot are tov (good). He does not say how wonderful it is when (and only when) our finite tents are transformed into places for the Infinite. He says that both sides are good.

Moreover, according to the Zohar, the word Mah, which ordinarily means 'what' or 'how,' is a signifier of the shechinah. With this understanding, mah tovu teaches us that ultimate Goodness, the Presence of God, inheres both in our times of Yisrael, when it is obvious, and our times of Yaakov, when it is not. Devekut with God is all-inclusive. When we cry, when we feel isolated, when we encounter loneliness or pain – these too are tov, Good. All of our soul is purely God, even those parts which are absolutely sure that, whatever God is, they are not God, even those parts our egos regret or despise.

EXPANDED DIGITIAL EDITION

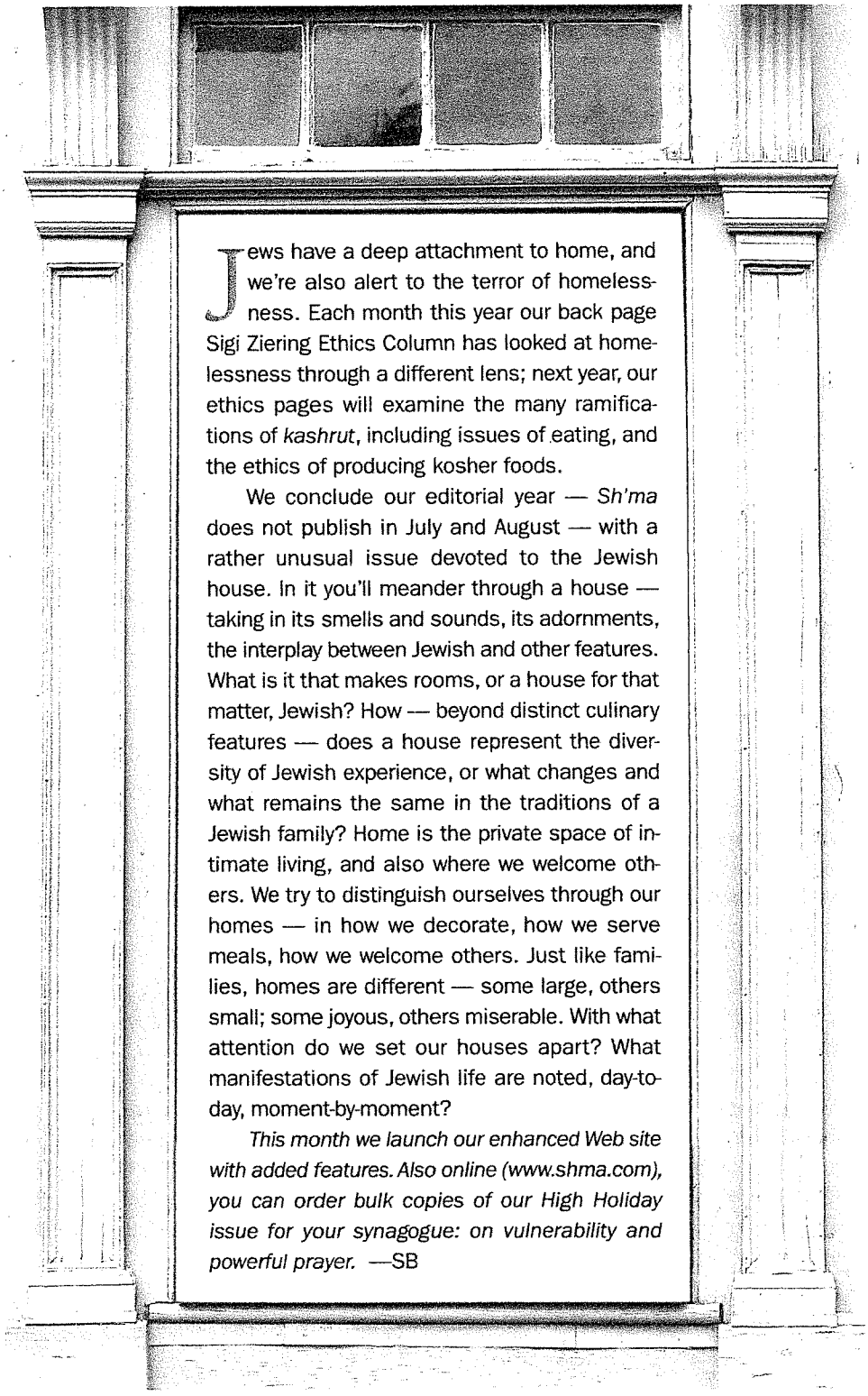
39/661
June 2009/
Sivan 5769
A publication of JTA MEDIA

Sh'ma שמע

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Jewish House

To subscribe:
877-568-SHMA
www.shma.com



Jews have a deep attachment to home, and we're also alert to the terror of homelessness. Each month this year our back page Sigi Ziering Ethics Column has looked at homelessness through a different lens; next year, our ethics pages will examine the many ramifications of *kashrut*, including issues of eating, and the ethics of producing kosher foods.

We conclude our editorial year — *Sh'ma* does not publish in July and August — with a rather unusual issue devoted to the Jewish house. In it you'll meander through a house — taking in its smells and sounds, its adornments, the interplay between Jewish and other features. What is it that makes rooms, or a house for that matter, Jewish? How — beyond distinct culinary features — does a house represent the diversity of Jewish experience, or what changes and what remains the same in the traditions of a Jewish family? Home is the private space of intimate living, and also where we welcome others. We try to distinguish ourselves through our homes — in how we decorate, how we serve meals, how we welcome others. Just like families, homes are different — some large, others small; some joyous, others miserable. With what attention do we set our houses apart? What manifestations of Jewish life are noted, day-to-day, moment-by-moment?

This month we launch our enhanced Web site with added features. Also online (www.shma.com), you can order bulk copies of our High Holiday issue for your synagogue: on vulnerability and powerful prayer. —SB

The Front Porch

LISA D. GRANT

I've lived in six different houses in four towns over the past 25 years. My favorites of these houses were the two that had front porches. Now, there was a lot about the interior of the houses that I liked as well, but the front porch was what I loved the best.

The front porch is a liminal space — both public and private. It faces the street, making it far more open to the world than a secluded back deck. It also invites visitors into the front hall — the most public of spaces inside the home. Like the *chuppah*, the porch is covered from above and open on the sides; it protects and welcomes.

The front porch is where public and private Judaism intersect. It welcomes others in, yet protects the home's private space.

I live in the Northeast where the front porch is a seasonal space. When spring arrives, the neighborhood comes alive. Streets with houses that have front porches are friendlier places, for children as well as adults. If a neighbor sees someone on their porch, they linger for a few minutes to check in and catch up on news. As the days grow longer and warmer, the porch becomes a gathering place, the public square for social interaction where spontaneous conversation may turn into substantive dialogue and debate.

It's unlikely that the late 19th-century Russian Jewish thinker Yehuda Leib Gordon had a front porch. And if he did, I doubt that he would have thought about it as a space that bridges public and private life. Gordon coined what might be called the motto of the Enlightenment: "Be a Jew in your home and a man on the street." He was saying that for Jews to make our way in the world, we must keep our Jewish identity private, secluded, in the confines of our homes or the privacy of our backyard. For my grandparents and immigrants like them, to make it in America, they cast off their Jewish observances in exchange for material and social success. Jewish practices that they kept were relegated to the seclusion of private spaces, or the synagogue, JCC, or federation.

Gordon's notion of a bifurcated identity is less pertinent today where we are blessed with the privilege of living in a pluralistic and open society. Politicians, artists, business people, and others are more public as Jews in their professional lives and on the street. Ironically, many are less Jewish at home in a world that allows and even celebrates multiple, partial, and constructed identities. On the street, they can label their actions "Jewish" as a positive and public expression of identity, whether or not their private lives are enriched with Jewish learning and practice.

Perhaps the most obvious place where the blurring of boundaries between public and private occur is in the domain of social activism. Today, we have a Jewish environmental movement; Jews for social and economic justice; Jewish service-learning projects; we even have *Sh'ma*, a journal of *Jewish* responsibility. And a multitude of Jewish causes exist on Facebook and other social networking sites.

For Jews who have blurred these public-private lines, being Jewish is integrated into all aspects of life. In a metaphoric sense, the home's front porch is anchored to a structure and foundation of Jewish teaching and tradition, but is also open and facing outward to the life of the street. As a liminal space, this metaphoric front porch is where public and private Judaism intersect. It's a way of living as a Jew at home and on the street at the same time. It welcomes others in, yet protects the home's private space. Unlike a back deck that hides from the world, the front porch looks out, offering opportunities to engage in social interaction and meaningful discourse. As a place of safety, comfort, and traditional warmth, it helps us frame life as a Jew and connect our beliefs and behaviors to the work of making a cleaner, safer, more hospitable, and comfortable neighborhood where all can live with dignity, decency, and mutual support.

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. What makes a home Jewish?
2. What books are essential to a Jewish home?
3. When you travel, what Jewish things do you bring with you from home?

Lisa D. Grant, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, is associate professor of Jewish education at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York. Her research and teaching interests include adult Jewish learning, the professional development of Jewish educators, and the role Israel plays in American Jewish life.

35

The Kitchen

RACHEL KAHN-TROSTER

I won't be able to write Torah about a Jewish kitchen on an empty stomach, so I wander into my kitchen. As the garlic in the pan starts sizzling and popping (soon to be joined by chard, probably an alien vegetable to my Ashkenazi ancestors), I take a quick inventory of the room: two sets of dishes, *milchig* and *fleishig*, and enough of both to invite guests to our table; a really big fridge; some ritual items in danger of getting smashed by my toddler; meat/dairy labels on everything, the result of a marriage between someone who grew up kosher (how do I know which pot is for which? Because I just do) and someone who believes he will be struck by lightning if he uses the wrong sponge. There is also a wok; exotic spices like cumin and coriander; meat from happy, local grass-fed lambs; organic lactose-free milk; and a take-out menu for sushi. How did the Jewish kitchen turn into this?

One of my teachers taught that Jewish eating, and Jewish rules about eating, had long been a mimetic tradition, transmitted from mother to daughter in a parallel track to the Judaism of the book. I can hear the questions now from each generation of children: "Mama, why do we eat this? Mama, why are we cooking special food tonight? Mama, can I have a taste?" The books might tell the official story, the study house might be the place of masters and students, of arguments and interpretation, but the Jewish kitchen transmits the personal stories of our individual families — folk Judaism. As a rabbi and a mother, I love both worlds. I remember one year when, as a mouthy child, I told my mother I did not want our *seder* to "just be about the food." She scolded me, saying that I was denying the contribution of every generation of women in our family to the meal. The generations of Jewish women (and men) who have cooked and nourished have created a culinary *midrash* on the cultures they lived among, giving birth to a wide variety of Jewish foods.

When imagining this Jewish kitchen, it would be easy to just picture comforting, nourishing images: chicken soup, gefilte fish, a warm gathering place. One of my favorite Yom Kippur sermons pictures God as an old woman, welcoming her errant child into her kitchen once more, everything remembered and forgiven. But the Jewish kitchen is also a place of rupture. We're several generations past assuming it's a kosher kitchen, and many of us could not even replicate our grandmother's recipes if we tried. Like many American kitchens in general, the slowly simmered tastes of the Jewish kitchen are being replaced with quick, convenience tastes and ingredients. And many of us want to branch out beyond chopped liver, chicken soup, and kugel, to create new stories.

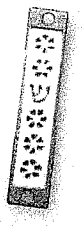
The renovated Jewish kitchen teaches us to enlarge our culinary palette; that adaptation, like tradition, is also a core Jewish value. On a Friday afternoon we might take in the aroma of *chamim* (a Sephardi *cholent*) rather than chicken soup or brisket. Many of our kitchens also include the cuisines of our non-Jewish family members or neighbors—sushi Shabbat, anyone? Or the kitchen might emulate contemporary mores and values — for example, today some see vegetarianism as the purest form of keeping kosher.

The Jewish kitchen is also a place of rupture.

How can all this thread through a Jewish kitchen? For me, what makes a kitchen Jewish is its openness — to people, stories, and especially to new tastes, textures, and smells. The kitchen is the center of the Jewish home. It is warm and embracing and spicy. Its logical extension is the Jewish table, where dishes are passed, lives are drawn together, and new members of the family are woven into the fabric of family life. Every year at Pesach, we invite new guests to join those who left Egypt, new traditions to join with the old. There is always room for one more person at this table.

And surely you'll have another bite to eat? There is always room for that, too.

Rabbi **Rachel Kahn-Troster** is director of education and outreach for Rabbis for Human Rights-North America. Passionate about the intersection of Judaism, food, and sustainability, she writes for *The Jew and the Carrot* (www.jcarrot.org) and is a board member of Hazon. She lives in Teaneck, New Jersey, with her husband and daughter.



Dining / Room

ARYEH COHEN

1 The first real furniture my partner and I bought after we moved into our house ten years ago was a beautiful cherrywood dining room table. The table came with dreams of Shabbat meals, *sedarim*, family gatherings, communal festivities, classes to be taught, and Torah to be studied. Most of this has come to pass around that table — the meals, conversations, Torah study, and family gatherings. Though much has happened to rock our world, our community, and our lives over these past ten years, on most Friday evenings, I still believe that I hear the good angel praying that it should be thus next week and the angel's companion reluctantly saying amen.

"All who are hungry come and eat" — but if they knocked on the door would we actually let them in?

2 Walpole State Prison: I visit K on Sundays — that is, when he's not confined to solitary. When the weather is nice we sit at a rough wood picnic table in a grassy visiting area surrounded by families — children in their Sunday-going-to-prison clothes, wives and girlfriends dressed in the modest fashion regulated by the prison. In the field is a little carousel for the children; they push it around and then jump onto it and scream in joyous fright. Sometimes K and I eat; sometimes we talk. Sometimes he tells me about his fellow prisoners: rape, murder, armed robbery.

3 Center City, Philadelphia: Steam rising from the grates adds to pedestrian misery in the summer; it also provides a bit of warmth that blunts the edge of the bitter winter nights for those for whom the streets are home and the grates are bed. Every night on Walnut Street I see a man sitting on a milk crate. Tonight I invite him to dine with me in McDonald's. Hesitant, he asks that I get him something and bring it back to him, outside. I insist that we both go indoors. He orders some kind of burger and fries; I order coffee, the universally kosher beverage. All the workers seem to know him from his usual perch outside the door. They look at him with surprise as we sit in the booth. He grows progressively more and more uncomfortable. Finally, he tells me he'd rather not stay here anymore. We leave and finish dining on the street.

4 "All who are hungry come and eat. All who need to partake of the Paschal sacrifice come and join with us," so declaim 20 people around a beautifully set table. The door is locked. "All who are hungry come and eat" — but if they knocked on the door would we actually let them in? Would we go out and find "them" and bring "them" home?

5 The halakhic definition of "common space" is "people who eat at the same table." This may be an abstract or potential "eat" symbolized by an unopened box of matzah. The matzah constitutes an *eruv*; it is a manufacturing of common space, a *yachad*, which consists of my home and yours, and every other Jew's home.

What of those Jews who would not eat at my table? What of those Jews at whose table I do not eat? What of those Jews whose culinary customs are far removed from the Eastern European palate of my ancestry or the California palate of my contemporary life? Are they part of my *yachad*?

6 The first time my parents came to my home and told me they could not eat our cooking I had to make a choice.

The first time we went to my in-laws' home and I told them I could not eat their cooking they had to make a choice.

I could have become offended and angry; I could have shattered the deep and loving relationship we have.

My in-laws could have been offended and angry; they could have nipped in the bud our relationship before it had a chance to blossom.

Fortunately, I chose to treat my parents' decision as though it came from a different religious tradition, one that had no claim on me.

Fortunately, my in-laws made accommodations, now affectionately dubbed the "kosher box," which includes kosher pots, plates, and cutlery, and they let us kasher a part of their stove.

Aryeh Cohen, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, lives in Los Angeles with his partner Andrea and their children Shachar and Oryah. He teaches Talmud at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, davens at the Shtibl Minyan, and writes about Talmud, justice, Shabbat, and gender, among other topics. He is currently writing a book, *Justice in the City: Thinking the Just City out of the Sources of Rabbinic Literature.*

The Medicine Cabinet

ANONYMOUS

I told my grandmother that they were vitamins. For the first six years that I took antidepressants, I did so secretly after breakfast. After my grandfather died in 2004, I was a bit more open; that's when I created the vitamin ruse. Vitamins were nonsensical to my grandmother, but not as attractive to ridicule as antidepressants.

All of my grandparents seemed to believe that a doctor's cure would do more harm than good; that hospitals were for dying. Although my paternal grandmother, a clinical psychologist, believes in psychotherapy, I have not yet been able to bring myself to admit my pharmaceutical habit to her. She has a well-worn copy of *Worst Pills, Best Pills: A Consumer's Guide to Avoiding Drug-Induced Death or Illness* among her reference books.

Not only could I not raise the subject of antidepressants, but when I mentioned that I was working to reduce the stigma of mental illness in the Jewish community, my grandfather lauded my work but cautioned me that "craziness might be catching." What could I say in response: "It's okay; I'm already crazy"? "Depression is not 'craziness'"?

I began taking antidepressants the day after Yom Kippur 5758. Though I'd picked up the prescription in time to start taking them on Yom Kippur, I was young, foolish, and *frum* and decided to wait the extra day. They started working two days after Simchat Torah. I have been on them now for over ten years.

The pills have been part of my life for so long that I hardly ever think about them. I think about the pills like the allergy medicine that I have been taking, more or less, since I was eight. I would rather take a chance with potential unknown side effects of antidepressants than suffer the effects of depression, which are well-known to me.

Most of the time, when acquaintances see me taking the pills, they either ignore me or quietly tell me what they're on and how well it works or doesn't work. People who do not know that I am on antidepressants sometimes declaim in my presence against our medication-dependent society and make fun of pill-poppers. As a nonconfrontational type, I generally remain silent. Part of me would want to launch into a monologue about what the quality of my life would be like without those pills. Would anyone make fun of someone who takes beta-blockers for their heart? Or insulin for diabetes?

The shame and stigma that depression still carries in our society, both Jewish and general, is infuriating. That shame causes far too much unnecessary pain; many people avoid treatment because of it and others must watch them suffer. While few would imagine that people with heart disease could "fix" themselves, or that people with diabetes could regulate their blood sugar without insulin, there is an assumption that somehow I should be able to fix my mood disorder "on my own."

In all of my efforts to heal, I have been strong, honest, and brave — but even I am not brave enough to come out as a survivor of depression in this journal.

Most people are bewildered when I speak about my depression, which I only do out of necessity or when I actively want to help people understand depression better. Perhaps I'd be better served by keeping it more of a secret, but keeping secrets is no way to reduce stigma or to recover from depression. Some people awkwardly try to be helpful; others share their own mental health struggles, or those of family members. Some people simply tell me that I do not belong in whatever environment we find ourselves.

The Jewish community, and secular culture at large, could do a much better job supporting and including people struggling with depression and other forms of mental illness. We're all around you. We hear the disdain toward the mentally ill and toward those who need drugs to help maintain an even keel, and you make things harder for us for no reason. It is because of this disdain that I am choosing to publish this piece anonymously. In all of my efforts to heal, I have been strong, honest, and brave — but even I am not brave enough to come out as a survivor of depression in this journal.

The author of this piece is a freelance writer and editor. She is passionate about integrating Torah study with life experience and emotional truths, and would one day like conversations about mental health to be as honest as conversations about physical illnesses. She edits *Borei Hoshech*, http://boreihoshech.wordpress.com, a blog dedicated to the interplay between depression and *tefilah*.

_Sh'ma_ does not publish in July & August.

Order copies of the September _Sh'ma_ for the High Holidays. See page 17.

Living Room: Shrines

VANESSA L. OCHS

When my daughter phoned to announce she was pregnant and then added "with twins" after a pregnant pause (which grew richer each time I relived the conversation), my husband reacted by resolving to spend the next months without saying a single word until, "Godwilling," the babies were born. I reacted by fainting (one of my stock responses) with astonished joy. Our chosen responses — silence and swooning — left something to be desired. For a while, we turned to the God-fearing and modest Jewish phrase, *"b'sha-ah tova"* (may the babies come "in an auspicious hour"), which we launched back when people said, "Aren't you excited?" or offered an altogether premature and inauspicious "mazal tov." But the phrase grew flat after repeated use, with months to go.

Our shrines are spiritual agents that construct our religious and cultural identities, that prompt ethical and holy response, and that foster connections between oneself and the community.

Then I assembled a covert Jewish house shrine to accompany me through the months of waiting; it stood as the visual symbol of all my hopes and prayers. Not altogether covert: it was in the living room, alongside the fireplace. But I figured that if I didn't mention it was a shrine until it had done its work, it could stand in the open, looking like one of my assemblages of stuff put out for decorative effect. Low profile because Jews, in theory, don't make shrines; in reality, of course, we do — we just don't talk about them. Our shrines are spiritual agents that construct our religious and cultural identities, that prompt ethical and holy response, and that foster connections between oneself and the community. Sometimes we amass photos of our ancestors to look over us, interceding with God on our behalf at the hot moments of our lives. We may assemble the Rosh Hashanah cards we received on the mantelpiece, with hopes that the wishes they have extended for a good, sweet year will come true. We may keep out various Israeli souvenirs, trinkets, and ritual objects we have collected: the Hebrew Coca-Cola can, the decoupage *hamsa*, the mezuzah purchased in the Cardo. It's not that we need those objects "lest we forget Jerusalem" — how can anyone who reads the newspaper forget Jerusalem? Those objects are displayed as a 24/7 prayer for peace.

My mother, as a Jewish home shrine keeper, keeps her archival stash in a ziploc bag. Her mother's Sabbath shawl, her father's velvet *kippah*: she activates them with prayer at moments of risk, danger, and even joy. They summon all the ancestors, who worry about us now, in the world to come, as much as they did when they were alive. When relatives ask my mother to use her "powers" on their behalf, she faces in their direction. She does not disappoint!

My shrine needed to meld various symbols. To represent the ancestors, there was the giant-sized Seagram's bottle that my grandfather used to display in the window of his liquor shop so many years ago in Ridgewood, New Jersey. That made a little nod as well to my husband, who holds a Bronfman Chair in Jewish Thought. To represent my daughter who would hopefully grow with each month, there was a moon that she had once carved out of wood for her father. To represent watery healing of Miriam the prophetess, I put out my bright yellow enamel watering can. I added a red wooden birdhouse, adorning it with *hamsas* my daughter had made as a child.

No one noticed the shrine; no one said a word. I passed it many times each day as I moved about the house. I cannot say I knew what ritual practice might emerge. I don't practice my mother's *minhag*, and certainly don't have her "powers" of communication with the ancestors. But I found myself sending off prayers as the bottom of my bathrobe brushed against the Seagram's bottle, and again as I extracted the watering can to feed my plants each week. The physical objects linked me to Jewish women, in times gone by and in the present, who have traveled to the shrines of saintly rabbis and to the tombs of saintly ancestors in efforts to beseech God for healthy children and grandchildren. I cannot say that my own theological scheme permits me to ask God to do good things for me or the people I love. I believe that good things, like bad things, simply happen, that we turn to God to hold us up, however things land. I started out praying for the optimism of Miriam, and as the due date came closer, I cast my theology aside, and dared to imagine a happy and blessed ending — which came to pass.

Vanessa L. Ochs teaches at the University of Virginia and is author of *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (JPS). She is the grandmother of Harry Sidney and Emanuella Natalie Dweck.

The Bedroom

HAVIVA NER-DAVID

Buying a bed is a loaded decision for a couple. Will they have one bed or two? Will their bed be king-sized, or a smaller queen? Which bed they buy will have ramifications on their sex life and their home life in general.

A discussion in the Gemarah (*BT Shabbat* 13b) explores whether or not a couple may sleep in the same bed — in their pajamas, of course, since sleeping nude in the same bed is assumed to certainly be forbidden — when the wife is *nidah* (sexually off-limits due to her menstrual flow). The passage raises the concern that the couple will be unable to avert the forbidden sexual relations if they are in the same bed, even when clothed.

This is why many couples who observe strict halakhah have separate beds. During the time of the month when sex is permitted, they push the two beds together. And during the period when sex is forbidden, they push the beds apart.

This cyclical distancing and reuniting each month can raise a sexual relationship and a marital relationship in general to a higher level. As Rabbi Meir suggests, when a couple is always together in a sexually intimate way, it can create a feeling of ennui in the sexual arena. (*BT Nidah* 31b) As the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. Or, on the more positive side, absence makes the heart grow fonder. Not being sexually intimate all of the time can also help a couple hone their communication skills.

This is not true, though, for all couples. Some couples find this externally imposed rhythm contrary to their own natural rhythm, and it causes tension and anxiety instead of enhancing the relationship. This is especially true for couples who need buildup in their intimacy and have trouble turning their sexuality on and off in the way a strict halakhic approach seems to require.

Rabbinic literature offers another approach, one that privileges the relationship over strict halakhah. In *Sifra Metzora, Parashah* 5, we learn that Rabbi Akiva disapproved of the conventional practice of women making themselves appear less attractive during times when sex was forbidden. He objected to this practice because he feared that if men saw their wives in a less physically attractive state their attraction to their wives in general would be diminished. In other words, the rabbinic institution of women purposely looking less attractive when sex was forbidden in order to prevent their husband's sexual arousal was preventing their husband's arousal during the rest of the month when sexual relations were not only permitted but were actually obligated.

While this approach may legitimatize society's notion that a woman must constantly keep herself attractive for her husband, we can also learn from Rabbi Akiva that observing this rhythmic sexuality within a marriage should not be used to threaten the marriage. If the ritual inadvertently threatens the marriage, it would be wise to take a less stringent approach.

For instance, some couples who take it upon themselves not to touch at all during *nidah* find that the estrangement creates tension in the relationship; in such a case, according to Rabbi Akiva's precedent, it would be better for the couple to draw the line at sexually suggestive touch (i.e., foreplay) rather than all forms of touching. This would allow them affection and intimacy as long as they could control themselves and not end up in bed together. Akiva's approach is an important model for couples today who take on this practice, sometimes without knowing how it will affect their relationship.

In fact, a couple can observe this rhythmic approach to sexuality while still sharing the same bed all month long. Dressing differently, depending on the time of the month (flannel pajamas instead of sexy lingerie), can be a way to signal a "nonsexual" mode, or using separate blankets or creating a divider with pillows. Then, a couple can enjoy the experience of one marital bed (if they are so inclined) without feeling that they are compromising their religious practice.

Another reason to choose the "one-bed" option is that it allows for the possibility of a family bed, which creates a sense of love and togetherness among the entire family especially surrounding sleep and cozy time. Having to choose between mom's bed or dad's bed during part of the month simply does not fit with this child-rearing philosophy.

For couples who prefer more privacy about family intimacy, the parents' bedroom is considered off-limits to the children, and no one need take note of whether the beds are together or apart.

One can tell a lot about a couple from their choice of bed. Religious approach, parenting style, and level of intimacy are all reflected in the kind of bed one finds in a bedroom.

Rabbi Haviva Ner-David is a teacher and writer living in Israel. She is the founding director of Reut: The Center for Modern Jewish Marriage, and her new book, *Finding Chanah's Voice: A Rabbinic Challenge to Religious Patriarchy*, is forthcoming from Ben Yehuda Press.

June 2009/Sivan 5769
To subscribe:
877-568-SHMA
www.shma.com

Sh'ma

TOBI KAHN

Bedside Reading

NESSA RAPOPORT

My bedside table is, let us say, aspirational. Its teetering volumes are a hazard to my sleeping head — but heartening to contemplate.

Naturally, there are many books that have not remained in my possession long enough to reside on my bedside table. *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* is one, devoured in less than a week of overly late nights. I am fascinated by British women writers and "How They Did It," domestically speaking. Because, as Virginia Woolf knew, a room of one's own is possible only with a paid pair of hands.

The position of books in the bedside pile varies, but the Hebrew novel and dictionary are near the top.

At the turn of the 20th century, one third of British women were in domestic service. Not that I wish servitude on anyone, but the transformation of women's lot also explains the scrim of urban dust on the glass top of my bedside table.

As for my late nights, what nights aren't? It is a truth universally acknowledged that a working mother cannot read during the day. Ergo, at the precise hour when the bedside lamp should be doused in order to assure a good night's sleep, said reader can be found poring over a book. Knowing that she'll pay dearly. And not caring.

When my children were young, I read that their ambition could be measured by their answer to the question: "Would you rather have a small cookie now or a big cookie later?"

In the matter of reading, I'll take the big cookie now.

What books await me when I am, at last, horizontal? Whatever Hebrew novel I am painstakingly reading; and a paperback Hebrew dictionary, coverless from its being toted on subways and planes, often unopened while I peruse something more ephemeral than a novel in my second, halting language, however beloved.

The position of books in the bedside pile varies, but the Hebrew novel and dictionary are near the top. They reflect an existential predicament, posed ardently, centuries ago, by the poet Yehuda Ha-Levi: "My heart in the East, and I at the edge of the West."

And so I see:

Peter Cole's *Hebrew Writers on Writing*, discovered by my friend Avi Katzman, visiting from Israel and my source for books Israeli and pertaining to the Jewish narrative. I have already bought Avraham ben Yitzhak's *Collected Poems*, published in a bilingual volume by Ibis Editions, which Cole founded with Adina Hoffman. The pleasure of this book — I have too many copies to keep at my bedside — is an ever-renewing spring. Ben Yitzhak's published oeuvre, so influential to modern Hebrew poetry, consists of eleven ravishing poems and some fragments. This fact may or may not have afflicted their pseudonymous creator, but it is inevitably heartening to fastidious writers who live one hundred years later.

Avi's own recent book, *be-machloket: shishim imutim she-his'iru et ha-itonim* [*Controversies: 60 Momentous Debates in the Hebrew Press from 1918 to 2008*], reproduces his meticulously chosen excerpts of controversies reported in the left-to-right spectrum of the dynamic Hebrew press, from 'Should women get the vote?' to 'Should we withdraw from Gaza?' It would have a place of honor in the pile, but is necessarily oversize — and thus threatens the stability of even the most compulsively arranged book tower.

Here is Catherine Madsen's *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech*. Her subject is among my obsessions: The impoverishment of English prayer language and translation, a stultifying betrayal of the Hebrew originals. Madsen articulates the problem with an awakening — galvanizing to this writer — incisiveness that is incompatible with the need to read for the transition between the constraints of the day and sleep's oblivion. Which is why I have begun to take this book with me for the interstices of my work life (a notion, alas, more symbolic than likely).

Finally, *Worlds of Truth: A Philosophy of Knowledge*, the most recent work of my friend and teacher, Israel Scheffler. I have a bookshelf of his work, not all of which I am equipped to understand, as he is a scrupulous philosopher and I am a civilian. But I learn from him always — and, when I complete this sentence, I will open the book to savor his words.

Well after midnight, I will place it at the top of the pile.

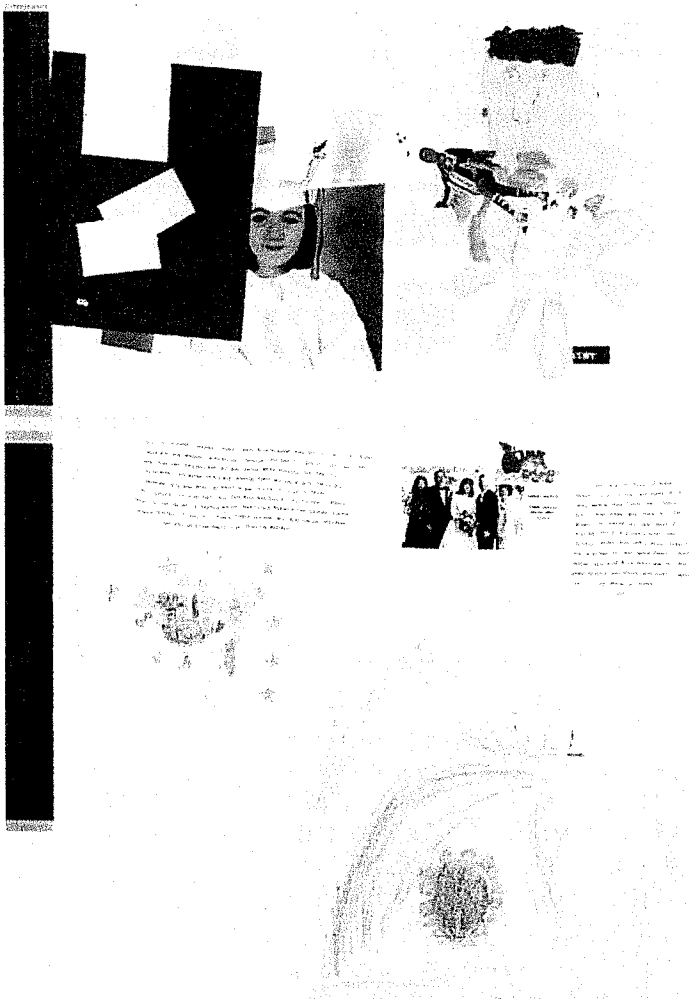
Nessa Rapoport's most recent book is *House on the River: A Summer Journey*, a memoir of family and place.

41

The Refrigerator Door

LAURA KINA

My portraits examine the complex realities of a multiracial, multiethnic society — "the slipperiness of identity" that is my own autobiography. Raised by an Okinawan father from Hawai'i and an Anglo/Spanish Basque mother from the Pacific Northwest, I am now bringing up my own Jewish family in a Chicago neighborhood where the city's Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish communities intersect. In the process of converting to Judaism, I made my home kosher. The refrigerator became symbolic of the central role of the kitchen in a Jewish home.



In my *trompe l'oeil* painting of our family's Frigidaire, the haphazardly arranged decorations reflect our mixed identities: a Japanese American wedding family portrait; poetry magnets symbolizing "authentic" Jewish culture and bearing Yiddish words like "*kvell*" and "yinglish"; and drawings by Ariel, my Jewish Mexican stepdaughter. The refrigerator door serves as a surrogate portrait of my family. While the viewer doesn't know what is inside the refrigerator, the painting tells something about my family by the images on the door and the style of the refrigerator acknowledges issues of class. The painting is at once very personal and distinct and also universal. On this family refrigerator, we can see a complex set of questions about negotiating what it means to be Jewish.

The Kina-Aronson's
Refrigerator Door
acrylic, crayon, pen, and collage on canvas
60" x 30"

Laura Kina is an associate professor of art, media, and design and the director of Asian American studies at DePaul University. Her work is represented by Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts in Miami, Fla. She lives and works in Chicago, Ill.