

How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael. (24:5)

Chazal teach that the word *ohalecha*, your tents, alludes to the study halls, and *mishkenosecha*, your dwelling places, alludes to the *shuls*. The similes of tents and dwelling places have found fertile interpretation among the Torah's commentators. We will cite a few before suggesting our own. The *Shearis Menachem* (*Parashas Vayishlach*) wonders why we commence our daily prayers with a statement made by the wicked pagan prophet, Bilaam.

He explains that Bilaam made this remark after observing the *tznius*, moral modesty, of the Jewish people, manifested by each tribe living distinct from one another; the doorways of each home not being opposite one another, so that one doorway did not coincide with the doorway of his neighbor, thereby preventing one from peering into his neighbor's home. He observed the distinction between *Am Yisrael* and the pagan nations in this area, and was reasonably impressed, to the point that he declared, "*Mah tovu ohalecha!*"

The *Rebbe* explains that the origin of *kedushah*, holiness, is not the *bais ha'knesses*, *shul*. *Kedushah* streams forth like a river emanating from the *ohel*, the individual Jewish home. The home is where *kedushah* is planted and germinates to the point that it blooms and thrives in the *shul*. When the *ohel* is "Yaakov," and it rises to the standards of Yaakov, then the *mishkan*, the *shul*, will represent *Yisrael*. A *shul* in which the *davening* is pure – the singing is traditional and holy, the *niggunim*, tunes of the songs, reflect dignity and not street fare – reflects that the *daveners*, worshippers, experienced solid Jewish foundations in their homes.

The *Divrei Chaim*, *Horav Chaim Sanzer*, *zl*, once approached a group of wealthy individuals to solicit them for a certain *tzedakah*, charitable endeavor. One of the would-be philanthropists said that he would contribute proportionately to the donation rendered by another wealthy man who had much more money than he. The *Sanzer* replied that Bilaam was impressed with the Jews that *ein pischeihem mechuvanim zeh k'neged zeh*, "their doorways were not facing one another." The *Rebbe* said *pischeihem* can serve as an allusion to *tzedakah*, as it says, *Pasoach tiftach es yadcha*, "You shall surely open up your hand" (*Devarim* 15:8) which is a reference to contributing toward the poor. Thus, we can interpret *pischeihen* as "opening their hands" in a manner which did not depend upon how much their contemporaries gave. Each person gave in accordance with his own understanding and appreciation of the need.

Perhaps we may suggest a standard for what ought to be a *rav's* conviction for determining the value of a *shul*. Some would have us think that a successful *shul* must consist of a large edifice, filled with a sizeable crowd comprised of the finest, most distinguished lay and spiritual membership. Anything less is a *minyan*, a quorum, not a situation which reflects success.

Some leaders thrive on public acclaim and have difficulty surviving on the accolades of the few.

They require large crowds, with small groups considered unworthy of their time and effort. Others do not need the limelight and view each Jewish *neshamah* to be of inestimable value, each Jew representing a microcosm of the world. The spiritual potential found in each and every Jew should be the motivating factor for outreach – not the public attention one might garner. True achievement, true greatness, lies in overcoming the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, which seeks *kavod*, honor. Instead, focus in on the individual. Every *mitzvah* is a world.

Ohel Yaakov: a tent is small; thus, it represents the spiritual shelter provided for the individual. Yaakov is a single person; the term Yaakov refers to the Patriarch at his early – and perhaps most vulnerable – periods in life. *Mishkenosecha Yisrael*: a *mishkan* is a large repository which is the large house of worship; and Yisrael reflects the large Jewish community. Its strength is not only in numbers, but in Yisrael, the name given to the Patriarch after he bested Eisav's Angel. *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*, "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov." One should never ignore the small tents, the Yaakovs of our People, who have yet to reach their greatest spiritual potential, for it is those small shelters that reach out to the individual (often yearning) Jew, providing him with identity and encouragement. They represent *mishknosecha Yisrael*.

Rav Menachem Mendel Perr, zl, was *Rav* in South Ozone Park, Queens, for over fifty years. A *talmid*, student, of Slabodka, he recognized and encouraged the development of each individual Jew due to the inherent *gadlus ha'adam*, greatness of man, within him. As the years of his *rabbanus* progressed, the demographics of the congregants changed, to the point that Rav Perr barely had a *minyan* of observant worshippers for *Shabbos* morning. Nonetheless, his devotion to them was consistent. As long as there was a congregant who came to *shul* – he would be there to serve his spiritual needs. When it came time for his grandson's *bar mitzvah*, his family expected him to attend. How surprised they were to hear that he would not abandon his *shul* – even for his grandson's *bar mitzvah*. His reason is what inspired me: "Even if only a few men attend the services, at least for those few hours, they will not be *mechallel Shabbos*, desecrating the *Shabbos*. How can I allow myself the luxury of attending a *bar mitzvah* at the expense of *chillul Shabbos*?"

This was a person to whom *ohalecha Yaakov* meant something. It is *rabbonim* such as he, who care about their congregants more than they care about themselves, who merit building *mishkenosecha Yisrael*.