

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

Rashi says that Bilaam was prompted to praise the Jewish home when he observed that the entrance to each person’s home was not aligned one opposite the next. He was impressed with their modesty. In the *Talmud Sanhedrin* 108a, *Chazal* give an alternative explanation that does seem to coincide with *Rashi*’s. Rabbi Yochanan says that from the blessing of that evil one (Bilaam), we are to ascertain what was originally in his heart. He wanted to curse them, that there should no longer be houses of *Torah* study and houses of worship, but he ended up saying, “How goodly are your tents.” He did not want the *Shechinah* to repose among the Jewish People. Instead he said, “*Mishkenosecha Yisrael*,” “Your dwelling place, Yisrael.”

At first glance, it appears that *Rashi*’s explanation is inconsistent with that of Rabbi Yochanan. According to *Rashi*, Bilaam’s intention was to laud the individual Jewish home, while Rabbi Yochanan contends that Bilaam’s focus was on the *shuls* and *yeshivos* and Hashem’s Presence resting there. Is this an irreconcilable dispute or can these two expositions be unified? The *Baalei Mussar* take a more penetrating approach towards understanding the meaning of “their doors were not aligned one opposite the other.” It goes beyond the fact that they were modest, not exhibiting what goes on in the privacy of one’s home to the rest of the neighborhood. There is a more profound aspect to this privacy between Jews – they had no interest in what was going on in their neighbor’s home. They were not nosy; they were not envious. There was neither jealousy nor rivalry between them. Each one lived his own individual lifestyle, and his neighbor was not concerned if his house was huge, what type of furniture he had, if he had live-in-help, or how he spent his day. Each Jew was satisfied and happy with his individual way of life. The comings and goings of his neighbor was not his affair – unless his neighbor was in need. Then, he was there immediately, without question, prepared to assist in any manner.

When people are happy with their own lives, when there is self- satisfaction, there is no jealousy and there is no rivalry. Jealousy is a terrible character trait which can result in tragic consequences. Jealousy causes one to defer to his base desires. It stunts one’s spiritual development as it chokes his life-line to spirituality. Commensurate with the manner and zest that one pursues materialism, so, too, does he detract from spirituality. Pursuit of materialism and spirituality do not complement each other. As one increases, the other decreases.

The primary prerequisite for maintaining the *Shechinah*’s Presence in our *shuls* and *yeshivos* is that there be no rivalry among Jews. When we do not respect one another, when our differences constitute a reason for denigration or envy, then the *yetzer hara*, evil-inclination, takes a stranglehold on our souls, encouraging us through its blandishments to follow our physical desires. Only after one has cleansed himself of this demanding and demeaning character trait can he ascend the spiritual ladder.