



# GROWTH

## At The SHABBAT TABLE

### PARSHAT BALAK

#### Of Tents and Homes

This week's parsha presents the unusual and somewhat amusing story of Balaam, a non-Jewish prophet and notorious adversary of the Jewish people, who is summoned by the Moabite king to curse Israel. Yet, instead of curses, what emerges from Balaam's mouth is some of the most exquisite poetry ever spoken about the uniqueness and destiny of the Jewish nation. His words have echoed through the ages, becoming a timeless source of inspiration.

Among his declarations is the famous verse: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; Your dwellings, O Israel!" So beloved is this verse that, in some customs, it opens the morning prayers every single day of the year — not with a quote from Moshe or another revered Jewish leader, but with the words of Balaam, a gentile prophet.

The Baal Shem Tov offered a deeply insightful interpretation of this line.

Balaam speaks of both "tents" and "dwellings"—the former linked to Jacob, the latter to Israel. At first glance, this might seem redundant. But upon closer inspection, the distinction carries profound symbolic meaning. In the literal sense, a tent is a temporary, easily dismantled shelter. A dwelling, by contrast, implies permanence and stability.

From a spiritual perspective, however, these two structures reflect two kinds of religious experience. Some individuals create within themselves a fixed and lasting space for the Divine. For them, G-d's presence is constant. Their lives, homes, and hearts are enduring sanctuaries for holiness. Others, however, find this constancy elusive. The distractions and demands of daily life — work pressures, family responsibilities, emotional strain, and physical cravings — pull them away from a sustained awareness of the Divine. Yet even so, there are fleeting moments — early in the morning, late at night, or in the middle of a chaotic day — when a sense of yearning arises. A need surfaces. In those moments, a temporary "tent" is pitched: a brief encounter with G-d.

For example, it might be just a few minutes before sunset. A

Jew, fully immersed in work, suddenly remembers that he hasn't yet prayed Minchah. He quickly runs into a shul, opens his siddur, and starts praying swiftly. The whole thing may take about eight minutes, but what he's essentially communicating is: "G-d, I don't have much time right now. There's a lot on my mind and a lot going on today. Let's spend a few minutes together, cover the basics, and then I'll head back out to deal with everything else." This kind of moment doesn't create a lasting, permanent dwelling for G-d. It's not a structure built to stay. At best it's a tent, brief and temporary, but a space nonetheless where G-d is invited in, even if only for a short time.

The names Jacob and Israel reflect these two modes. Jacob (יַעֲקֹב/יַעֲקֹב) derives from the Hebrew word for "heel," connoting struggle, groundedness, even spiritual lowliness. He was given this name at birth, grasping Esav's heel. Only after wrestling and prevailing was he renamed Israel/יִשְׂרָאֵל, a name composed of the letters לִי ראש — "I have a head" — symbolizing higher awareness and spiritual mastery. Jacob represents those still in the struggle, building fleeting tents. Israel stands for those who have triumphed, establishing lasting dwellings.

One might assume that Israel's dwellings are superior, while Jacob's tents are merely tolerated. But Balaam proclaims otherwise: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; Your dwellings, O Israel!" He mentions Jacob's tents first — not as an afterthought, but as something profoundly cherished.

For it is within Jacob's struggle — within the mundane, the imperfect, and the temporary — that the true purpose of creation is realized. While Israel's dwellings are havens of transcendence, Jacob's tents are where sanctity is brought into the thick of real life. It is in such fragile tents, raised amid the storm, that the Divine finds some of the most beautiful places to dwell.

D'var Torah shared by R' YY Jacobson,  
<https://theyeshiva.net/jewish/item/961/essay-parshas-balak-the-temporary-jew>

#### Refuah Sheleimah, b'toch she'ar cholei Yisrael:

Ariel Ben Frida Rachamim Ben Shifra Yitzhak Ben Naama Frida Bat Yaffa Yisrael Ben Miriam Ehud Ben Miriam  
Shlomo Zalman Ben Miriam Miriam Bat Bakol Nechama Bat Rachel Leah Shoshana Yitzhak Tzvi Ben Raizel Miriam  
David Aryeh Ben Sarah Chana Shmuel Menachem Ben Avigayil Binyamin Mordechai Ben Yael Yaffa Bat Motaram  
Yitzhak Eizik Ben Sara Rachel Hinda Bat Chaya Yona Chaya Bat Tzipora Yosef Yitzhak Ben Baila Moshe Ben Baila

*A man once asked his father, "Father, how will I ever find the right woman?" His father replied, "Forget finding the right woman, focus on being the right man."*