



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

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ROSH BAIS MEDRASH ENGLISH SPEAKING PROGRAM MACHON LEV

Ma Tovu – Turning a Curse Into a Blessing

The opening verse in our daily tefilla is מה טובו אהלך יעקב משכנותך ישראל – How good are your tents oh Jacob, your dwelling places, oh, Israel (Bamidbar 24:5). It must be a significant statement if it is assigned to be the first line we recite each morning as we enter the *Beit Knesset*. Hazal interpreted the phrase to refer not to tents and dwellings but rather to *shuls* and *yeshivot*. How good are your shuls and yeshivot. May they increase in influence and grow in beauty and splendor.

Yet, if we consider the source of this pasuk, it may not seem appropriate to include it in our prayers at all, let alone assign it such a prominent position. These words were uttered in our Parsha by none other than *Bilam Harasha*. In fact, his intention was to curse Bnei Yisrael, and to state that “you

should **not** have shuls and schools and may they **diminish** in influence and scope.” A divine command changed the words that were uttered from Bilam’s mouth from a curse to a blessing.

Why is it then that our custom is to include these words at the beginning of our tefilla? It is interesting to note that although his opinion has not been widely accepted, the Maharshal was indeed disturbed by this custom and he did not recite this verse. He started his tefilla with the second line “*va’ani berov chesdecha*” (see Maharshal Responsa 64).

Rabbi Norman Lamm in his book ‘A Commentary for the Ages’ offers an insightful explanation. If it is the accepted opinion to begin our day with *Ma Tovu*, then there must be something special that reflects an aspect of the basic personality of the Jew and a deep indigenous part of the Jewish character. Perhaps we recite *Ma Tovu* not despite the fact that it was intended to harm us, but because of that very fact. In Rabbi Lamm’s words: “It is Jewish to find the benediction in the malediction, the good in the evil, the opportunity in the catastrophe.”

Essentially, as history proves, we learn to make the best of the worst and to squeeze holiness from the profane! The Temple was

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destroyed so Hazal instituted “sacrifice of the heart”. Jerusalem was destroyed and so we built Yavneh. For centuries we refused to surrender to a curse. We seek and find the spark within, the silver lining beneath it all. That is what is implied when we recite *Ma Tovv*.

Hashem, continue that power within us! Let us make the best of a difficult situation -and turn a curse into a blessing.

The aim of prayer is **not** to change God, but to **change ourselves**! We come before God as humble petitioners and ask for the ability to change ourselves. To provide us with the strength and ability to squeeze the blessing out of the curse. As we recite *Ma Tovv*, may Hashem hear our cry and strengthen a nation experiencing challenging times so that we may uncover the hidden blessing. ■



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