

Tents

One of Balaam's famous phrases that he speaks when he reviews the Israelites is *Ma Tovu Oholeha Yaakov, Mishkenoteha Yaakov*. How good are your tents, Jacob, Your dwelling places Israel.

On the face of this Balaam is looking at an impressive array of tents of various sorts that the Israelites were using as they were about to end a nomadic life and were preparing to settle down into something more permanent and structured in their ancestral homeland.

But traditionally we have taken this to mean much more. At one level Balaam might have been referring to the Tabernacle as the core and center of Israelite life, both religiously and civilly. For it was the home, so to speak, of the priesthood and the functions of the Seventy Elders.

We however prefer it as referring to the homes of the people in general. That home life was the core of Israelite survival. What went on in the home was in many ways more important than what went on in the public religious sphere. And even more so, when the Jews were forced to wander, it was the home that provided not just sanctuary but also education, Torah and continuity. When our homes fail us, that is when we begin to drift and wither. On the other hand, when homes are strong, we survive. Whatever Balaam intended we take it to be a compliment. We may have no Temple, no Cathedrals or huge Mosques but we do have our homes.