



In this week's Parsha we encounter that master soothsayer Bil'am whose attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael were confounded by HKBH. Our rabbis teach that Hashem invested Bil'am with powers comparable to those of Moshe so that the gentile world could not argue that if they had had such a prophet as Moshe, they too would have become worthy.

Not only did Bil'am fail to curse the people, but his curses were turned to blessings.

One that stands out is so profound that it found its way into the Siddur as an opening to our prayers as we enter the Beit Knesset: MA TOVU... - 'How goodly are your tents O Yaakov and your dwelling places, O Yisrael!' (Bamidbar 24:5).

The S'forno teaches that "tents" refers to study halls (Batei Midrash) where, following Rav Mordechai Eliyahu z"l, people fix various times to study; the ambience is thus relatively transient. On the other hand, "dwelling places" (MISHKENOTECHA) alludes to more permanent fixtures, Batei Knesset, where the Shechina abides eternally.

This idea is mirrored by the terms Ya'akov and Yisrael, respectively. Ya'akov was a temporary name that evoked lowliness (from the Hebrew word EIKEV, a heel) while Yisrael associates with the one who overcame and is a prince of G-d.

Bil'am wanted to extinguish the Jewish nation, but with Hashem's help, "Yisrael" will endure forever. Bil'am and his cohorts, however, have disappeared from the face of this earth. **MP**