by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

PLACES TO BE JEWISH

On entering the synagogue, the custom is to recite MA TOVU - "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael" (Bamidbar 24:5).

This is Bilam's praise of Israel as he looks across at the Israelite camp and his intended curse turns into a blessing. We echo his words as we come into the synagogue as our celebration of all that the synagogue means to a Jew.

The sages say that the tents of Jacob are the houses of study; the dwelling places of Israel are the synagogues.

Note which comes first - not the synagogue but the house of study. Not that the synagogue is not a great powerhouse of the Jewish spirit, but the house of study is even greater. We want Jews to pray: but even before that we want them to know.

It is one of the miraculous achievements of modern Judaism that Jewish learning is flourishing. It is a phoenix risen out of the ashes of the Sho'ah; eighty years ago most people thought that with the great sages, scholars and schools destroyed in Europe, hardly anyone would now know what it was to be a Jew. But our people saw the danger of spiritual disintegration, and Jewish education has become our great growth industry.

That is now a fact. Jewish education for young and old is impressive, and it increasingly attracts members of our communities. Some who never dreamed of attending a shiur, for instance, these days enjoy sitting at Talmudic study groups and delving into so much else in Judaism. More could do it, and will. But thank God, Jewish learning is safe.

The time has come, then, to attend to a second major item: the reinvigoration of the synagogue. Because the synagogue focusses our spiritual energies, enables us to reinforce each other's spiritual possibilities, and is the only place that brings Jews together to experience all of Jewish identity - peoplehood, religion, ethics, observances, Israel, humanity - it helps to make us whole Jews.

Jews should not leave the synagogue out in the cold. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH