

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Balak

## The Virtue of the Tents of Jacob

How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places O Yisrael! (24:5) This verse appears at the very beginning of our siddur and is traditionally recited when one enters shul in the morning.

The Talmud (Bava Batra 60a) and the Midrash (Yalkut, Balak 871) explain the meaning of this pasuk. Bilaam was praising B'nei Yisrael for the fact that their tents were positioned such that their openings did not face each other, meaning that neighbors could not see into each other's tents. This lofty trait of modesty and privacy deserved to be highlighted at the beginning of Bilaam's prophecy.

Rav Matisyahu Salomon asks some very basic questions about this Midrash. Why was B'nei Yisrael praised so highly for the fact that the entrances of their tents did not face each other? This is a very basic and common measure of privacy that most people would insist on. Who would want their door open to the public so people could see inside their home! And furthermore, why do we need the powerful prophet Bilaam to reveal this attribute of B'nei Yisrael? Anyone passing through the camp would surely notice this town-planning regulation with merely a glance.

Rav Salomon explains that the true underlying motivation behind the positioning of their tents was not just to preserve their own privacy, but rather in order to avoid seeing into their neighbors' homes! Their real intention was to ensure that they focused on their own home without being distracted by what was happening elsewhere. This was truly an exalted attribute, as human nature generally likes to pry into others' business. And this also explains why we needed prophecy to reveal this hidden aspect to B'nei Yisrael's positioning of their tents.

This explanation from Rav Salomon contains a very powerful lesson for us today. We live in a world of instant communication and social media. This allows us to stay in touch with our family and friends, keep up to date with their simchas and important events, and share their experiences. But there is a very significant downside to this world. Rather than living private lives, focused on our homes and families, we are opening our homes to the world and inviting everyone to see what we are up to. And we are becoming obsessed with keeping up to date with what everyone else is doing, of peering into the "tents of our neighbors".

This phenomenon is very common and is often associated with a fear of missing out (FOMO) and jealousy. As we look at the photos and read about the experiences of our 'friends', we feel bad

that we are missing out on what they are doing. We don't realize that everyone tries to show their best side to the public, so what we see is not really an accurate reflection of reality. Our comparisons are unjust and we can feel jealous unnecessarily. We are not really missing out on other experiences. But ironically, we are missing out on our own experiences because we are not truly present, we are too busy thinking about posting our own update.

If we do need to 'live in the real world' and use social media, we should at least be conscious of the negative aspects of these powerful tools of communication. Bilaam praised us for our focus on privacy and our lack of interest in what is happening in our neighbors' tents. It would be a shame for us to lose this beautiful character trait due to modern technology. 🙌