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# SYNAGOGUES AND SHARING ONE TENT

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*"Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael-* How goodly are your tents Jacob, your dwelling places Israel".

These are the opening words of the siddur, and it how we begin the davening (praying) each and every morning.

Our Tradition shares two different readings of these words of the Prophet Bil'am. The first – that he looked out upon the encampment of the Israelites and noted that the doorways of the tents of the Israelites were set in such so that no one could see into the tent of the other. The private life of each Jew was respected and maintained, even in the cramped conditions in which they lived.

The other read – Bil'am praised that which he saw with his prophetic eye, namely the future gathering places of the Jews, where God's presence could be seen residing among us.

At first blush, it would seem that we invoke this second interpretation when we recite these as we enter the *Beit Knesset*, as if to say "this shul is a special place, and we are privileged to feel God here" as the service begins.

But it is possible that the first reading is yet meant to be in communication with the second one, even as cross the threshold of the synagogue. Rabbi Isaac Luria seems to lead us this way when he inserted this additional meditation (along with giving tzedakah) beforehand: "It is proper to say before beginning prayers 'I accept upon myself the affirmative commandment of Love your neighbor as yourself'". This is how we might understand the message: The synagogue is no place for the privacy we keep elsewhere, where I don't peer into your tent, and you don't place your nose in mine. Often times, that protection of privacy is actually just a clever disguise for what is actually human disinterest. In shul, we function with a different ethic.

This is not to say that the shul is the place to yenta, God forbid. Rather, when we walk into the Beit Knesset, the Communal Home, we all become inhabitants of the same space; everyone present dwells now in a shared tent, and our lives are meant to intertwine. So much so that my prayers can't begin until I make the effort to reach out for you, to realize that you and I are family, that we are made of the same stuff, that you are as I; that what weighs upon you, what worries you, weighs upon me too, and what lifts you, helps lift me as well.

Here in shul, we all, of different stripes and of unique needs and goals, come together to share ourselves with one another, and with God. That's what a synagogue community is all about. It is how *tefillah* begins, and it's what a shared communal prayer is meant to be.

*Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov* – what a beautiful tent O Jacob, which we will dwell in together with God, as one family, with one destiny. So may it be.