

How Lovely Is the Picture You Present to the World?

Throughout the world on Saturday mornings, Jewish people gather in synagogues and begin their prayer service with the following Hebrew words found in Numbers 24:5, *"Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk'notecha Yisrael,"* which means in English, "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your tabernacles, Israel." These beautiful words of affirmation are spoken or sung by either an individual or in unity as a congregation as a reminder of the beauty that is visible when one looks upon the people of G-D.

It might surprise some of those reading this today that the first person to say these words while looking upon Israel from a hilltop was Bilaam, or Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet who was being paid by Israel's enemies to bring a curse upon Israel. Yet, even though these words were not first spoken by Moses, Aaron or one of the great prophets of Israel or Judah, even until today, we still open our Shabbat services with these words.

You may be asking yourself why the Jewish people, the descendants of those whom Bilaam first spoke over these words, would choose to begin their prayers with these words. I believe the reason is twofold and is something all believers in Yeshua (Jesus) should take deeply to heart.

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The first reason that the Jewish people say these words as they start their service is that they are a reminder that G-D has made unbreakable, unchangeable covenants with Israel. These covenants are still in force today, and no king or prophet can curse or void G-D's covenant promises to the

people G-D made them with, Israel. Remember the words G-D inspired Paul to write in Romans 11:28-29 (TLV):

“Concerning the Good News, they are hostile for your sake; but concerning chosenness, they are loved on account of the fathers—for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

The second reason is that we must also remember that we, the people of G-D, have a responsibility to live in such a way that even a prophet paid to curse us sees so much G-D in, on and around us that they have no choice but to proclaim our beauty.

Having faith in the first reason we say this prayer is easy because the first reason is fully reliant only upon G-D. We all know that G-D is perfect. and His Word is true and will always come to pass. We also know that G-D will never break His covenant with Israel, so we know that no matter what comes or goes, G-D will keep His covenant with Israel. It doesn't matter who tries to curse Israel; their curse will turn into a blessing.

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However, the second reason we say these words as a prayer to begin our Shabbat service is more difficult because the second part is reliant upon us, Israel. G-D has called us to be a light to the world. In Genesis 12:2-3; when G-D made His covenant with Abraham and his descendants, He said, “My heart's desire is to make you into a great nation, to bless you, to make your name great so that you may be a blessing. My desire is to bless those who bless you, but whoever curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Later, in Isaiah 49, G-D said He would make Israel a “light for the nations” (v. 6c).

When Bilaam climbed that mountain so he could curse Israel, he

looked out at Israel. In that moment, he understood that he could not curse Israel because G-D had made an unbreakable, unchangeable covenant to bless Israel, and no words Bilaam could say would be able to curse what G-D has blessed. But, that wasn't all Bilaam saw when he looked at Israel. He didn't just see what G-D had said and done. He also saw the beauty of Israel. In that moment at that time, Israel was radiating the absolute glory of G-D's presence so powerfully that Bilaam had no choice but to proclaim those famous words we say every Saturday morning.

There are many "kings" and "prophets" in our world today who are figuratively standing on a mountain, overlooking the people of G-D and desiring to speak curses over them. The truth is that G-D's covenant promises are just as true and just as strong today. The only question is whether the people of G-D radiate the glory of G-D's presence in our midst in such a strong way that those who would speak curses are so overwhelmed by G-D's glory that they have no choice but to say those words first spoken by Bilaam: "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your tabernacles, Israel."

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Eric Tokajer is the author of "Overcoming Fearlessness," "What If Everything You Were Taught About the Ten Commandments Was Wrong?," "With Me in Paradise," "Transient Singularity," "OY! How Did I Get Here?: Thirty-One Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Before Entering Ministry," "#ManWisdom: With Eric Tokajer," "Jesus Is to Christianity as Pasta Is to Italians" and "Galatians in Context." Visit his website at .