

The opening verse in the daily order of T'FILLAH BE'TZIBBUR, public prayer, is the familiar MAH TOVU OHALECHA YAAKOV, MISHK'NOSECHA YISRAEL, "How good are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel". It must be quite an important verse to be so strategically and significantly placed, as the very first thing we say as we enter the synagogue. And indeed it is just that. For, as the opening chord in the overture to the Morning Service, MAH TOVU sets the key for the entire day of prayer, the symphony of the Jew's mind and heart and soul rising harmoniously with those of all of Israel to our Father in Heaven.

Just what does this verse mean? ~~Tradition~~ Our Sages interpreted "tent" and "dwelling place" to refer to "BATEI K'NEISYOT U'VATEI MIDRASHOT", to synagogues and religious schools. How good are thy synagogues and thy halls of study, is the meaning of this blessing. May they increase in influence and grow in beauty and splendor. And this blessing, which is found in today's Sidra, comes from a most surprising source. It was first uttered, our Bible tells us, not by a Jew but by a non-Jew; and an enemy of Israel, at that. It was Bilaam "HA'RASHA", the wicked one, who, upon seeing Israel's tribes arrayed in the desert about the Tabernacle, exclaimed MAH TOVU. And there is yet something more surprising in the entire episode, something that makes the choice of this verse for our opening prayer even less understandable. Tradition consistently reports, in all its comments on this episode, that Bilaam fully intended to curse Israel. He had been hired to do so by the Moabite king Balak. Seeing Israel <sup>ar ose and</sup> proudly and devoutly arrayed about the Temple, Bilaam/wanted to curse Israel, saying, SHELO YIHEYU LACHEM BATEI KNEISYOS UVATEI MIDRASHOS, may you NOT have any synagogues and schools, may they diminish in influence and in scope. But instead of a curse there issued forth from his mouth, by Divine command, the blessing of MAH TOVU.

Certainly, then, it is difficult to understand this choice of MAH TOVU. Was it not intended as a curse? Was it not uttered by an enemy of our people, by the ancient forerunner of the modern intellectual anti-semit? Indeed, one of the outstanding Halachic scholars of all generations, the MAHARSHALL (R. Solomon Luria, 16th century),

wrote in his Responsa (#64): ANI MAS'CHIL BE'ROV CHASDECHA, UMEALEG MAH TOVU SHE'AMRO BILAM, V'AF HU AMRO LI'KLALLAH, "I begin with the second verse and skip MAH TOVU, which was first recited by Bilaam, and he intended it as a curse". This is the weighty opinion of a giant of the Halachah.

And yet our people at large did not accept the verdict of the MAHARSHAL. We have accepted the MAH TOVU, we have given it the place of honor, and, as we well know, it has become the "darling" of cantors and liturgical composers. And if all Israel has accepted it and accorded it such honors, then there must be something very special about it that somehow reflects an aspect of the basic personality of the Jew, and a deep, indigenous part of the Jewish religious character.

That unique aspect of our collective character, that singularly Jewish trait which manifests itself in the choice of MAH TOVU under the conditions we mentioned, is the very ability to wring a blessing out of a curse. We say MAH TOVU not despite the fact that it was intended to harm us, but because of that very fact. It is Jewish to find the benediction in the malediction, the good in the evil, the opportunity in the catastrophe. It is ~~to~~ Jewish to make the best of the worst, to squeeze holiness out of profanity. From the evil and diabolical intentions of Bilaam SHELO YIHEYU LACHEM BATEI KNEISYOT UVATEI MIDRASHOT, we moulded a blessing of MAH TOVU, which we recite - just as we enter those very halls of worship and study.

Hassidism, in ~~its~~ <sup>the</sup> symbolic language of its philosophy, elevated this idea to one of its guiding principles. We must, Hassidism teaches, find the NITZOTZ in the KLIPAH, the "spark" in the "shell"; that is, we must always salvage the spark of holiness which resides in the very heart of Evil. There is some good in everything bad. The greatness of man consists of rescuing that good and building upon it. In fact, that is just how the entire movement of Hassidism had its beginning. European Jewry, suffering untold persecutions, was desparately seeking some glimmer of hope. There was a tremendous longing in every Jewish heart for the Messiah. There was a restlessness and a thirst for elevation. Two "False Messiahs", one a psychoneurotic and the other a quack and charlatan, proclaimed themselves Messiahs and led their people astray.

All European Jewry was terribly excited about these people. Soon, one led them into Mohammedanism, and the other into Catholicism. The common, simple Jews of Eastern Europe, those who suffered most and who bore the most pain, were completely depressed by this tragedy of seeing their only hopes fizz and die. Now there was nothing to turn to. And here the Baal Shem Tov stepped in, took these yearnings and longings and pent-up religious drives and directed them not to falseness and apostasy and tragedy, but channeled them into a new form, into sincere and genuine religious expression which, all historians now admit, literally rescued all of Jewry from certain annihilation. He wrung a blessing from a curse. He found the good in the evil. He saw opportunity in catastrophe. He knew the meaning of MAH TOVU.

Jewish history is rich in such examples of making the best of the worst, of transforming the K'LALLAH into the B'RACHAH. The Temple and its sacrificial service was destroyed, so our forefathers exploited the catastrophe and found new avenues for religious expression in prayer, the "sacrifice of the heart". Jerusalem and its schools were ruined, so they decided that Torah is unprejudiced in its geography, and so they built Yavneh, where they accomplished even more than in Jerusalem. Ernest Bevin refused to permit 100,000 Jewish refugees to immigrate into Palestine, so, having no choice, we proclaimed and built a State of Israel for over a million Jews. Remember the mourning and sadness and gloom when Bevin refused us? And remember our joy and thrill and SIMCHAH in May of 1948 when the State was declared? BRACHAH from KLALLAH. We have never completely surrendered to K'LALLAH. We have always poked around in its wreckage, found the <sup>spark</sup> key we were looking for, and converted the whole K'LALLAH into one great BRACHAH. That is what is implied in reciting MAH TOVU as the opening chord of our prayers. G-d, continue that <sup>power</sup> ~~power~~ within us. Let us make the best of the worst; blessing from curse.

Perhaps one of the most outstanding example of one human being who was able to transform curse to blessing is the renowned Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, who died in 1929. Rosenzweig was a German Jew, an assimilationist, who was profound, scholarly and sincere in his intellectual pursuits. He is the one who, concluding that he was going to convert to Christianity, decided to follow the historical process ,

and so attempted to acquaint himself with Judaism as a stepping stone to his new faith. Interestingly, he experienced a great religious feeling during the Nei'lai Service on Yom Kippur in some small Orthodox synagogue in Germany, and thereafter became one of the leading Jewish philosophers of our time, a man who attracted many great students and colleagues and, in his criticism of Reform, led people back to our origins. Rosenzweig was an extremely active man. He was a thrilling and popular lecturer. He was a talented speaker, writer, and administrator, as well as thinker. But, at the prime of his life, in 1922, tragedy struck. In the wake of a cerebral hemorrhage came partial then complete paralysis. The widely traveled searcher could not move. The able lecturer could not speak. The writer could not move his hands, could hardly even dictate notes. Surely, this should have killed him. Surely, this should have marked the end of a fruitful and promising career. But no, Rosenzweig had rediscovered Judaism, and with it its inarticulate but very real insights. And so he learned to wring fortune from this misfortune. He dictated numerous letters, scholarly articles, books to his wife, by virtue of a special machine. His wife would turn a dial, with the alphabet, and he would nod ever so slightly, at the letter he wanted. Thus, mind you, were letters, articles, diaries and books written!

Nor was this only a flurry of panicky activity, something to "make him forget. " No, it was a state of mind, it was the Jewish genius ever seeking the "spark" in the "shell", the blessing in the curse. Shortly after the onset of illness, he wrote the following, "If I must be ill, I want to enjoy it...In a sense, these two months have been quite pleasant. For one thing, after a long spell, I got back to reading books". This from a man who couldn't move a limb, and who couldn't pronounce one consonant intelligibly! And listen now to what the same man writes seven years later, just before his death, "I read, carry on business,...and, all in all, enjoy life...besides, I have something looming in the background for the sake of which I am almost tempted to call this period the richest of my life....it is simply true:dying is even more beautiful than living." What a conversion of KLALLAH to BRACHAH!



It is so, and should be so, with every individual. Misfortunes, may they never occur, have their redeeming qualities. Death brings an appreciation of Life. Tragedy can bring husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister, closer together and bring out dormant loves and loyalties. Failure can spur one on to newer and greater successes than ever dreamt of. In the inner shells of curse, there lies the spark of blessing.

The aim and goal of prayer, as our Jewish sages have pointed out through the ages, is not to change G-d, but to change ourselves. We come before G-d as humble petitioners, terribly aware of our shortcomings, our inferiorities and our sins. Whoever prays truly knows that somewhere, sometimes, he or she has been caught in the web of Curse. We feel tainted with evil. And so we pray. We pray and we want G-d to help us change ourselves. What sort of change is it that we want? The change from Evil to Good, from Curse to Blessing. We want to transform ourselves. That is the spirit of the prayerful personality.

And that is the reason for beginning the day of prayer and petition with MAH TOVU. We enter the House of G-d which stands and survives despite and because of its ancient and modern enemies. The synagogue itself is the symbol of that transformation. We begin now to pray, with the object of such transformation in ourselves. Hence, MAH TOVU.

MAH TOVU. How good. <sup>is</sup> Indeed, not only good, but how fortunate a people <sup>is</sup> who can forever hope and smile, knowing that even if, Heaven forbid, KLALLAH should be its lot, it will ~~wring~~ wring out of it every drop of BRACHAH. This, indeed, is the greatest BRACHAH.

in fact. How good.