

## Of Tents and Temples

*'Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'acov, mishkenotecha Yisrael'* – 'how good are your tents, oh Jacob, your dwelling-places, oh Israel.' This classic line from Parashat Balak (Num.

24:5) was uttered by the prophet Bilaam. Bilaam was a non-Jewish prophet who was commissioned by the Moabite king, Balak, to curse the Israelites as they camped at the borders of the territory of Moab, a large throng of refugees. As Bilaam was poised to utter the curse, blessings

'mishkan' can be translated as either dwelling or sanctuary). A tent is an open, portable space. A sanctuary is a place for holy encounter and refuge. Bilaam isn't only saying that the Jewish people should be blessed, but that *we ourselves*

A tent is open to the world: hospitable and engaged. A sanctuary provides us with a safe and protective space. One invites us to share our blessings with the world; the other allows us to cultivate those blessings for the edification of our own community. To be strong, to feel centered in our Judaism, to be

*should be a blessing:* by creating spaces that guarantee kindness, relationship, compassion, safety and openness. It is no coincidence that the Rabbis who crafted our liturgy put this verse right at the beginning of the service: it frames our intentions for everything we do at the