

Tefillah Focus Of The Week:

MA TOVU

'None Other Than The House Of G-d'

MEANING: The simple translation of the prayer

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel. As for me, through your abundant kindness I will enter Your House, I will prostrate myself toward Your Holy Sanctuary in awe of You...

מה טובו אהליך
יעקב משכנתיך
ישראל. ואני ברב
חסדך אבוא ביתך,
אשתחוה אל היכל
קדשך ביראתך...

WORD TO THE WISE: Meaning within the meaning



The word "mah" is traditionally translated as "what". However, Rabbi Meir Schuck, z'tl offers a more penetrating definition based on three well-known uses of the word "mah." The first is when Yaakov Avniu, upon reaching the place of the future Beis Hamikdash, exclaimed: "Mah nora hamakom hazeh - What an awesome place this is!" Secondly, on the Seder night, the young child calls out "Mah nishtana halayla hazeh - what is so different about this night?" Both of these instances are exclamations of stunning realization. The third instance is the verse of "mah tovu" itself, which comes from בלעם's reaction when he perceived the holiness of the Jewish homes. The word "mah," then, can indicate a remarkable realization, appreciation of a place or event, as if it were brand new. So too, when we enter shul for the first time each day, we can experience anew feelings of joy and trepidation. The mere recitation of the word "mah" can then instill within you a wonderful appreciation of the moment!

THEME:

An essential concept of the prayer

Entering A Holy Place

The shul is an exalted place of holiness.

INSIGHT:

Deeper meanings of the theme

Making Your Own Connection

The Sages interpret the phrase אהליך יעקב as a reference to its "tents of prayer and learning." The Gemara teaches that the Shechinah resides in places of holiness: the Holy Temple, Jerusalem, and in a shul when ten men pray together. Therefore, when one enters the shul, he is entering into a place where the

Shechinah's presence can be more vividly felt.

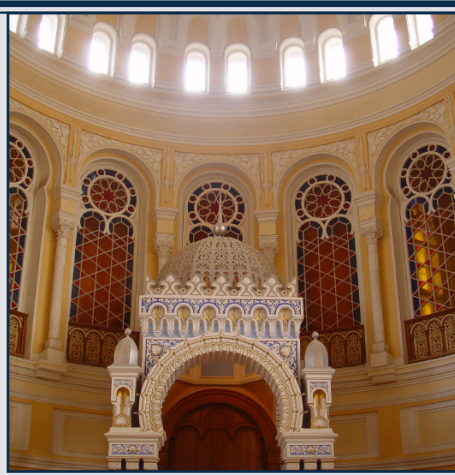
However, this sense of holiness does not come automatically. The Ramchal teaches that although the Shechinah's influence manifests itself in certain holy places, it is only there for those who seek to connect to Hashem.

VISUALIZE:

Images that bring the prayer to life

The Flash Of Recognition

Yaakov, our forefather, sets out on the road from Beersheva to Haran. On his long journey, he passes Har Moriah – the exact spot upon which his father, Yitzchak, was brought to be sacrificed by Avraham. Through this seminal event, the mountain was imbued with a great emanation of G-d's presence. Despite that, Yaakov did not stop there. But when he arrived in Haran, he was troubled by a nagging thought: "Is it



possible that I passed the place where my fathers prayed and I did not pray there?" He turned around and headed back out on the road, burning with desire to pray in that holy place.

As a reward for his willingness to re-embark on an arduous journey solely to have the opportunity to pray at Har Moriah, G-d performed a miracle and shortened the way.

Upon arriving at the mountain, Yaakov was overcome with reverence and declared, "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the Home of G-d and this is the gate of the heavens." It is partly in the merit of Yaakov's recognition of the holiness of this spot on earth that it became the site of the two Holy Temples.

By entering shul in the spirit with which Yaakov approached Har HaMoriah, longing to deliver our tefillos in a place imbued with holiness, we too can awaken our recognition that "This is none other than the Home of G-d."

Try This!

Think about one aspect of your shul that arouses your sense of awe; the sound of everyone saying "Yehai Sh'mai Rabba" together; the facial expression of someone who prays with a great deal of kavannah; the physical appearance of the Torah scroll or the holy ark, or some other sight or sound. Imagine it vividly and let the image arouse your emotions. This week, when you recite the words "מה טובו" as you enter the synagogue, flash upon this image and let it awaken your heart.

Did You Know

In Lieu Of The Temple

"מה טובו" is said upon entering the synagogue in the morning to pray. Although it is not cited in the Gemara and Tur, Seder Rav Amrom Gaon and Siddur Rashi state that it is recited in praise and reverence of the shul, which we have in lieu of the Beis HaMikdash.

The Mishnah Berurah (Siman 151:1) explains that the verse "and My Sanctuary shall you revere" applies to every shul, each of which has the halachic status of kedushah. Therefore, in shul or in a house of learning a person is prohibited from acting foolishly or even engaging in idle talk.