

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XL: Balak (Num. 22:2–25:9)

Essay 5. With the holiness of synagogues, one finds life

"מה-טבו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך ישראל". יש לדקדק בלשון של "מה-טבו", שהנה די לומר "טבו אהליך יעקב".

Instead of cursing Israel, Balaam involuntarily blessed us: **“How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!”** (Num. 24:5). Some commentators say that tents and dwellings refers to synagogues and study halls.¹ Unlike tents, these are permanent buildings that may require a *mezuzah*.² **We should scrutinize the language, “how fair,” for it would have been sufficient to say, “Fair are your tents, O Jacob . . . ,”** i.e., omitting the word “how” (מה) (*ma*).

וגיש לומר שסוד המזוזות כתבו המקובלים שהוא ז"ל מן"ת, ועוד כתבו שבאמצע האותיות מ"ת נכנס ז"ו וז"ו דהיינו מזוזות, והוא בגימטריא כ"ו פ"ש המיוחד. וזהו שאמרו כתוב שמי על פתחך, וזה השם מרחיק המנות ומפרידה. וידוע שבתו כנסיות פטורים מן המזוזות, ולמה פטורים מפני ששם אין מנת ואין צורך להפרידה אלא אדרבא שם יש חסידים.

It can be said that an esoteric secret of the *mezuzah* was written by the Kabbalists, and it is that the letters of the plural form, מזוזות (*mezuzot*) can be rearranged as ז"ז מן"ת (*zaz mavet*), which means “death departs.”³ In other words, the use of a *mezuzah* can help protect one’s property and person against harm.

They also wrote that in the middle of the letters מ"ת (*met*) (“death”), the letters ז"ו וז"ו enter, which are joined together to form the (plene spelling of the) word *mezuzot* (מזוזות). This group of letters ז"ו וז"ו has the Gematria of 26, the same Gematria as the Familiar Name of G-d, i.e., the Tetragrammaton. This is what they said, “Write My name on your entryways,”⁴ i.e.,

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¹ Sanhedrin 105b. *Also* Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1550), *Bei'ur al ha'Torah* (Venice, 1567).

² Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 286:10 says that the majority view is that a Beit Midrash (study hall) does not require *mezuzot*, some say that they are required. Yoreh Deah 286:3 teaches that if a synagogue is only used for prayer, it does not need a *mezuzah*. But since most synagogues now are also used for kiddush, for weddings, for dinners, and as a study hall, most are provided with *mezuzot*.

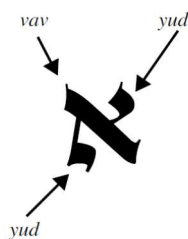
³ Zohar Chadash, Sifra Tanina 98. *Also* Rabbi Menahem ben Benjamin Recanati (1223–1290), Italian rabbi, *Perush Al ha-Torah* (Venice, 1523), parshat Va'etchanan 35. [Note that this can also work with the plene spelling, as ז"ז מן"ת can be rearranged as ז"ז מן"ת.]

⁴ Zohar II:36a: “Rabbi Abba said: In a few places, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has mercy on His sons. A man makes a house, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, says to him: ‘Write My name and put it in your doorway, and you will be inside the house, and I will sit outside the doorway to preserve you.’ And here, He said: ‘Place on the doorway the secret of My faith, and you will be inside the house, and I will keep you from outside,’ as it is written, ‘None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning’ (Ex. 12:22), and it is written, ‘He will see the blood on the

by providing a *mezuzah* there, which includes selections of Scripture containing the Name of G-d, **and this is The Name that distances death and separates it.**⁵ **It is known that synagogues are exempt from the law of the *mezuzah*, and why are they exempt? Because there is no death in a synagogue, and there is no need for separation, rather to the contrary, [in the synagogue] there is life.**

וְלָכֵן אָמַר מ"ה טוֹב"ו שֶׁהֵם גִּימְטְרִיָּא ס"ח דְּהֵינּוּ חַיִּים. וְאָמַר "אֵהְלִיךָ יַעֲקֹב", לְפִי שֶׁהִכְתוּב אוֹמֵר "תִּתֵּן אֶמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב", שֶׁהָאֵלֶּף שֶׁל אֶמֶת מְצַטְטֵינֵרֶת יו"י, וְהִיא גִימְטְרִיָּא כ"ו. וְהִיא סְמוּכָה לְאוֹתֵיזוֹת מ"ת וְנִנְעָשָׂה אֶמֶת דְּקוּשָׁטָא קָאֵי, וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי אָמְרוּ יַעֲקֹב אֲבִינּוּ לֹא מֵת.

Therefore, [Scripture] said, “how fair” (מ"ה טוֹב"ו), which [letters] have the Gematria of 68,⁶ which is the same Gematria as the word “life” (*chaim*) (חַיִּים). It says, “your tents, O Jacob,” because the Scripture also names the patriarch when it says, “You will keep true faith (אֶמֶת) (*emet*) with Jacob” (Micah 7:20), for the *alef* (א) of *emet* (אֶמֶת) (which can mean “truth” or “faith”) is drawn as a combination of a *yud*, *vav*, *yud*, as shown below. These three letters have the Gematria of 26, which as noted above is the same Gematria as the Tetragrammaton.



This letter א (*alef*), which by itself therefore evokes the Name of G-d, is placed **adjacent to the letters מ"ת (*met*) (death), and together they become the word “truth” (*emet*) (אֶמֶת). For truth stands eternal.**⁷ Because of this, it says, “our father Jacob did not die.”⁸ Abarbanel’s explanation is that this allegorical saying means that Jacob’s legacy continues, with his descendants still bearing his name, Israel, and following his teachings. Balaam’s involuntary blessing recognized the beauty of our synagogues and study halls, which ensure the continuation of Jacob’s legacy.

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lintel and the two doorposts, and the L-rd will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home’ (Ex. 12:23).”

⁵ If the translator correctly understands the intent, that the Name separates death, then the word ומפרידה should be ומפרידו, as מוֹת is a masculine noun.

⁶ Note that this requires a change from the deficient spelling טב"ו found in Num. 24:5 to the plene spelling טוב"ו.

⁷ Shabbat 104a: “Why do [the letters that comprise the word] *sheker* (שָׁקֵר) all stand on one foot, and [the letters that comprise the word] *emet* (אֶמֶת) [stand on bases that are wide like] bricks? [Because the] truth stands [eternal and] falsehood does not stand [eternal].”

⁸ Taanit 5b: “After they had eaten, [Rabbi Yitzchak] said to [Rabbi Nachman] that Rabbi Yochanan said as follows: Our patriarch Jacob did not die. [Rav Nachman] asked him in surprise: And was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him and the embalmers embalmed him and the buriers buried him? [Rabbi Yitzchak] replied to [Rav Nachman]: I am interpreting a verse, as it is stated: ‘Therefore do not fear, Jacob My servant, says the L-rd, neither be dismayed, Israel, for I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity’ (Jer. 30:10). This verse juxtaposes Jacob to his seed: Just as his seed is alive when redeemed, so too, Jacob himself is alive.” [The Zera Shimshon discusses this allegorical statement at length in Chapter XII, Vayechi, essay 15.]