

Shuls are just fantastic!



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It's a children's service classic: "*Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael* - How good are your **tents**, Jacob, your **dwelling places**, Israel!?"

Not only does it appear on page 3 of the green Tribe children's siddur, but it also features in this week's Torah portion, Balak!

In Bemidbar 24:5, we see Bilaam, a non-Jewish prophet who set out to curse the Jewish nation, end up becoming awestruck by God and sensationally utter these words of blessing for the Jewish people.

But what is the meaning of this blessing? How is it so significant to sit at the beginning of our siddurim?

Looking at the new Authorised Daily Prayer Book, a footnote on page 5 shares the explanation of these 'tents' and 'dwelling places' that Bilaam compliments in *Ma Tovu*. Namely, they refer to the synagogues and houses of study of the Jewish people (Talmud Sanhedrin 105a).

So, *Ma Tovu* can be paraphrased as "Jews, your shuls and *Bet Midrash* programmes are just fantastic!" What lovely words!

Yet, what is so fantastic about these two specific parts of Jewish life – of praying and of learning? Are there not many other terrific Jewish-related activities? Performing acts of kindness (*chesed*) and giving to charity (*tzedaka*) are two hugely worthwhile pursuits that surely deserve lauding and recognition!

Perhaps an answer is found when thinking about our Jewish communities today.

Our shuls are not only homes of prayer. They are also places of *chesed* opportunities and positive social experiences.

Our *Batei Midrash* (places of study) are not only homes of learning. They are also focal points of *tzedaka* – whether that may be collecting for in-house maintenance or for wider community needs.

Our Jewish places are filled with Jewish actions. And that really is fantastic!

In simple terms, *Ma Tovu* is an emphatic shout-out to our communities. It is a celebratory prayer of the incredible activity that takes place in our Jewish buildings. And even more refreshingly, as proven by its recitation by a non-Jewish prophet, it reminds us daily of the remarkable impression we can make on the world around us through our shul and *Bet Midrash* life.

Shul Quiz!

Have a go at answering these questions about shuls:

1. What is the Hebrew name of the light above the Ark?
2. In which direction do we pray and why?
3. What is used to point to the Torah while it is being read?
4. How often are the Ten Commandments read aloud in shul?
5. Which historic synagogue was so large that a flag would signal when to say "Amen"?!