

Dear Chavraya,

I send greetings from the North Sea, where Mieke and I have come for a few days during our stay in Belgium. When we went shopping for Shabbos in a nearby market, we saw a few men wearing yarmulkes. I went over to one of them to say good Shabbos and he asked if I knew there was a shul in the area. It is the local shtibl that I go to every year when we are here. We had in fact just biked past it, an apartment building with no indication whatsoever of a Jewish presence, but for a subtly placed mezzuza deeply set in the stone doorpost.

As we approach this Shabbos of *Parashat Balak*, I think of the local shtibl in JP. Whether a shtibl in the Belgian town of Knokke or ours in JP, or for any shul however humble or grand, this *parsha* offers a challenge for who are to be. As the Midianite prophet Bilaam seeks to curse Israel on their desert journey, trying to curse three times at the behest of the Moabite king Balak, only words of blessing come forth from his mouth. On the third attempt to curse, he sings Israel's praises with familiar words that have become much beloved from their place at the beginning of the Siddur, *Mah tovu ohalecha ya'akov, mish'k'notecha yisra'el/how good are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel*. Tents are seen to be our personal dwellings, our homes, while the dwelling places of Israel are seen to be our communal dwellings, our synagogues and houses of study. However impressed Bilaam was with what he saw, there is not an inherent goodness that inheres among us in perpetuity. It is for us in every generation, in every place and time of our gathering, to renew our worthiness to be so blessed.

In pursuing peace and justice, in doing deeds of *chesed/kindness*, we seek to be worthy of Bilaam's blessing. So too, in filling our shtibl with words of prayer and the song of Torah, we help to raise up each other's spirit and reach for the blessing of who we are meant to be. There will be a wonderful gathering in our shtibl this Shabbos morning, many people contributing to insure that the song of our people is heard among us in the place of our gathering. Please come to shul if you are at all able, adding your own voice and spirit while supporting those who have prepared to lead and facilitate, insuring nourishment of body as well as soul.

As I daven in a shtibl by the North Sea, I will think of you, all of the tents and dwelling places of Israel joined across oceans and time. Confident of our worthiness, that it shall also be said of us, the shtibl in JP, *mah tovu/how good*, I will sing out from afar Amen v'Amen.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor