

מַה טָבוּ

מַה טָבוּ אֱהָלֶיךָ, יַעֲקֹב, מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ, יִשְׂרָאֵל.

וְאֲנִי בְּרַב חַסְדֶּךָ אָבוֹא בֵיתְךָ.

אֲשַׁתְּחֶוּהָ אֵל הַיְכָל קֹדְשְׁךָ בִּירְאָתְךָ.

יְיָ אֱהַבְתִּי מֵעוֹן בֵּיתְךָ, וּמִקוֹם מִשְׁכַּן כְּבוֹדְךָ.

וְאֲנִי אֲשַׁתְּחֶוּהָ וְאֶכְרַעָהּ, אֲבָרְכָהּ לְפָנַי יְיָ עֹשֵׂי.

וְאֲנִי, תִּפְלְתִי לָךְ יְיָ, עֵת רְצוֹן,

אֱלֹהִים בְּרַב חַסְדֶּךָ, עֲנֵנִי בְּאֵמֶת יִשְׁעֶךָ.

מה טוב

Root: ט-ו-ב

Meaning - good

Word in the prayer with the root: טוב

מה טוב is found in the warm up, introductory section, of the Reform Shabbat morning service. It serves to welcome everyone to the worship service, just as Abraham (Jacob's grandfather) welcomed visitors to his tent. It signals the formal beginning of the service. As we sing this prayer we ready ourselves for prayer.

The first part of מה טוב comes from the Torah in the Book of Numbers, the 4th book of the Five Books of Moses. Other parts of the prayer come from different verses in the Book of Psalms. מה טוב recalls the story of B'laam, a prophet of the king of the Moabites, Balak, who was an enemy of Israel. King Balak sends his prophet B'laam to curse the Israelites. Along the journey God sends an angel to block his path, and B'laam's donkey, seeing the angel, goes off the road to bypass the angel. B'laam, who doesn't see the angel, beats the donkey for going off the road. The donkey opens its mouth and starts speaking to B'laam, asking why he is beating her. B'laam sees the angel, who tells him that he will not be able to curse the Israelites, and will only be able to say what God allows. B'laam attempts to fulfill the task Balak hired him to do, but instead blesses the Israelites. From higher ground, he gazes down at the encamped Israelites spread below him far into the distance and wondrously announces, "מה טוב אלהיך, יעקב"

מה טוב emphasizes the importance of looking outwards, and to serve as an example to those around us. Like Balak and B'laam, the outside world notices us, and learns from our actions.

When we first enter the sanctuary, ready to recite words of praise and blessing to God, we strive to acknowledge our own role and essential part we play in helping to fix the world. The words of מה טוב anchor us to our place within humanity. The prayer celebrates Jewish identity.

Vocabulary

good - טָבוֹ	what, how - מַה
I bow down - אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה	and place - וּמְקוֹם

Past Roots and Prefixes

choose ב-ח-ר	place, put ש-י-מ	bless ב-ר-כ
life, live ח-י-(י)	root for names of God and also the word “God” (ה)	
and ו	to, for ל	great, large ג-ד-ל
give נ-ת-נ	on, in, with ב or ב	save, redeem ג-א-ל
hero, power ג-ב-ר	father א-ב	mother א-מ
holy, sacred ק-ד-ש	love א-ה-ב	speak ד-ב-ר
		ruler מ-ל-כ

Translation

How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel. I, through Your great love, enter Your house; I bow down in awe at Your holy temple.

Adonai, I love Your temple, the dwelling-place of Your glory. I will humbly bow down low before Adonai, my Maker.

As for me, may my prayer come to You, Adonai, at a favorable time. O God, in Your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance.