Mah Tovu -
How goodly are your tents, O Jacob!


How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!
- Numbers 24:5

The Mah Tovu is a mixture of verses from different places in the Tanakh: Numbers 24:5 and Psalms 5:8, 26:8, 95:6 and 69:14. The custom is to recite Mah Tovu as you enter the synagogue (or shortly thereafter). The theme of Mah Tovu is expressing our appreciation for being able to come together and worship in a makom kadosh (holy place).

How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, 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. * O LORD, I love the House where You dwell, and the place where Your glory tabernacles. I shall prostrate myself and bow; I shall kneel before the LORD my Maker. As for me, may my prayer to You, LORD, be at a favorable time; O God, in Your abundant kindness, answer me with the truth of Your salvation!

* Bow here.
Mah Tovu

Transliterated:

Mah Tovu
yisra'el mishkenote ykha ya'akov o'haleykha te vu mah
O Israel your dwellings O Jacob your tents goodly How

ve ye tekh a vo chas de kha ber ov ve'ani
into your house I will come your favor in the multitude As for me

ashmeta na al hilel kri sh va'irikhu
in awe of You the sanctuary of Your holiness unto I will prostrate myself

yirku kav de kha mish kan une kom be ye te kha me 'on a hav ti Adonai
of Your glory tabernacle and place Your house shelter I love Lord

'osi Adonai if nei 'evre kah vee'eh ra'ah 'eshta chav eh va'ani
my Maker the Lord before I will kneel and bow will prostrate myself and I

ratsen 'el Adonai le kha te fil la ti va'ani
favorable a time Lord to You may my prayer and I

yish ekha be e met 'aneini chas de kha ber ov 'el him
of Your salvation in the truth answer me of your favor in the multitude O God

* Bow here.
Kavanah: Preparing to “Cross Over”

The *Mah Tovu* helps us get our attitude readied before we go in to worship at the synagogue. We pause, attune ourselves to new surroundings, and leave our “baggage” behind us. We should feel as if we are passing over bridge into a new country. The *Mah Tovu* was first uttered by Balaam, an outsider of Israel, who nevertheless was awestruck with the glory of the God of Israel (Numbers 22-24). In the same way, we seek to apprehend and behold the glory of God as we make our way to worship before Him.