

LISHMAH OR LO LISHMAH?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Balak said to Bilaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times." (Bamidbar 25:10)

In the world of Torah there is something called "lishmah" and "lo lishmah," literally meaning "for its name" and "not for its name." They are two terms that can refer to one's performance of a mitzvah, which can be either for the right reason or the wrong reason. The Talmud warns us about making sure that we perform mitzvos for the former reason and not the latter one.

What if a person has a difficult time serving God for the right reasons? Should he not do so at all? Answers the Talmud:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: A man should always occupy himself with Torah and the commandments even if it is not for their own sake, because from [occupying himself with them] not for their own sake he comes to do so for their own sake. As a reward for the 42 sacrifices which Balak, king of Moav, offered, he merited that Rus should issue from him and from her issued Shlomo . . . (Sotah 47a)

What? How could that be? Rus was one of the most righteous Jews to ever grace Jewish history, and even that was after a late start, since she was a convert to Judaism. Balak, on the other hand, as the Torah mentions in this week's parshah, was a pretty evil guy. On top of that, his sacrifices were all to try and convince God to allow Bilaam, to curse the Jewish people even after He already told Bilaam quite explicitly that the Jewish people were not to be cursed.

Normally when we talk about performing a mitzvah, such as learning Torah, lo lishmah, that is, for selfish reasons, we mean that the person is doing the mitzvah for his own personal benefit. For example, he may learn Torah to become more knowledgeable about it so that he can become a Torah scholar in the eyes of the others. We are supposed to learn Torah because it is a mitzvah to do so, and any personal gain it might bring us is only supposed to be a wonderful by-product of serving God, not the goal itself.

There might be other "wrong" reasons for performing a mitzvah, but none of them include using the mitzvah against God. It is not called learning lo lishmah if a person learns Torah, no matter how much, in order to undermine Torah belief, as many priests and secular Jews have done over the ages. On the contrary, that is called profaning the holy Torah, and there is no reward for that, only

punishment. What then was different about Balak's 42 sacrifices to God that not only brought him reward, it brought him the ancestress of Moshiach?

The answer is not what it appears to be. To begin with, if we were to have asked Balak how he felt about such a reward, would he have been pleased or upset? He himself answers this question in the parshah:

Balak's anger flared against Bilaam, and he clapped his hands. Balak said to Bilaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times." (Bamidbar 25:10)

In other words, Balak would have said to God, "With reward like that I'd rather go rewardless." Balak had come to push off the Final Redemption, maybe avoid it altogether, and all he did in the end was further its cause. A reward is only a reward if that is how it appears to the one receiving it.

Is the Talmud then only being facetious? It doesn't seem so, because it is using the story as an example for the rest of us who certainly would be very grateful to give birth to someone like a Rus, especially if we knew that we only performed our mitzvah lo lishmah. Then what is the Talmud's message, and to whom is it conveying it? To answer the question, we can draw from another story that goes back even further in time, to Egypt and the Ten Plagues.

Of all of the plagues that God inflicted upon the Egyptian ruler and his people, the plague of Frogs was somewhat unique. The Torah reports that once the plague began frogs began to appear all over the place, driving the Egyptians batty. What the Torah does not report is the following:

One verse says, "and the river swarmed with frogs" (Shemos 7:28), and another verse says, "and the frog came up" (Shemos 8:2). Rebi Akiva said, "There was one frog, and the Egyptians were beating it, and many frogs showered from it." (Midrash Tanchuma, VaAira 14; Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah 7)

What was the point of that? Would not the simple understanding have sufficed to describe the second plague with which the Egyptian people were afflicted? Was it not a big enough nightmare for them according to the simple explanation of the plague?

Nightmare yes, lesson no. The plagues that God sent to Egypt were more than just punishment, they were also instructions about life and Divine Providence, if not for the smart Egyptians, then at least for the smart Jews. It is a lesson that is also found in this (rather lengthy) section of Talmud:

Rebi Chanina bar Papa, and some say Rebi Simlai, expounded [the previous verse] this way: "In the time to come, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will take a scroll of the Law in His embrace and proclaim, 'Let him who has occupied himself herewith, come and take his reward.' Thereupon all the nations will crowd together in confusion, as it is said, 'All the nations are gathered

together, etc.' (Yeshayahu 43:9). The Holy One, Blessed is He, will then say to them, 'Do not come before Me in confusion, but let each nation come in [one at a time].' The Kingdom of Edom will enter first before Him . . . The Holy One, Blessed is He, will then say to them, 'With what have you occupied yourselves?'

They will answer, 'Master of the Universe, we have established many marketplaces, we have erected many baths, we have accumulated much gold and silver, and all this we did only for the sake of the Jewish people, that they might [have leisure] to occupy themselves with the study of the Torah!'

The Holy One, Blessed is He, will answer them: 'Fools of the world! All that you did you did to satisfy your own desires. You established marketplaces to place prostitutes within them, and baths to enjoy. [Regarding the distribution of] silver and gold, that is Mine . . .' They will then depart crushed in spirit. (Avodah Zarah 2b)

This account in the Talmud does not end there with the Romans. Rather, the Persians follow the Romans and try the same shtik and receive the same rebuke. And, for all intents and purposes, we could put the Americans and Europeans, et al, in the line up as well with similar stories.

Some might think that the point of this story is that one day, in the future, the Jewish people will have their comeuppance against all of their oppressors. "They may be able to enjoy themselves now," the Talmud is telling us, "but don't worry, they'll be miserable when God finally lowers the boom and turns the tables on them and us."

True as that point is, the deeper and more profound lesson is hidden under a little "rock" that everyone overlooks, except of course the Brisker Rav. In true Rambam style the Brisker Rav uncovered an important insight about life in this world in a single word: fools.

"Fools?" questioned the Brisker Rav. "More like Liars!" he explained. "Yes, fools," he answered. The Talmud chose its words carefully, the Brisker explained, and it chose to call the lying nations of history "fools" to tell us that this is exactly what they are, Fools. They will be right, that everything they did throughout history was for the sake of the Jewish people, to help them fulfill their longterm national mission.

"But," the Talmud is telling us, "if they will think for one moment that they will be able, on their future day of judgment, to convince God that this had been their intention from the start, well, they will be outright foolish." Though it was God's intention to help the Jewish people along their way to national completion throughout each epoch from Day One, the nations of the world will only have been the instrument to accomplish this, goaded into doing so because of their own selfish and mistaken tendencies.

It is a very powerful and encouraging message for the Jew, especially the downtrodden one. It also

teaches us the importance of trusting in God and having faith in the way He runs the world, especially when human logic has difficulty making sense of current history. It's all for the good, and it's all to help the Jewish people reach fulfillment, even when it looks as if what is being accomplished is just the opposite.

The only question is, how does this reflect back on the original source of the discussion about performing mitzvos even, if necessary, lo lishmah? That too may be hiding the Talmud's real message, which is embedded in the unusual example it uses to make its point. This is something that only becomes clear once the concept of lo lishmah is better understood.

The Talmud, when discussing the end result of the adulterous woman, says its quite poignantly:

Our Rabbis have taught: The suspected woman set her eyes on one who was not proper for her, and what she sought was not given to her and what she possessed was taken from her. Whoever sets his eyes on that which is not his is not granted what he seeks and what he possesses is taken from him. (Sotah ga)

In other words, the Talmud warns, be careful what you seek, and why you seek it. If it is not meant for you, or at least for the reason you seek it, then not only will you not acquire it in the end, but even that which you did possess will be taken from you. If the only way you can get yourself to do a mitzvah is for an ulterior motive, let it be with the goal of eventually doing it for the right reason. God has patience for that, and will help you out.

Do not, however, make lo lishmah your approach to Torah and mitzvos, because it will not serve you well. Rather than get what you want, you will even lose what you have. You can fool yourself some of the time, other people most of the time, but God, none of the time. If love of God and a desire to be His partner in the rectification of Creation is not your motivating factor when it comes to mitzvos, He will know it and respond accordingly. The mitzvah will get done and the Torah will be learned, but it will not be for the benefit of the one who did them. As they say here in Israel, "Chaval al hazman," which loosely translates as, "What a waste of time."

Text

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