THE APTER REBBE BENDS THE RULES FOR AHAVAS YISRAEL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Balak

The Apter Rebbe Bends The Rules For Ahavas Yisrael

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #644 -- Makom Kevuah Revisited. Good Shabbos!

The Apter Rebbe was known by his sefer called Ohev Yisrael [lover of Israel]. The Apter Rebbe was, as the name of this sefer implies, an exceptional proponent of the mitzvah of loving one's fellow Jew. He was accustomed to say that in every single Torah portion there is an allusion to Ahavas Yisrael (the mitzvah of loving a fellow Jew).

One of his Chassidim came to him and asked where such allusion was to be found in Parshas Balak. A superficial reading of this parsha certainly turns up no such reference.

The Rebbe looked at the Chossid in surprise and told him there was an obvious allusion -- the name BaLaK is an acronym for the words V'ahavta L'Reacha Kamocha [You shall love your neighbor as yourself] [Vayikra 19:18]! The Chossid looked at the Rebbe and protested, "But Rebbe, Balak is spelled Beis Lamed Kuf and the words in the pasuk [verse] teaching we should love our neighbor begin with the letters Vov Lamed Chaf? - You are matching a Beis with a Vov and a Kuf with a Chaf to make this allusion!" [The matched letters make the same sounds, but are different letters.]

The Apter Rebbe responded with something that was more than just a whimsical quip. He responded with a profound insight saying: "You have been my Chossid all these years. Haven't you learned yet that when it comes to 'Ahavas Yisrael', you can't be so precise about the exact lettering (ven es kumpt tzu Ahavas Yisrael ken mi'nisht medakdek zayn mitt de'oysiyos)"?

The Apter Rebbe knew very well how to spell Balak. But he was teaching his disciple the lesson that when it comes to Ahavas Yisrael, there must be an elasticity. We have to cut people flak. We have to be a little more tolerant, a little more open, a little more willing to bend.

If we go with strict justice (shuras haDin) one will not achieve Ahavas Yisrael. One has to go beyond the strict interpretation of the rules in order to achieve Ahavas Yisrael. One who is too precise will nev er be a true Ohev Yisrael and never come to complete fulfillment of the mitzvah "V'Ahavta l'Reacha Kamocha".

The Differences Between Avraham and Bilaam, and Avraham and Iyov

The Mishna [Avos 5:22] teaches: "Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul (ayin tova, ruach nemucha, nefesh shefalah) are among the disciples of our forefather Avraham. Those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul (ayin ra'ah, ruach gevoha, nefesh rechava) are among the disciples of the wicked Bilaam.

What does ayin tova (a good eye) really mean? It means a generosity of spirit and a generosity of dealing with people - to give and to give with an ayin tova.

Rabbeinu Yona asks how we know that Avraham Avinu had an 'ayin tova'. Rabbeinu Yona cites as proof the pasuk "and he took a calf, tender and good" [Bereishis 18:7]. When the 3 Angels came, Avraham went and slaughtered for each his own head of cattle and prepared for each his own tongue with mustard.

When we look at this part of Parshas Vayera, there seem to be many examples that Avraham had a generous spirit. Avraham had a whole hotel going -- providi ng food, drink, and companionship. Why does Rabbeinu Yona specifically cite the above-cited pasuk to demonstrate that Avraham Avinu had an ayin tov?

Rav Matisyahu Solomon explains that there is a difference between a normal "baal chessed" [kind person] and a person who has an "Ayin Tova". If a person is a normal "baal chessed" and he sees a person who needs lunch, he gives him lunch. If he sees a person who needs a place to sleep, he'll find him a place to sleep.

"Ayin Tova" represents a higher level of generosity. A person with an "Ayin Tov" does not just look at the next person and ask "how might I fill his need?" Rather, the "Ayin Tov" asks himself "if I were in that situation -- what is the thing that I would want the most?" This is "Ayin Tova", generosity of spirit: Not merely filling a void and not merely taking care of his needs, but looking at a person beyond his needs to determine what he really wants.

The hotel, the food, the water that Avraham provided represented an effort to satisfy the needs of the wayfarers. Providing each guest with his own tongue from a tender calf -- that takes chessed to a higher level! This is "generosity of spirit" (ayin tova). This defines Avraham Avinu.

The disciples of the wicked Bilaam are at the opposite end of the spectrum. Ayin Ra'ah [evil eye] represents a certain kind of skimpiness -- a person who is not able to tolerate the fact that someone else has something that he does not have.

Rabbeinu Yona cites the pasuk "If Balak will give me his house full of silver and gold..." [Bamidbar 22:18] as proof of the fact that Bilaam had an Ayin Ra'ah. This proves that Bilaam was desirous of that which belonged to other people. Bilaam did not merely say "if he will give me A house full of money". He said, "if he will give me HIS house full of money". There is more than just a concern that "I should have", but also that "he should not have" as well! This is the opposite of "ay in tova".

It is interesting to note that when the Mishna lists the key attributes of Avraham, it neglects to mention what most of us assume was his key attribute -- Chessed. The reason for this is that the Mishna is specifying the root personality traits that allowed Avraham to be such a master of Chessed. Those root personality traits are a good eye, a humble spirit, and a meek soul (ayin tova, ruach nemucha, nefesh shefalah).

Avos D'Rav Nassan [Chapter 7, Mishna 1] states: "'Let impoverished people be members of your household' -- like the practice of Iyov. However, when the tragedies befell Iyov he asked the Almighty 'Did I not provide food and drink and clothing to those who were hungry and thirsty and naked?' But the Almighty responded, 'Iyov you have not yet reached half the level of generosity of Avraham. You would wait in your house and a guest would come to your door. If it were his custom to eat wheat bread, you would give him wheat bread. If it were his custom to eat meat, you would give him meat. If it were his custom to drink wine, you would give him wine. But Avraham acted differently. He went out of his house and went looking around for people. When he found someone he would invite him in and inquire of his customary diet. If the person normally (only) had wheat bread, Avraham would give him meat. If he normally (only) ate meat, Avraham would (also) give him wine. Avraham did not merely give the person what he needed. He gave him MORE than he needed.'"

What is the difference between Iyov and Avraham? Iyov was a Baal Chessed. He fulfilled people's needs. Avraham had the superior attribute of ayin tova. He did not merely fill a void, he would ask: "What would I want?" and provide that benefit as well.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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