

THE APTER RAV: HOW DO YOU SPELL AHAVAS YISRAEL?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah CDs on the weekly portion: CD# 908 - Krias HaTorah and Tircha D'Tziburah. Good Shabbos!

The Apter Rav was known by the title of his Sefer ('Ohev Yisrael') because he was very meticulous in the mitzvah of loving a fellow Jew. He was known to have said that in every single parsha there is a hint to the mitzvah to love a fellow Jew. He was once asked where this mitzvah is hinted at in Parshas Balak. He responded that Parshas Balak is an easy parsha in which to find this allusion for the very name BaLaK is an acronym for the commandment V'ahavta L'reacha Kamocha.

The Chassidim questioned the Apter Rav asking that "V'ahavta" begins with a Vov and Balak begins with a Beis and furthermore, Kamocha begins with a Chaf and Balak ends with a Kuf! (Two of the three letters do not match, even though they make the same sound.) The Rebbe then chastised his disciples: "If you are so particular about 'the letter of the law,' you will never come to Ahavas Yisrael (loving a fellow Jew)."

This is very true. In order to achieve Ahasvas Yisrael, a person must be a little flexible. Certainly, the Rebbe knew how to spell v'Ahavta L'Reacha Kamocha, but he wanted to make the point of needing flexibility when dealing with other people.

We have told this story previously. I would now like to add the following related incident: The Apter Rav was once accosted by a group of Maskilim ("Enlightened" Jews who were hostile to Chassidism in general and Chassidic Rebbes in particular). They got into a heated and disrespectful discussion with him. At one point in the discussion, one of the Maskilim took out a cigarette. The Apter Rav reached into his pocket, pulled out a match box and asked, "Can I give you a light?"

At that point, the Maskil, who pulled out the cigarette said to his companions, "Enough already. This is not the type of person we should be harassing." This was an example of Ahavas Yisrael in action. He could have had fundamental and vehement disagreements with them, but when a Jew needs a favor, you do him a favor. It so disarmed them, that they ceased the harassment. A person cannot have a hostile discussion with a person who is so willing to help his sworn adversary.

Young Groom Sets Up Throne Prematurely

I recently saw an anecdote involving Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein. Rav Zilberstein walked into the home of a newly married couple and noticed a beautiful gold armchair, almost like a throne, at the head of the dining room table. Rav Zilberstein said to the newly married young man "What are you doing with such a chair in your house?" The young man responded, "Before my wedding, when I was learning about the mitzvah of Shalom Bayis [family harmony], I was taught the Rambam that a wife should look at her husband like an officer or a king. [Hilchos Ishus 15:20] If my wife is supposed to look at me like a king, I figured I should have all the paraphernalia of a king!"

Of course, Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein was extremely put off by this attitude and he said "It is clear to me that you never heard the insight of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik on Parshas Balak."

The parsha begins: "Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Emori. Moav was very frightened of the people, because it was formidable; and Moav was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel. Moav said to the elders of Midyan, 'Now the congregation will chew up our entire surroundings as an ox chews up the greenery of the field.'" And then the narration continues: "and Balak son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time." [Bamidbar 22:2-4]

This seems a very odd way of writing the narration. The natural way to write this would be to begin "Balak son of Zippor, King of Moav, saw..." If the Torah is introducing Balak at the beginning of the parsha, it should tell us right then who he is! Why does the Torah wait 3 pasukim to tell us that he happened to be the king?

Rav Chaim explained. The primary goal of a king is to take care of his people, to protect his subjects and to worry about them. The Torah introduces us to Balak and tells us that Balak was rightfully fearful of what was going to be with the people of Moav. He lost sleep over it. He sought the counsel of Midyan and he came up with a plan to protect his people. He demonstrated the primary responsibility of a king - concern for his subjects. It is only after he demonstrated having concern for his subjects that the Torah confers upon him the title: "Balak son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time".

Rav Zilberstein then said to the young groom, "Young man, if you want to be the king in your household, you have plenty of time to get your throne. The first thing you need to do is act like a king. Your domain is your home and your "subjects" are your wife and your family. After you demonstrate your worry, concern, and loss of sleep for their needs and problems, then you can claim the title "King". This is what the Rambam meant - a husband should EARN the role of being a king in his house, not artificially set up the TRAPPINGS of royalty without demonstrating the CHARACTERISTICS of royalty.

Billam Never Opened Up His Eyes

Bilaam went with the officers of Moav to curse the Jewish people, even though he knew this was not the Will of the Almighty. G-d was angry that Bilaam went. [Bamidbar 22:22] In order to warn Bilaam, the Almighty placed an Angel of G-d in his path, which blocked his donkey. The donkey sees the Angel while Bilaam does not see it. Bilaam whips the donkey; and then in one of the most miraculous incidents of the whole Torah, the donkey begins speaking and chastises Bilaam for whipping him.

There is a rule of thumb: The Almighty does not make miracles for the fun of it. When He makes a miracle, it is because there is a 'necessity' to do so. Why was it necessary to have this miraculous event of a donkey speaking to a human being? This was an unprecedented supernatural event to the extent that the Rabbis tell us that the "donkey's mouth" was created on the eve of the first Sabbath at twilight [Avos 5:6]. What was the necessity for this miraculous departure from the laws of nature?

The Kli Yakar explains that this was a pointed message to Bilaam: "Bilaam, don't be so proud of yourself! Don't let the fact that you have been granted prophecy go to your head. I can even make a donkey speak! In effect, you are just a talking donkey."

The Sforno takes a diametrically opposed view of this. According to the Sforno, this was not a put down of Bilaam. On the contrary, it demonstrated the Master of the Universe's unbelievable concern for even a person like Bilaam. Hashem made this dramatic miracle to get Bilaam's attention and arouse him to repent by recalling that all speech comes only from the Almighty. The purpose of the miracle was to make a profound impression on Bilaam so that he might be 'chozer b'Tshuva'

Consider... Bilaam was a low life of society (The Rabbis tell us he used his donkey for more than just a vehicle of transportation!), yet the Almighty preforms a miracle just to bring him back. Rather than being a put down, this is an unbelievable expression of Divine Love for EVEN such a person as Bilaam.

The Rabbeinu Bechaye points out that (if this was the purpose of the miracle) it was not successful! Bilaam should have been shocked by the wondrous event of the donkey speaking to him. He should have contemplated its import and significance and clearly understood "from Hashem is this matter" [Tehillim 118:23]. It should have led him to repent, but it did not.

It does not get any more dramatic than this. But, as a result of his wickedness, his cruelty, and his unbridled desire to continue on his evil path, he totally ignored the warning sign. His lust for the money he was going to receive for cursing the Jewish people made him take the incident of the talking donkey totally in stride as if it were an everyday occurrence.

There is an expression in English called "blind ambition". People can become blinded because of a certain ambition. Those ambitions can be power, money, or lust. Their common denominator is that they have a capacity to blind.

Rav Volbe comments on the "Al Chet" we mention on Yom Kippur regarding "our feet that run to do evil". Rav Volbe says that it is not really the feet that are the source of the problem. The problem is with the brain or perhaps symbolically, the heart. Rav Volbe answers that sometimes a person becomes so enamored and so passionate about doing something wrong that it is like his feet move on their own and he is no longer in control of them.

This is what happened to Bilaam. He was so blinded by his lust for money and honor that he did not see what was happening before his eyes. Rather than falling over in amazement, the impact of the miracle rolled off of him like water off of a duck's back. This sometimes happens to us in life as well. We get blinded by so many things that we fail to see the things that are staring us in the face - the messages that are there, because we become blinded.

At the end of the entire incident of Bilaam, how does the parsha end? "Then Bilaam rose and went and returned to his place and Balak also went on his way." [Bamidbar 24:25]. Why does the Torah need to tell us that Bilaam went home and that Balak went home? What is the significance of this pasuk?

This pasuk is teaching a profound message. After everything that happened -- the donkey, the Angel, the fact that every time he tried to open his mouth to curse the Jews, a blessing came out -- after all that, he went back to where he came from. Nothing registered. Nothing made an impression on him. The same thing can be said of Balak. He too went on his way as if nothing happened.

Incredible! Wake up and smell the coffee. Don't either of you understand what happened over here? How can you just go back to business as usual as if nothing happened? But that is exactly what both Bilaam and Balak did.

I once heard from Rav Pam that several times in the last few chapters of the Book of Shoftim [Judges], the Navi uses the expression "In those days there was no King in Israel. Every man did as was right in his own eyes." The last chapters of Shoftim reflect a horrible period in Jewish history. There were tragic events of Idolatry, Immorality, and Bloodshed that took place within the Jewish nation. How does the book of Shoftim end? It ends with those very same words: "In those days, there was no King in Israel. Every man did as was right in his own eyes." [Shoftim 21:25]

After all that occurred, after the civil war that almost wiped out an entire tribe in Israel, everyone was still the same. Everyone was still doing their own thing -- as if nothing had transpired during that entire horrendous period of history.

When events occur and they are staring us in the face, we are supposed to open up our eyes. Bilaam never opened up his eyes. He was so blinded by personal ambition that it did not make a

difference what was happening. He returned to his place just as he left it.

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