

Parshas Bolok – R. Jonathan Shooter (reprinted)

י' תמוז תשע"ו – 28th July 2016 – שבת פ' בלק

The Navi Sums It All Up

Why is it that the First Temple, which was destroyed for the three cardinal sins of murder, immorality and idol worship, was rebuilt after seventy years, while the Second Temple, which was destroyed because of baseless hatred, remains unrestored after two thousand years? The commentators explain that it is because of the importance of mitzvos between man and his fellow, and the consequences if they are neglected, that the Temple's reconstruction is being delayed. Let us have a look at this week's haftarah. The Kochav MiYaakov explains that we find that Michah the prophet is doing a self-analysis: "With what shall I approach Hashem... shall I approach Him with burnt offerings... Will Hashem find favor in thousands of rams?" (Michah 6:6-7). He is really asking, "What is it I can really do to appease Hashem?" If it is with offerings, which there is a basis to, as they are enumerated in the Torah, this is only a kindness of Hashem that He accepts these, since anyway they are His. If it is with something that is considered more one's own, namely, his children, Chazal say that there are three partners in the creation of a person: Hashem, his father and his mother. Therefore, children also belong to Hashem. Rather, the concluding advice is "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what Hashem seeks from you, only the performance of justice, the love of kindness, and walking humbly with your God" (ibid., 8). What is the meaning of this verse? The Malbim explains that "the performance of justice" refers to the mitzvos between man and his fellow. How one treats others in business, his honesty and integrity, are typical examples of mitzvos in this category. "The love of kindness" is the other aspect of this category of mitzvos. This includes interpersonal relationships and the kindness he bestows on others. "Walking humbly with your God" refers to mitzvos between man and God, and in particular, according to the Radak, those which are hidden in the heart, as we say in Shema, "you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart." We see that this verse encompasses all of a person's Divine service. One thing that stands out is the emphasis placed on mitzvos between man and his fellow, and the importance of chessed. The following incidents illustrate this point.

A Night in the Home of the Chofetz Chaim

When Rav Elya Lopian was the rosh yeshivah of Kfar Chassidim, he traveled to Gateshead to raise funds for the yeshivah. He was told that there was a wealthy man in the community who supported all types of Torah causes — yeshivos, shuls, mikvaos, and so forth. The man was not shomer Shabbos and Rav Elya didn't want to take that money to build Torah. The community told him, however, that it would be a chillul Hashem if he didn't go to visit the man, and that he would be offended and wouldn't support the other Orthodox institutions, so Rav Elya decided to meet him anyway but resolved not to take any money from him. At the end of their meeting, when the rich man announced he would like to make a donation, Rav Elya replied that he had come only to visit, not to take money. The man persisted and eventually the rabbi asked him, "Why is it you are so generous to Orthodox institutions and yet you yourself are not keeping Torah and mitzvos?" The man replied that he was the first rabbi to ask him that, and then told him the following story. When the man was young, his parents wanted him to study in yeshivah. He didn't want to; he just wanted to run wild and wasn't ready for it. Despite this his parents packed a case for him and sent him to Radin to the yeshivah of the Chofetz Chaim. He spent a whole day traveling, and then had an interview with the mashgiach. It didn't take long for the rabbi to work out that he was not the type of student they were looking for, and that he had no desire to become that type. He told the boy it was not the place for him. Not too disappointed, he asked the mashgiach if he could just spend the night in the dormitories, as his train was not leaving until the next day. The rule was that unless one was a student of the yeshivah one could not spend the night in the dormitories, but the mashgiach told him that if he got permission from the Chofetz Chaim he could stay. The Chofetz Chaim lived on the other side of town. The boy traveled there and knocked on the door and explained the situation. The Chofetz Chaim confirmed to him that it was the rule, but told him that instead he could stay at his house for the night. He gave him some of his meal, and personally made his bed, as he was accustomed to do for his guests. That night the boy couldn't sleep. The events of the day were racing through his mind, and he thought about what he would tell his parents, and the irony that he wasn't allowed to sleep in the yeshivah dormitory but could sleep in the Chofetz Chaim's home. Suddenly, the Chofetz Chaim entered his room. The boy pretended to be asleep. He looked at the boy, and exclaimed, "Oy, my guest is cold." He took off his long coat and placed it over the boy. The Chofetz Chaim learned in his shirtsleeves on a bitter Polish winter night so that his guest remained warm. The man concluded his story by saying, "I may not keep Torah and mitzvos yet, but that cloak warmed my body as well as my soul to what Torah and mitzvos mean." The Chofetz Chaim never once imagined that his actions would result years later in the support of such causes. All that he had in mind was the well-being of his guest.

On the other hand, we are never aware of what failing to perform a mitzvah might cause. There was once a young avreich from Lakewood who went to an out-of-town community to interview for the position of rabbi. He inspired the congregation with his drashos, and when the people took a vote, they unanimously decided to accept him as rabbi. The avreich informed the congregation that he would accept the position on one condition: that they put up a mechitzah in the shul, as it did not yet have one. The committee had a meeting and all present voted for the motion, except one, who happened to be the president and had veto power. Apologetically, they informed him of the decision. In his disbelief, the avreich requested to meet the president to try and convince him to change his mind. They told him it would be no use, but he went to meet him anyway. At the meeting, the young avreich told the president how the shul could grow and be inspired if they would just accept his condition. The president told him, "I like you and believe it would be good for the shul. However, my shul will not become Orthodox." He then took him over to the window and continued, "You see that house over there? For twenty-five years I have been the neighbor of the owner of that house, and each year he puts up a Sukkah. I don't, as I'm Conservative. Not once did he ever invite me in. If that's Orthodox Judaism, I don't want any part of it, and my shul will not become Orthodox."

These stories show the importance of our deeds, and that simple actions can have ramifications that we never dreamt of. In these troubled times, when we remember the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and its causes, we should take note of the words of the prophet and particularly seek the "performance of justice" and "the love of kindness."