

Parshas Bolok – Avi Friedwald (*reprinted*)

י"ד תמוז תשע"ז – 8th July 2017 – שבת פ' בלק

I have often wondered why this weeks sedra is called פרשת בלק, rather than פרשת בלעם. It is true that בלק hired בלעם, but most of the events in the sedra are around what בלעם did and said!

Rav Nebenzahl, the Rav of the Old City suggests that we can learn a number of ideas from בלק's actions:

1. The value of doing Mitzvos.
2. The negative power that a מחשבת עבירה (evil intention) can have when doing a Mitzvoh.
3. The impact that even a small amount of לשמה can have on the Mitzvoh.

Where do we see these ideas in this week's sedra?

1 - There is a well known statement in Chazal, that "it is a good to learn Torah and do Mitzvos even שלא לשמה (without intent to fulfil the Mitzva) because learning and carrying out Mitzvos will bring us to learning and doing Mitzvos לשמה". Rav (נזיר בג) brings a proof for this from בלק, because he offered 42 sacrifices to Hashem, based on בלעם's suggestion and as a result merited that רות and the Davidic line (and ultimately the Moshiach) would be descended from him. Here, בלק's sacrifices were most definitely not offered לשמה. On the contrary, they were offered with the most evil of intentions, but he still merited a great reward.

You may ask - why is this new? Surely everyone knows that we need to do Mitzvos? The Vilna Gaon on Pirkei Avos answers – one might think that it is better to do an עבירה לשמה (i.e. the Aveiroh is being done לשם שמים - with very valid reasons) than a מצווה שלא לשמה. However, this is not the case, because as the Mishna in Avos (דב) states – מצווה גוררת מצווה ועבירה גוררת עבירה. Any Aveiroh, even when performed with the best of intentions, will only lead to more Aveiros. Whereas, a Mitzvoh, even if carried out שלא לשמה, will lead to more Mitzvos being done, many of which could be done לשמה.

2 – Although we see that בלק was rewarded because of his actions, there were also terrible repercussions resulting from his negative intentions. Chazal tell us that בלק's evil intentions succeeded in causing disaster for the Jewish people ר"ל, in the time of Elisha, where 42 young people (נערים קטנים) were devoured by bears, corresponding to the 42 sacrifices offered by בלק (סוטה מו:מז).

Rav Nebenzahl quotes a Posuk in Koheles (י, א) which describes the impact of bad intentions on good deeds-

זָבוּבֵי מוֹת יִבְאִישׁ יִבְיַע שָׁמֶן רוֹקֵחַ יִקַּר מִחֲכָמָה מִכָּבוֹד סְכָלוֹת מְעַט – Just as a dead fly ruins expensive oil (even once removed), so too does foolishness outweigh wisdom and honour (i.e. the honour resulting from doing Mitzvos).

3 – Since we find that בלק was rewarded so greatly for his Mitzvah, even though it was done entirely שלא לשמה, we can only assume that when a Mitzvah is done, even partially לשמה -that the reward is immensely greater.

Rav Nebenzahl quotes Rav Sholom Shwadron who says we don't realise how easy it is to elevate the day to day activities we do and transform them from mundane to spiritual. When a husband offers a cup of coffee (or tea) to his wife, or a person is asked for the time, if he realises that he is actually fulfilling a Mitzvoh because Hashem wants him to do Chesed – then he will receive reward for numerous mitzvos, including emulating Hashem's ways לרעה כמור, ואהבת חסדים, גמילת חסדים, (הליכה בדרכיו), and many more.

May we all merit to do many Mitzvos and thereby help to hasten the Geula, במהרה בימנו.