

PARSHAS CHUKAS – AVI FRIEDWALD

Towards the end of this week's sedra, we have the story of the Bnei Yisroel approaching Sichon, the King of the Emorites for right of passage through their land. Sichon refuses and instead takes his people to battle. Hashem performs a miracle and the Jewish people defeat Sichon and conquer all his territory. The Torah then proceeds to tell us that one of the cities conquered in this battle was Cheshbon, which originally belonged to Moav and was conquered by Sichon. It then states the following:

על כן יאמרו המושלים באו חשבון תבנה ותכונן עיר סיחון... (במדבר כא: כז)

Literally – “regarding this, the makers of parables would say – go to Cheshbon – let it be built and established as the city of Sichon.”

Rashi explains that this refers to a prophesy/blessing of Bilaam to Sichon that he will succeed in capturing Cheshbon.

There is a famous Gemara in Bava Basra (78b) that learns a very different idea from this Posuk:

על כן יאמרו המושלים ביצרם באו ונחשב חשבוננו של עולם הפסד מצווה כנגד שכרה ושכר עברה כנגד הפסדה

Therefore the people who are in control of their “Yetzer” (inclination) should say – come, let us consider the account of the world; the loss incurred by the fulfilment of a precept against the reward secured by its observance, and the gain secured through a transgression against the loss it involves.

The following are some of the suggestions given by the commentators as to what connection this Aggadic teaching actually has to the simple reading of the Posuk:

1. The battle with Sichon happened during Ellul, which is a time for self-introspection (Cheshbon Hanefesh) and battling with the Yetzer Hora. [Tallelei Oros in name of Rabbi Eliezer from Pinsk]
2. Moav made the assumption that they would never lose land to the Bnei Yisroel, due to the fact that Hashem had promised them that the Jewish people wouldn't fight with them and He was unlikely to perform an open miracle to cause them to lose their land, as He prefers not to over-rule nature. Had they thought things through properly, they would have realised that Hashem has other ways of achieving the same goal – without having to resort to an open miracle, i.e. enabling another nation to conquer Moav's territory and then allowing the Jewish people to conquer this nation. The Gemora in Bava Basra advises us that we shouldn't make the same mistake as Moav made. The Yetzer Hora will try to convince a person that he doesn't need to worry about sinning, as the next world is far away – and Hashem doesn't generally over-rule nature and punish a person as soon as they sin. However, this person should make a Cheshbon Hanefesh – and realise that the short term gain achieved by sinning is miniscule in comparison to the loss it will incur for him in the long term R”L. [Ohel Yaacov – the Dubno Magid]
3. Moav focussed on protecting their larger cities, and ignored their smaller ones. As a result, Sichon was able to conquer the smaller cities (including Cheshbon) – and from there it was much easier to attack the rest of Moav's territories. This is a parable for the battle with the Yetzer Hora. It always tries to start with small Aveiros, but, once it's let in – it will be able to convince the person to do bigger Aveiros too. Protect the smaller Aveiros and the Yetzer Hora will not have a foot in the door. [Tallelei Oros in name of Yaaros Devash – Rabbi Yonasan Eibeshitz].
4. It was precisely the idea mentioned in Bava Basra, that Bilaam used to help Sichon. A Tzadik's brocha works by strengthening a person spiritually, making him fitting to receive a blessing from Hashem. Conversely, a klala works by weakening a person spiritually, so he's more likely to sin. As a result, he is fitting for punishment R”L rather than blessing. Bilaam blessed Sichon and his people and encouraged them to do a Cheshbon Hanefesh, thus opening them up to G-d's blessing. At the same time, he cursed Moav – so that they would fall spiritually and as a result encounter Hashem's wrath. This is what enabled Sichon to conquer Cheshbon. [Oznaim Latorah – Rabbi Zalman Sorotskin of Lotzk].

Let us take Chazal's lesson from the end of the Parsha, thereby elevating ourselves and becoming receptacles to receive Hashem's blessings.