

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Leibel *ben* Hershel *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

When the Race is Over

PARSHAS BALAK 5777

The world is, and always has been, obsessed with the attainment of “*kavod*” – honor (i.e., glory and recognition). And while most people crave it and pursue it, the Torah’s outlook is just the opposite. The ideal, Chazal relate, is to recognize the fallacy of honor and to try to avoid it. As we shall see, the main character of this week’s *parshah* serves as the model for the consequences in store for one who dedicates himself to glory-seeking.

A Study in Contrasts

Chazal relate that there actually exists an inverse relationship when it comes to the attainment of *kavod*. As they state: כָּל הַמְחַזֵּר עַל הַגְּדוּלָה גְּדוּלָה מִמֶּנּוּ, וְכָל הַבוֹרֵחַ מִן הַגְּדוּלָה גְּדוּלָה מִמֶּנּוּ – “Anyone who seeks after prestige, such prestige shall flee from him; but anyone who flees from prestige, such prestige will seek after him” (*Eruvin 13b*). Now, the Chofetz Chayim (*Ha’Chofetz Chayim Chayav U’pa’alav*, p. 1186) wonders about this arrangement. Chazal here are obviously making the point that glory-seeking does not pay, as one who runs after honor will not acquire it – the honor will flee from him. Much preferable is the one who eschews honor, as he himself will then be pursued by it. What emerges, however, is that there doesn’t seem to be much difference between the situation of these two individuals. Honor runs from its pursuer and chases the one who flees from it. Either way, however, the result seems to be the same: no one is accorded honor – the first one can’t catch it, and the second one runs away. Where, then, does the difference manifest itself?

The true distinction, explains the Chofetz Chayim, is only evident when the “running” stops – that is, once one’s term in This World has expired. Until then, *kavod* remains at the same basic distance from the two individuals described above. When they stop running, however, the chasm between them is glaring. *Kavod* finally catches up to the humble man who had always been running away. But for the one who was chasing after it – and has now ceased – *kavod* is able to distance itself even further.

This notion is illustrated quite dramatically by two very different personages. Bilam, the focal character of this week’s *parshah*, fancied himself as an accomplished prophet of Hashem. In introducing his message, he had no hesitation in trumpeting his alleged abilities: נָאִם בְּלֵעָם בְּנוֹ – “Thus says Bilam, son of Be’or... Thus says the one who hears the words of G-d, knows the thoughts of the Most High, and beholds the vision of the Almighty...” (*Bamidbar 24:15*). But as the Ramban points out (*Ibid.* 22:23), the truth is that Bilam was really no prophet at all. That is why – unlike his own donkey – he could not detect the presence of the angel standing in his way, until, as the *passuk* states, Hashem opened his eyes for him: וַיִּגַּל לְדָוִד אֱתֵינִי בְלֵעָם וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱתֵינִי בְלֵעָם ד’ נָצַב בְּדַרְדָּר – “And Hashem opened the eyes of Bilam, and he saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand” (*Ibid.* v. 31).

In reality, Bilam was little more than a practiced sorcerer; but this didn’t stop him from pompously flouting his “credentials” as a prophet of Hashem of the most eminent stature. But at the end, the truth caught up with him. Thus, it is telling how the *passuk* characterizes him in his death, when he could no longer obfuscate the truth: וְאֵת בְּלֵעָם בְּרָבִעוֹר הַקּוֹסֵם הָרְגוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – “And concerning Bilam son of Be’or the sorcerer – B’nei Yisrael killed him by the sword” (*Yehoshua 13:22*).

In stark contrast is the example of Moshe Rabbeinu, the consummate “flee from glory” and the absolute humblest individual, as the Torah attests: וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה – “And the man, Moshe, was exceedingly humble, more than any man on the face of the earth” (*Bamidbar 12:3*). And compare the accolades the Torah confers upon him at the end of his life: וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד ד' בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל־פִּי ד'... וַיָּמָת שָׁם עֶבֶד ד' בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל־פִּי ד' – “And Moshe, **servant of Hashem**, died there in the land of Moav by the mouth of Hashem... **and there never arose a prophet in Yisrael like Moshe**, whom Hashem knew face to face” (*Devarim 34:5-10*).

A Sanitary Lesson

As stated, most of the world is habituated to crave and pursue *kavod*. Obviously, as Chazal have illustrated above, this is done because of mistaken perceptions; that is, people become enamored with a fantasy, according real value to the notion of glory – when, in fact, it has none.

R' Chayim Shmuelevitz emphasized this point by relating a personal anecdote. “I never fully grasped the real meaning of *kavod*,” he shared, “until it was explained to me one day as I was walking down the street.

“The garbage truck was passing by, and I observed the different levels of tasks that the sanitation workers performed. There was one group that handled the cans laid out on the street, bringing them closer to the proximity of the truck. Then there were those who rode on a ledge protruding from the truck, and it was they who took the cans from their colleagues and emptied them into the truck’s bin.

“One of the workers from the former group noticed me and approached. After offering me a greeting, he explained to me his position. ‘Do not be alarmed, Rabbi, that I belong to the “street-level” group. I also could ride up there on the truck with the others and perform emptying duty. The reason I do not is because I strive to flee from honor.’

“With that lesson,” concluded R' Chayim, “I understood what the real meaning of *kavod* was” (*R' Yechiel Michel Stern, Middos V'hanhagos Tovos, p. 325*).

To be sure, there is such a thing as true *kavod*. But it has nothing to do with the illusory entity that so many devote their lives to acquiring. The *Mesilas Yesharim* (*ch. 11*) says it is one’s Torah knowledge that is the sole factor in defining true *kavod*. He bases himself on the Mishnah in Avos (6:3), which states:

אֵין כְּבוֹד אֶלָּא תוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כְּבוֹד חֲכָמִים יִתְחַלּוּ.

“Honor is none other than Torah; as it says (*Mishlei 3:35*): ‘The sages shall inherit honor.’”

The challenge is only to discern between “fake” *kavod* and true *kavod*, and to attempt to flee from the former and amass the latter.

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