



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY JULY 5TH, 2012 / יב' תמוז תשע"ב

PARSHA:

Balak / בלק

SERMON TITLE:

Jew orGentile – just be a Chassid!

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Balak

Jew or Gentile – just be a Chassid!

Kareem Abdul Jabbar, a Harlem-born convert to Islam, became a scholar, author, historian and filmmaker after retiring from basketball. One of the films he made told the story of his father, Lew Alcindor, and his fellow members of the 761st Tank Battalion, an all-black U.S. Army tank corps that had fought in World War II.

When Mr. Alcindor had liberated Buchenwald, the story goes, he met an eight-year-old boy who looked like he was only five. The soldier picked him up and hugged him. This little boy grew up to be former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yisrael Meir Lau.

And this brings us to the subject of “righteous gentiles”—the designation used for non-Jewish people who did the right thing during the Holocaust and saved Jewish lives.

However, in Hebrew, the title used to describe non-Jews who do the right thing is “chasidei umos ha’olam”—“the pious of the nations of the world.”

This description crowns them not as “tzadikim,” or righteous ones, but rather, “Chasidim”—pious ones. Thus, we find that one does not necessarily need to be Jewish to be a Chasid. Even a non-Jew can be a Chasid.

So what’s a Chasid?

Before the movement of Chasidim came about, there was the movement of the Magidim. These were “preachers” who went from town to town making their living by delivering sermons. Their goal was to inspire the community to repentance.

The typical Magid would come to a village for Shabbos, and they would announce in all the synagogues that, for example, “on Shabbos day at four o’clock in the afternoon, Rabbi So-and-so will speak”—and the whole town would come out to hear him and be moved to do teshuvah, repentance.

If the Magid did a good job, he would be paid handsomely after Shabbos for his sermon—and with the next Shabbos, he’d go on to the next village. And a Magid was considered good if he’d get the entire crowd weeping and wailing.

During the course of Shabbos, the visiting Magid would watch the behavior of the community members with eagle eyes—and that would be enough to give him material for a full sermon. After all, which community is completely free of infighting, gossip and so on?

So the Magid would come up to the podium and start rebuking the community members for all the sins they do—for not being ethical in business, for talking during synagogue services, and so on. He would describe the punishments they would get for such behaviors, and he would describe in living color what hell looks like—how hot it is, what it smells like, and so on. And the better his imagination, the better his sermon.

Obviously, then, when the people would hear such shocking descriptions, they would start getting scared and start crying. And the more the “preacher” made people cry, the more money he’d make.

Then along came the Baal Shem Tov.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chasidic movement, couldn’t stand this. He believed that G-d was not some sort of tough and angry king who was always looking for ways to oppress the Jewish Nation. On the contrary—G-d is a compassionate and merciful father who loves His children like a father loves his children, and is always looking for the good in them.

The Baal Shem Tov went from town to town, telling the worthy Jewish villagers in each how much G-d loved them and cherished them, and how much pride and joy He got from every little mitzvah a Jew does, and how happy and proud He is with the behavior of the Jewish Nation.

The story is told that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, one of the greatest Chasidic Rebbes of all time and who always argued for the merits of the Jewish Nation, once heard such a “preacher” delivering a terrifying speech, raining fire and brimstone on the community and its sins—sins both real and imagined.

After the “preacher” finished, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak turned to G-d and said: “Don’t listen to that Magid! He needed to say what he said for his livelihood! That’s his job! He has a family to feed! Three daughters to marry off! I ask You, Master of the Universe: Give him the money he needs so that he can stop slandering Your children!”

Additionally, the story is told that a Magid once prepared a tough and serious speech to pour over the heads of the entire community—but suddenly, he suffered some sort of mishap and he was not able to get to the city... and the sermon was canceled.

The Magid had suddenly started not feeling well. He had pain in the chest—but he didn’t know if it was coming from the heart or if it was something connected to the stomach. So he went to a doctor.

The doctor examined him from head to toe but didn’t find any problem. But the doctor asked him about his latest experiences and the Magid shared with him the news of his cancelled sermon. The Doctor immediately asked the Magid to tell him the speech.

The Magid didn't need any more convincing. He immediately began to speak and spew fire and brimstone.

When he finished his speech, the doctor asked him: "Well, do you feel better now?" Yes, came the answer. To which the doctor replied, "With so much evil and wickedness on your heart, it's no wonder you didn't feel good!"

The story is told of another great Chasidic Rebbe, Rabbi Zushe of Anipoli, who once was visiting his master, the Magid of Mezritch and saw a Jew arrive who was known as an arrogant person and dishonest in business.

Rabbi Zushe saw how the Magid greeted him with a smile and treated him with respect—and in his heart, Rabbi Zushe nursed a complaint against his Rebbe: How could he be so friendly to a man like that?

But after the man left, Rabbi Zushe regretted that he had doubted his Rebbe's behavior, and came in to ask his Rebbe for a redemption. So the Magid blessed him that he should always see only the good in others.

There are those who are prepared to bear it when they see evil—who are prepared to forgive another person for the evil within him or her. Rabbi Zushe, for his part, simply didn't see any evil in any Jewish person in the first place.

And the foundation for this philosophy, the need to see only the good in another Jew, is found right in this week's Torah portion.

In the Torah portion of Balak, we read about Bilam, the evil gentile prophet, who was summoned by Balak to curse the Jewish Nation and was promised a lot of money to do so.

Bilam, we might say, was one of the first "preachers." His entire mission was to find faults in the Jewish Nation. And so he hoped that he'd succeed in stirring up anger on G-d's part against the Jewish Nation. As the Zohar comments on the phrase "close-eyed," which refers to Bilam: "He had an evil eye" (Zohar I:8b).

Bilam was not one of the "Chasidim" among the non-Jewish nations—if anything, he was one of the Misnagdim, the traditional opponents of Chasidim, among the non-Jewish nations. He only sought the faults of the Jewish Nation.

But ultimately, even he ended up talking like a Chasid.

He laid down the foundation for how one must look upon other Jews—by saying the words, "No sin was perceived in Jacob and no indiscretion was seen in Israel." This means that G-d doesn't see any sin in Jacob, and He does not see anything false in Israel—G-d loves the Jewish Nation so much that He finds no fault in them.

Bottom line? It doesn't matter if you are Jewish or not—you need to be a Chasid