

"And he (Balak) sent messengers to Bilaam the son of Be'or to Pethor." (22:5)

The main character in our *parsha* is *Bilaam*. This *parsha*, however, is called *Balak* after the evil king who invited Bilaam to join him in cursing and destroying the Jews. This emphasis implies that the individual who is maliciously manipulating behind the scenes is more ruthless than he who does the actual cursing. Regrettably, we are often confronted with people who put on a veil of piety and religious superiority while subtly slandering others in such a manner that no one would ever connect them to any malevolent activity. They incite others to do their destructive work for them. These people are the real miscreants who are responsible for so much character assassination.

This implication by no means ameliorates the pernicious deeds of Bilaam. Indeed, Bilaam's personality is an enigma which defies interpretation. On the one hand, he possessed a profound awareness of Hashem, His powers and deeds. On the other hand, he sought to curse *Klal Yisrael*. Bilaam earned membership in that unique "club" of *resha'im*, wicked and evil people, such as Amalek and Haman. True, some opinions of him are favorable, referring to him as the gentile counterpart of Moshe *Rabbeinu*. This idea only serves to magnify his evil.

Bilaam, however, stands alone as the only individual in the *Torah* selected to receive the ignoble appellation of "*rasha*." He is referred to as Bilaam *Ha'rasha*. This distinction was definitely earned. What differentiates Bilaam's iniquity from that of the others? We suggest that the ambiguity which abounds in Bilaam's personality lies at the root of his distinction. He claimed to be a holy and true prophet, while he acted with unholy ambition and avarice. Bilaam provides a classic example of self-deception. A man can persuade himself to believe that the transgression he is about to commit fits into the mores of religious conviction.

Bilaam personifies the person who expounds religious belief, while behaving in a manner which would be considered demeaning even for a less devout individual. Perhaps to refer to Bilaam as an enigma is the wrong term. He is the embodiment of *resha*, evil. Nothing is more reprehensible than evil which hides under the guise of piety. Bilaam is called a *rasha*, because his true essence is not obviously manifest. His type of evil must be unmasked, for it is more harmful than any other form of iniquity.

Indeed, we have always had to contend with the "Bilaams" of each generation whose superficial piety conceals the reality of their sinfulness. Just as Bilaam's punishment revealed his true nature, so, too, will the sinister behavior of the modern day Bilaams be publicly manifest.