

He sent messengers to Bilaam ben Beor to Pesor. (22:5)

The *parsha* introduces us to Bilaam *ha'rasha*, the wicked, evil Bilaam, the prophet who was the designated pagan counterpart of Moshe *Rabbeinu*. While our quintessential leader certainly had no equal, Bilaam, as the *Midrash* explains, was the Heavenly response to the pagan world's request for equal leadership. Although Bilaam could not have been less like Moshe, he did have within him the ability to rise very high in prophetic powers. As we mentioned, he was a degenerate; as such, he was precluded from rising to spiritual ascendancy. In which specific aspects of his behavior did Bilaam manifest these shortcomings, which prevented him from achieving his lofty potential?

Chazal distinguish between the *talmidim*, disciples, of Avraham *Avinu* and Bilaam *ha'rasha*. They cite three character traits which, in their positive form, exemplify Avraham's *talmidim*, and, in their negative manifestation, represent the evil of Bilaam. They are: *ayin tovah*, a good eye, one who is not desirous of what others have, e.g. their wealth, etc; *ruach nemuchah*, a lowly spirit, humility; and *nefesh shefalah*, a meek soul. Bilaam's students are individuals who are missing these characteristics. This means, explains **Horav Meir Chodosh, zl**, that one could be sitting in the *bais hamedrash* studying Torah, even being a student of scholarly proficiency, yet he may still be a student of Bilaam – not of Avraham.

It is one thing to study Torah; it is altogether another to acquire that which Torah has to offer in terms of character refinement. Prior to Avraham's appearance on the scene, people did basically whatever they pleased, lived the way they wanted, without a care in the world. They did not answer to anyone, and they were not bound by any sense of discipline, ethics or morals. Avraham taught the world that even animals had a code of behavior. People should ascribe to at least some form of behavioral discipline.

The *Mashgiach* explains that a person can choose a *yeshivah*, a *rebbe* – everything that will improve and shape his scholarship – but he still must decide which approach to life he will take: that of Avraham or that of Bilaam. One does not have to be a Bilaam. One is not compelled to become a Bilaam. One chooses to become a Bilaam. There is no place for excuses to justify a messed-up life. This is something that cannot be blamed on the "usual": parents, schools, *rebbe*, etc. This is one's own fault.

Now, let us return to the beginning of the *Mishnah* which distinguishes between Avraham's students and those of Bilaam. Veritably, students are, for the most part, a reflection of their mentor. Does this mean that the difference between Avraham and Bilaam was discerned in only three areas of character – one of them exemplified these traits, and one was deficient in these traits? Surely, there are many other glaring differences between our Patriarch and this evil degenerate.

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, posits that, indeed, there is more to Bilaam than we understand. He achieved a level of prophecy, while not akin to that of Moshe, nonetheless, he represented the epitome of the pagan world's spiritual elite. He was their prophet, their answer to our

Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Thus, Bilaam was unquestionably no pushover. While Avraham's mission was to teach the concept of monotheism to the world, Bilaam saw this as part of his job description as the prophet to the pagans. Bilaam saw himself mandated to teach the pagans that there was one G-d who created the world *ex-nihillo*, from nothing, and that He stood above all of creation and guided the world.

Rav Alpert supports this hypothesis from the fact that Bilaam had Balak build seven altars upon which he offered sacrifices to G-d. Bilaam was essentially demonstrating his belief in the one God. In fact, he boasted that he had built seven altars, which was more than Avraham's four, Yitzchak *Avinu's* one and Yaakov *Avinu's* two. At the end of his "song" describing the Jewish nation's victory over Sichon's city of Cheshbon, a city which he had taken from Moav, Bilaam blamed its downfall on their belief in Chemosh, their false diety. Moav's loss was attributed to their misplaced faith in an idol – rather than in the one true G-d. He was mocking their false belief! Is this not an indication that he was promoting monotheism? If so, where did he go wrong? What lesson can we derive concerning our own choices in life? Let me add a loaded question: What lesson do we impart to our children concerning this despot and how not to fall to such a nadir of depravity?

In response to the question, how does one achieve such remarkable greatness, wisdom and intellect – yet remain evil incarnate? How does one who sees himself charged with the lofty mission of teaching a pagan world the truth about G-d remain such a profound *rasha*? Despite Bilaam's mission, he advised Balak that the effective way to destroy the Jews was to entice them into moral debauchery. Why bother cursing a nation, especially if it would not work, when the nation would curse themselves by consorting with the pagan women?

The explanation to the anomaly called "Bilaam" is revealed to us by the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* as quoted above. Bilaam was a morally depraved degenerate. While he certainly had moments of spiritual ascendancy, these were merely flashes of inspiration which were temporary "lapses" in his real character. At the end of the day, his personal character flaws destroyed him.

Avraham *Avinu* saw to it that his personal character, his moral compass and ethical behavior were all on the same level as his wisdom and intellect. He understood that a mind that was in Heaven and a heart that was absorbed with base earthiness do not synchronize together to make a G-dly person. It creates a moral profligate who is comfortable requesting *Tamos nafshi mos yesharim*, "May my soul die the death of the upright" (*Bamidbar* 23:10). Bilaam made this request. He did not realize, because he was so enveloped in himself, that in order to die like the righteous, one must live a life of piety – not of hedonism. When Bilaam realized that his wisdom had failed him, that he was unable to control his egoism and lust, his true essence emerged, and his degenerate character was revealed.

At least, in the end, Bilaam's profound wisdom made him acknowledge his failure in life. He understood that the *Avos*, Patriarchs, were straight, upstanding and truly righteous. He was a sham. In life, he was not prepared to exercise the discipline required of a righteous person. In

death, however, sapped of his physical strength, his lust for satisfying his hedonistic drives depleted, he felt that his soul was no longer in conflict. It was, however, too late.