

And he (Balak) sent messengers to Bilaam ben Be'or. (22:5)

Bilaam's reputation was enviable in his pagan context. Indeed, employing the forces of *tumah*, impurity, he became a leader and prophet among the pagans. *Chazal* present their own description of this unsavory person. In *Pirke Avos* 5:19 they say, "*Whoever has the following three traits is among the disciples of our forefather, Avraham, and whoever has three different traits are from the disciples of the wicked Bilaam. Those who have a good eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul are among Avraham's talmidim. In contrast, those who have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul are among Bilaam's disciples. How do the disciples of Avraham differ from the disciples of Bilaam? The disciples of Avraham enjoy the fruits of their good deeds in this world and inherit Olam Habah. On the other hand, the disciples of Bilaam inherit Gehinom and descend into the well of destruction.*" The *Tanna* of the *Mishnah* is clear in maintaining that the character of Bilaam was reflected in his disciples' traits. Why does the *Tanna* distinguish between Avraham Avinu's *talmidim* and those of Bilaam? Why not simply differentiate between Avraham Avinu and Bilaam? What purpose is there in particularly focusing upon their disciples?

Horav Shlomo Heyman, zl, offers a profound explanation of this *Mishnah*. The *Tanna* wondered what would attract someone who lived in Avraham Avinu's generation to the Patriarch? It was a period in history when the world population had sunk to the nadir of idol-worship. Monotheism was preached by one person alone, Avraham. Why would anyone leave the commonly accepted status quo to follow the Patriarch?

We may ask the same question concerning Bilaam's disciples. They lived in a period in which Hashem's *Shechinah* was clearly manifest. Miracles were daily occurrences. One nation sought to wage war with the Jews after the Egyptian exodus. This was the nation of Amalek. This conflict became a history lesson for others, asserting *Klal Yisrael's* affiliation with the Almighty. Why, then, would someone gravitate to Bilaam *harasha*? What qualities did Bilaam exhibit that would inspire a person to ignore *gadlus HaBoreh*, the greatness of Hashem, to become Bilaam's disciple?

The *Tanna* enlightens us with a characterization of Avraham and Bilaam's *middos*, character traits. Avraham Avinu's *talmidim* exemplified *middos tovos*, good character traits. They distinguished themselves in their character refinement: a good eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul. Popular opinion did not influence them. They did not capitulate to a society drowning in *tumah*, immorality, and self-worship. They were not washed away by the waves of paganism and perversion. They transcended society's depraved culture and followed Avraham. They believed in Hashem. Bilaam's disciples also transcended the world's religious philosophy. They were not moved by the miracles. They ignored the Revelation. They did not find the clear manifestation of the Almighty's power remarkable. They saw light when it was dark and vice versa. Their nefarious character traits motivated them to gravitate to Bilaam.

This is the origin of all *kefirah*, apostasy - *middos*. One whose *middos* have degenerated will do anything, regardless of the repugnancy of the act. All of the world's ills stem from a deficiency in

middos tovos. People are not bad; they have bad *middos*. If their character traits are refined by *Torah* they will, in turn, become *bnei Torah* -- *talmidei Avraham Avinu* and the standard bearers of Judaism.