

And the souls they made in Charan. (12:5)

Avraham *Avinu* made souls – so did Sarah *Imeinu* – each focusing on members of his or her own specific gender. Developing the spiritual qualities of their students and leading them to belief in the Almighty was much more than spiritual refinement. It was a process by which Avraham and Sarah transformed their students, actually made them anew. They developed the potential of each student, bringing it to the surface. They accomplished this through the medium of *mitzvah* performance, which teaches us that every act of *mitzvah* performance is transformative, capable of altering a Jew's overall essence.

In *Pirkei Avos* (5:22), *Chazal* distinguish between the students of Avraham and those of Bilaam *harasha*, the evil one. Avraham's *talmidim*, students, were identifiable by their good eye, humble spirit and meek soul. Those who possessed the opposite – a greedy soul, an arrogant spirit and an evil eye – were students of Bilaam. In his commentary to *Parashas Balak*, the *Sfas Emes* wonders why one requires the services of a *rebbe* to teach bad/negative *middos*, character traits. No pedagogical process is necessary. All one needs to do is remain in the proximity of an unrefined, uncouth, self-centered, evil person – and those traits will eventually rub off. It sounds almost as if one must “learn” these negative *middos*, when, in reality, it should be understood that one who does not strive to develop good/positive character traits will invariably develop negative ones!

Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, teaches us a critical lesson in Torah *chinuch*. *Chazal* are not addressing the teaching of *middos*, but rather, the learning of *chochmah*, wisdom, from a *rebbe*. One must be acutely aware that separating the educational material from the personality of the *rebbe* is impossible. Thus, when one studies wisdom from a mentor whose *middos* are vulgar, insensitive, discourteous, iniquitous and revolting (just to mention a few), his mentor's deficiencies will rub off on him.

When one manifests good *middos*, it indicates that he has studied under a *rebbe* who possesses refined character traits. Someone who possesses negative character traits attests to the inferior ethical and moral quality of his mentor. Avraham's students were walking advertisements for the *Rebbe* and institution in which he mentored the students. Likewise, those who attended Bilaam's school of wisdom demonstrated by their very behavior who their mentor was. This is a powerful lesson to parents from a *Rosh Yeshivah* who transformed the lives of thousands of students: the establishment of an appropriate environment through the influence of a mentor, friends (who also mentor) is an essential aspect of the educational development of a child. It is not only all about learning. It is about who your child's mentor is that often determines the direction the child will take in life.