

“And Moav was disgusted in the face of the Bnei Yisrael.” (22:3)

The parsha details how Balak and Bilaam sought every opportunity to curse Klal Yisrael. They tried everything to do away with the Jewish People. In the end, when they saw that all their efforts had failed, they brought out their young women and relied on the yetzer hara, evil-inclination, to perform the function in which he excels. Regrettably, this approach met with success, as many Jews fell prey to the yetzer hara's blandishments. We wonder why Bilaam waited so long to attempt this proven method of destroying Klal Yisrael's spiritual stature. Why did he try the methods that were at best weak, when such a devastating method was available?

The Chasam Sofer addresses this question and offers a practical response. He explains that, without any doubt, Balak was acutely aware of Bilaam's “ace,” but he felt that this plan would not succeed, to the point that it would be a waste to even attempt it. Why is this? Imagine the spiritual plateau that Klal Yisrael had attained at this point in time. They were the people who had stood at Har Sinai and experienced an unprecedented Revelation. They had not only received the Torah, but they also had meticulously observed and fervently studied it. Their external appearance coincided with their inner spirituality. They dressed modestly, totally in contrast to the immoral society that set the standard in those days. For all intents and purposes, the external behavior that was manifest by the Jews reflected an inner spiritual devotion. How could Balak succeed in ensnaring a nation to whom spirituality was so valuable?

Imagine, if Balak would have dispatched his young women in their immodest dress to the Jewish camp. Who would have looked at them? Why would a frum, observant, man look or converse frivolously with such a wanton woman? Furthermore, what would these women have in common with the Jewish men? Their lifestyles were totally disparate from each other, their values in direct opposition to one another.

“Va'yakatz Moav mipnei Bnei Yisrael”, “And Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisrael” (22:3). Balak was in a predicament. The Jews remained sequestered from the progressive, decadent lifestyle that represented the norm in contemporary society. They did not speak like the Moavites, dress like them, or frequent the same places. There was no common language in which the Jews and the pagans could converse. How could they begin to entice the Jews to sin?

This is where Bilaam entered the picture. He offered wise counsel concerning the most practical method for dealing with the Jewish problem. Bilaam understood how to bridge the gap between the observant Jew and the degenerate pagan. “Vayeshv Yisrael baShittim”, “and Yisrael settled in Shittim” (25:1) – The Midrash quotes Rabbi Yehoshua, who interprets shittim as being related to the word shtus, foolishness. Bilaam told Balak, “Do not attempt to overcome them with force. Begin with a small step – foolishness, an innocuous gesture of friendship, a joint program. It should be done strictly in accordance with their standards of kashrus and modesty: Glatt kosher, separate

entrances for men and women – but, at least, they will be together. This will break down the barrier they have imposed upon themselves. Slowly, their mode of dress will change; they will become congenial, and before you know it, they will be cavorting with our daughters. Then – they will be ours!”

Does this not sound familiar? It is the story of Jewish assimilation. It begins with unity, followed by congeniality, succeeded by acculturation and total assimilation. Bilaam was clever. He knew that the Jew who maintains a Torah lifestyle, whose standard of living is based upon Torah values, and not those of contemporary society could not be lured away, due to the self-imposed barriers around them. Break the barriers and you are victorious over them. Bilaam understood that the gap between the Jew and the rest of the world was not to be found in hard-core idol-worship and immorality, but rather in the little nuances, the simple differences in behavior and lifestyle. The chasm is defined by those nuances, not necessarily by the Shulchan Aruch, Code of Jewish Law. These small disparities, symbols of segregation from an immoral society, make all of the difference.