

Balak ben Tzipor saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori... Balak ben Tzipor was King of Moav at the time. (22:2,4)

The sequence of the *pasuk* is enigmatic. Why does the Torah mention Balak's position as King of Moav only after relating what he saw concerning the Jewish People's destruction of the Emori? Would it not be more realistic to state, that "Balak, King of Moav, saw all that *Yisrael* had done to the Emori"? The **Alter, zl, m'Kelm**, explains that the answer to our question lies in the words, "Balak *ben* Tzipor was King of Moav". Why was he appointed king? It is not as if his lineage warranted his succession to the throne. Balak was a nobody. Yet, he was selected by the people to become their king, because they valued his ability to "see". Balak's perspective was highly appreciated, because he did not simply make a cursory obligation of a situation. He delved into the incident, analyzing it from all sides and venues, in order to determine the best approach to take.

Everyone was aware that the Jewish People had utterly destroyed the Emori, a nation that was all-powerful. It was Balak, however, who ruminated over their triumph, examining their strengths and weaknesses: how they did it; how they were able to destroy a nation that had dominated the countryside for some time.

Indeed, this is the difference between a human being and an animal. Both see – the human being, however, sees the "effect" and searches for the "cause". The animal simply sees. Most people are, regrettably, like the animal, which sees but does not see cognitively. They look at a tree and marvel at its height, stability, fruit, etc. How many will ask: How did this get here? What made it grow? What is the growth process of all vegetation? One does not have to be a scientist to ask a question. One simply has to live with *seichel*, common sense, to ask questions, seek answers, maintain a cognitive appreciation of whatever takes place around him, and "think".

Everyone was aware of *Klal Yisrael's* victory. Balak asked, "Why?" They saw the effect – he sought the cause: Who is leading them? What is their most powerful weapon? When he discovered that the Jewish leader, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, was from Midyan, that his wife was none other than the Priest of Midyan's daughter, he went there and asked what Moshe's secret power was. When he heard that Moshe's power lay in his "mouth," he figured that the best person to counteract Moshe's power of prayer would be Bilaam.

A successful leader has the ability to see the bigger picture and act upon it. Perception determines one's ability to achieve greatness. Those who do not look, do not see, and they rely on hindsight or tunnel vision; they do not go very far. There is a well-known classic short story entitled "The Stone-Cutters," of which there are three versions. Rather than recite all three versions, I will just tell the simple version and the three lessons derived from it. Each lesson is significant in its own right.

One day, a traveler walking down a lane noticed three stonecutters working in a quarry. Each one

was busy cutting a large block of stone. After all, that is what stonecutters do. Interested in finding out what it was they were working on, he asked the first cutter what he was doing. The response was to be expected, "I am cutting a stone!" Still no wiser, the traveler turned to the second cutter and asked, "What are you doing?" He replied, "I am cutting this block of stone to make sure that it is perfectly square and its dimensions are uniform, so that it will fit exactly in its place in a wall". Now the traveler was a little bit closer to discovering the intended goals of the stonecutters. He turned to the third cutter and asked, "What are you doing?" This man appeared to be the happiest of the three cutters. He looked up from his work, and with a large smile, said, "I am building a cathedral".

While what he was building is unimportant, the story demonstrates how three different people can have three disparate perspectives concerning their work. All three stonecutters were doing the same thing, yet each gave a different answer. Each knew how to perform his job, but, for some reason, the third stonecutter had an edge over the other two. What set him apart?

He knew not just how; he knew why. He understood that his work had a purpose. He viewed the whole, not just the parts. He had a sense that there was a bigger picture. Thus, his work developed a significance to him beyond that which was found by the others. He also understood that he was part of a larger picture, whereby he was part of a force that was undertaking to build a structure that would benefit others for generations to come. He was establishing a legacy. This is why he smiled. This is why he was happy. His world had meaning.

The Moavites were well aware that anyone with brute strength and tactical skills could serve as their leader. They also knew that *Klal Yisrael* was not like other nations. They would need a leader who was astute – a *chacham*, wise man, who saw everything and thought it out before he made a decision.

Seichel, common sense, is sadly an uncommon commodity – not because it is unavailable, but because people rarely use it. Living in an age in which electronic technology has speeded up our lives, we no longer take the time or the luxury to think. A *talmid*, student, once visited **Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl**, to speak in learning. Being a brilliant, erudite scholar, he impressed the *Rosh Yeshivah* with his analysis of the *Gemorah* and commentaries. Yet, when he left, *Rav Shach* seemed a bit perturbed. His close *talmid* asked what was bothering the *Rebbe*. *Rav Shach* replied, "I spoke to him in learning and was greatly impressed with his depth and understanding. Afterwards, he discussed with me a number of personal issues involving his future. I was shocked how unchartered was his thought process. *Pashut*, simply, he was not using his mind to think!".

Similarly, *Horav Shlomo Hoffman, zl*, a celebrated Torah *mechanech*, educator, student of **Horav Aizik Sher, zl**, related the reaction he received from his *Rosh Yeshivah* when he informed him that he was becoming engaged. "What does your future *kallah*, bride, do?" asked *Rav Aizik*. "She does not yet have a job. They are presently hard to come by," *Rav Shlomo* replied. "This is not good," countered *Rav Aizik*. "Free time leads to boredom, which can be dangerous, in that it is a

precursor of many troubles”.

“I was hoping that she would find work after the wedding” was *Rav Shlomo*’s response. “To go out to work right after the wedding, once she is the wife of a *ben Torah*, is not so simple”, *Rav Aizik* said. “So, what should I do?” *Rav Shlomo* asked. “I did not come to give you advice. I just want to teach you to think. We take nothing for granted. Everything must be well thought out”.

Ben Zoma says (*Pirkei Avos* 4:1), “Who is wise? He who learns from all men, as it is written, *Mikol melamdai hiskalti*, ‘From all those who have taught me, I have learned understanding’ (*Tehillim* 119:99)”. The classic definition of wisdom, as understood by *Ben Zoma*, does not seem to coincide with *Chazal*’s statement: *Eizehu chacham, zeh ha’roeh es ha’nolad*, “A wise person is one who sees what the future will bring”. This has nothing to do with clairvoyance. It simply means that the wise man is a visionary; he sees the consequences, results, ramifications of his actions. How do the two definitions of *chochmah*, wisdom, reconcile with one another?

I think that a person who is astute enough to see what might be the results of his actions will also take the time to learn from all people, since he understands that, in the future, he might require the knowledge he gleaned from the least expected source. A *chacham* is one who has assimilated all of this accumulated knowledge into himself, putting into perspective all he has learned from everyone, so that whenever he needs it – he will be prepared.

Ben Zoma asks “Who is wise?” but answers with a *pasuk* whose root is *seichel/hiskalti*. This teaches us that wisdom is an acquired skill. Even a person who is not naturally gifted can become a *chacham* if he applies himself to Torah. His mental faculties will improve. If he uses his *seichel* to apply himself to the principle of learning from all men, he will develop a deeper cognitive understanding of the Torah’s secrets. It is more than just intellectual effort, which produces the *chacham*. Becoming a well-rounded person requires the coalescing of *seichel*, humility (to learn from all men), and vision to foresee and analyze how it will all work out.

Interestingly, the opposite of the *ben-rasha*, wicked son, of *Haggadah* fame is the *chacham*, wise son – not the *tzaddik*, righteous son. Why? I think that, without wisdom, one cannot be a true *tzaddik*. One must apply his learning: use his *seichel*; think before he acts; and give advice. A *tzaddik* is a *chacham*. A *rasha* is actually a *tipeish*, fool. Anyone with a modicum of common sense would never become wicked, since he would see from the very beginning the fruits of his negative deeds. He just did not think or refuse to open his mind. In any event, his evil consequences are the result of his foolishness.

Indeed, this idea is expressed by *Rav Shach*, in his description of *Bilaam*, the wicked enemy of our People. *Chazal* (*Midrash Rabbah, Bamidbar* 20) state: “It would be better for the wicked to be blind, for it is the eyes (vision) which brings them to commit evil”. The *Rosh Yeshivah* asks: Is it the *rasha*’s vision, which brings about his evil? It is his actions, his wicked activities, for which he is censured. *Rav Shach* explains that, veritably, it is the *rasha*’s actions, which constitute his evil

essence. *Chazal* are teaching us, however, where it all began. It is the *rasha's* negative perspective, his desire to manipulate everything in his life for a negative purpose, which is the cause of his downfall. If the *rasha* would not "see" or if his vision would not be tainted, he would not act inappropriately. It all boils down to perspective – what one sees; how he views it; how deeply he looks at it; and in what frame of mind – negative or positive – he responds.