

“May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his.” (23:10)

It is the old story. The wicked want to live a life of abandon, yet, they want to die as the righteous and upright. The *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, explains that Bilaam did not want to live like a Jew. After all, Torah Judaism makes “difficult” demands on a person. Morality, ethicality, spiritual integrity: these are not simple qualities to which someone like Bilaam is able to adhere. He wants to have his cake and eat it too. For a Jew, on the other hand, it is much simpler to deal with death than life. The Jew views death as a bridge which one traverses from temporary life to eternal life. When a Jew leaves this world, he has a “destination” for which he has been striving his entire life. A Jew believes in the immortality of the soul and in reward and punishment.

Thus, a Jew does not fear death. Bilaam wanted to “take part” in the Jew’s perspective on death. He made one mistake: It does not take a rocket scientist to understand the advantage of dying as a Jew. It does, however, take abundant wisdom to live as a Jew. Now, Bilaam was certainly no fool. He achieved distinction as the greatest pagan prophet. Could he not figure it out? Could Bilaam not understand on his own that to **die** as a Jew one must **live** as a Jew? What part of Jewish living did he not understand?

This question does not apply only to Bilaam. It applies to the archetypical hypocrites throughout the generations, our co-religionists who choose to live a life antithetical to Torah – yet **expect** to receive the reward of a Jew who has lived a life of obedience to Hashem. One wonders from where they derive the *chutzpah* to make such demands.

These modern-day Bilaams really believe that they deserve to be treated as Orthodox Jews, despite their “one” (or more) spiritual failing(s). This perverted sense of right and wrong stems from their concept of intellectual honesty. They feel that if they do not conceal their nefarious activities, they are at least acting as upright Jews. What they fail to consider is that there is no greater *sheker*, falsehood, than living such a life. Just because one is not acting in a hypocritical manner, it does not justify his miscreancy. Wrong is wrong no matter how one presents it.

Nonetheless, these are not foolish people. Bilaam certainly was no fool. How did he seek a righteous death while living a wicked life? The answer, I think, is in the carefully selected word used by Bilaam to describe himself: *Tamos nafshi mos yesharim*. *Yesharim* means upright, just – intellectually honest. Bilaam knew he was no *tzaddik*. He was as far from righteous as one could be. Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from considering himself to be an upright person. He believed in G-d. He even conversed with the Almighty, but Bilaam had a problem: he was a *baal taavah*, a man obsessed with physical desire. He did not conceal this behind a façade of piety. He was what he was!

Therefore, he wanted to die like the upright. What eluded Bilaam was that such “uprightness” is

the nadir of perversion and distortion.

Judaism is not a religion which allows for one's **personal** religious expression. It is a religion of **strict obedience**. Hashem decides what is and what is not appropriate, and He has indicated the exact manner in which He is to be served. If this does not conform with our idea of religious expression, it is unfortunate. Serving Hashem transcends sincerity. It is about doing what we are told. Nadav and Avihu were intensely sincere and consummately righteous, but they offered a sacrifice that was **not** mandated by Hashem. I am sure that many misguided people desire to express themselves to Hashem in total sincerity, but if this expression does not conform with Hashem's bidding, the sincerity is meaningless. *Yashrus* is important, but Judaism is about listening to Hashem. Without this sense of obedience, one is not only not righteous, he is also not upright.