

He sent agents to Bilaam ben Beor. (22:5)

Is it possible that, concerning all outward appearances, one not only manifests himself as righteous, but he even receives the fringe benefits and special treatment accorded to a *tzaddik*; yet, he remains throughout a despicable *rasha*, wicked person, of the lowest order? Yes! Bilaam showed us that it can be done. Bilaam was Hashem's "gift" to the pagan/gentile world, so that they could not assert that they had no worthy spiritual leadership. Bilaam was on a lofty spiritual plane, a prophet of the highest order. He was the gentile world's Moshe. So what happened? He refused to purge himself of his flawed *middos*, character traits. He was a wise man who knew quite well how to conceal his moral turpitude. Everything that he said and did could have two connotations. As a spiritual leader to the pagans, they looked at Bilaam's positive side and assumed that what he was doing had a lofty moral/spiritual foundation, while, in truth, he was an immoral, perverted megalomaniac who probably even believed his own ruse.

Wherein lay the difference between our quintessential leader, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and the pagan's poor excuse for a leader? Outwardly, Bilaam acted the part of the prophet. Where did Moshe and Bilaam part ways? Let us look at one instance in which they both demurred listening to Hashem, and observe the difference. The mere fact that Bilaam stalled in accepting Hashem's instructions indicated the spiritual place that he had achieved. The Almighty instructed Bilaam to go with Balak's agents. Bilaam stalled for more money and greater honor. He (of course) attributed his delay to G-d, claiming that He was not pleased with the idea that he would go with Balak's agents. This was but one more indication of a man who spoke out of both sides of his mouth, or that his heart (intention) and his mouth (what he said) were not aligned.

Moshe also delayed going to Egypt. He demurred accepting the leadership role of the nation out of respect for his older brother, Aharon *HaKohen*, who had until then been the acting spiritual leader of the people. Thus, we observe two members of the spiritual elite: one who is truly righteous; and one who is evil-incarnate. For all intents and purposes, however, to the unsuspecting, superficial observer, they appear to be one and the same.

I write this during the coronavirus plague that has assaulted the world. It is the day after that first *Shabbos* when thousands of observant Jews throughout the world were compelled to *daven* without a *minyan*, relegated to their homes for *davening*, *krias haTorah*, *Rosh Chodesh bentching*, etc. It was trying for everyone, but nonetheless spiritually uplifting as each one of us poured out our hearts in unison, albeit physically apart, to the Almighty, pleading for mercy and an end to the scourge that was devastating the world. The next day, I met someone who remarked that he, too, did not go to Temple, so now, for a change, we were both the "same." I replied that actually there was a major difference between us: I felt bad that I did not go. This was more than I could say for him. (Veritably, he never had the opportunity to attend services as a youth – growing up in a totally secular family. As a result, he was alienated from Jewish religious observance.) The reality is that *Yiddishkeit* is much more than going to *shul*. It is what takes place in *shul*: *Davening* to Hashem makes the experience special. During the especially difficult period of isolation which we all are

experiencing it is evident that our *davening*, our actual speaking to Hashem, is what has created the relationship and makes the *shul* experience so meaningful. Sadly, unless one has undergone the spiritual uplift experienced upon *davening* with a *minyan*, it is nothing more than *shul* attendance.

Horav Arye Leib Heyman, zl, explains that Bilaam is a prime example of *ohr v'choshech meshamshin b'arvuyah*, fusion/intermingling of light and darkness. Indeed, in Bilaam's case, the very light itself was corrupted and distorted by his darkness, his flawed character traits. If a person does not expunge the evil/darkness within him, then light and darkness will coexist and influence him equally. Does not a bit of light dissipate much darkness? *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl*, explains that a human being is different. The darkness of a human being is not merely the absence of light. It is, rather, a powerful force in its own right, asserting itself within a person, demanding equal time, even in the company of such a powerful force of light.

Regrettably, one is able to achieve exemplary erudition, to be a scholar of note, a man whose words inspire many, an individual whose students cling to him and are even spiritually elevated by his words and actions, even though his character may be defective. One might argue that Bilaam was a pagan. What more can we expect from an individual whose concept of spiritual devotion and service was the Peor godhead, who was serviced by relieving oneself in its presence. Could one of "ours" set such an example? Doeig Ha'Adomi was the head of the *Sanhedrin*, Achitofel was David *HaMelech's rebbe*; and who can ignore the "greatest" of all: Yaravam ben Nevat? Concerning these three individuals who personified *ohr v'choshech mishamshin b'arvuyah*, *Chazal (Sanhedrin 106B)* teach: *Ein lahem chelek l'Olam Habba*; "they forfeited their portion in the World to Come." Apparently, *choshech*, darkness, evil, can take a front row to light, even in a Jew.

We derive from here that external activity and expression do not define a person's true relationship with Hashem. In order to authenticate our superficial actions, we must purge whatever inner blemishes we have that impugn their integrity. Then, others can see us as we really are.