

He (Bilaam) said to the servants of Balak, “If, Balak, will give me his household of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem.” (22:18)

Rashi notes that, by speaking of a houseful of gold and silver – implying that if he could transgress the word of Hashem he would accept no less – Bilaam showed his true colors. He was arrogant and greedy, obsessed with furthering his immoral lifestyle.

One of the well-known *Mishnayos* in *Pirkei Avos* addresses the deficient character traits of *Bilaam ha'rasha*, as opposed to those of *Avraham Avinu*. The thought of comparing the two is ludicrous, since Bilaam was, and remains, a symbol of greed and moral profligacy, and the actions of Avraham, the Patriarch of our nations, concerning the area of *chesed*, lovingkindness, earned him the appellation (one of many) *amud ha'chesed*, pillar of kindness. *Chazal* detail three areas of character in which they differed from one another. First, is a good eye; one who believes in man's inherent goodness and views everything and everyone through a positive lens. Second, is a *ruach nemuchah* – a humble spirit. A person controls his strivings and passions of his mind and heart, so that he never strays from the path of Hashem. Third, is a *nefesh shefeilah* – an undemanding soul – does not show anger (even when it is permitted), shows consideration and respect for all men, disregarding his own honor completely.

Bilaam and his followers present a total contrast to Avraham. The evil eye that was so much a part of Bilaam's character was manifest with his skeptical, negative belittling manner through which he viewed people. No one could guide him, because he knew it all. Such an attitude eventually turns against Hashem. His egotistical mindset, his haughty spirit, caused him to want more; hence, he was the consummate *rasha*.

The *Mishnah* asks: “What difference exists between Avraham's disciples and those of Bilaam?” Obviously, this question does not concern their individual characters, because we know that they were direct opposites. *Horav Meir (Marcus) Lehmann, zl* (commentary to *Pirkei Avos* completed by *Horav Eliezer Leipman (Philip) Prins, zl*), explains that *Chazal* are wondering about the respective destinies of Avraham and Bilaam. We know that they were as different than night to day, but how do their respective destinies play out? We all know that rectitude and goodness are the true recipes for enduring success. Avraham had it – Bilaam eschewed it. At the end of the day, Bilaam died relatively young (34 years old). His cleverness, talents and sharp tongue did not help him. He left this world obsessed with his unsatisfied desires, with nothing to show or to bequeath his descendants, other than his implacable envy and hatred of *Klal Yisrael*. How sad.

To have a better understanding of the role *middos tovos*, positive, refined character traits, play in a person's Torah life, we quote from *Horav Chaim Vital, zl*, who explains (*Shaarei Kedushah*) why the Torah does not address the importance of *middos* in the *taryag*, 613 *mitzvos*. *Middos* are not an antecedent to Torah, but Torah itself. *Derech Eretz kadmah l'Torah*, character refinement,

proper *middos*, precede Torah. This means that the Torah of a person who is deficient in his *middos* – is of no value. He did not learn! Thus, since a pre-requisite for Torah study is *middos tovos*, it is not necessary to include *middos* in the Torah. *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl* (*Sichos Mussar Parashas Naso*), cites an analogy that he heard from his venerable *Rebbe*, the *Alter, zl, m'Kelm*, which explains the concept of *middos tovos* preceding Torah.

In order to become a tailor, one studies its craft. Tailoring is a skilled vocation for which one prepares and often works as an apprentice, learning every aspect of the craft. Without the knowledge acquired through study and practice, one cannot become a skilled tailor. When a person brings a large piece of material which he wants the tailor to transform into an elegant suit, he just gives him the material, and the tailor takes his measurements. The tailor need not be instructed in the procedure of how to sew the suit. That is his skill.

If the customer, however, were to begin by explaining to the tailor how he should sew the suit – i.e., cut the material this way; hold the needle in your right hand; check to make sure that the measurements are correct; stitch the buttons half an inch apart, etc. – the tailor would respond, “I am a tailor – not a shoemaker. There is no need to tell me how to sew. All you must do is bring the material, and I will do the rest.”

A similar idea applies to acquiring Torah, so that we achieve our Heavenly-mandated goal of becoming a *mamleches kohanim v'goi kadosh*, kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In order to accomplish this monumental goal, it is critical that we become craftsmen who are skilled in those vital character traits upon which a *mamleches kohanim* can be built. Priority number one to become such a craftsman is *middos tovos*, character traits that are refined and inspire others as well. No anger, no arrogance, no envy and certainly not hatred – just to mention a few. Unless one harnesses his *middos*, he will never become a “tailor.” Prior to becoming a “craftsman” of Torah, priority number one is expunging whatever deficiencies we have in the area of *middos* and then harnessing the inherent good that is within us, so that we will become true ambassadors of Torah.