

Bilaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me.” (23:1)

Balak complied to Bilaam’s request and erected seven Altars upon which he offered seven cows and seven rams. He did this three times for a total of forty-two sacrifices. While Balak’s attempt to curse the Jewish people yielded no immediate effect, it did play itself out negatively generations later in the time of Elisha *HaNavi*.

Chazal (*Sotah* 47a) teach that forty-two children who cursed Elisha died as a result of the *Navi*’s response to them. [The commentators explain that these children were products of a prohibited union which was consummated on *Yom Kippur*. Additionally, Elisha saw through Divine Inspiration that nothing, no good, would descend from these children.] The connection between the deaths of the forty-two children and Balak’s altar begs elucidation. On the surface, aligning these two events is a stretch.

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, explains that, when one acts outwardly in a positive manner to garner communal praise, while simultaneously harboring negative intentions, he is a sham artist who beguiles people. His greatest victim is himself, because after acting in such an insincere manner, one begins to believe in the ruse himself. The inconsistency between outwardly positive actions and underlying negative motives can erode trust and damage relationships. Mixing good and bad actions can create ethical dilemmas and moral conflicts, as people begin to believe that wavering between two positions is acceptable. Eliyahu *HaNavi* called out to the people who supported the pagan prophets of the *Baal* idol: *Ad masai atem poschin al shtei se’ifim*; “How long will you stand on two doorsteps?” It was a call to them to make a firm decision and commit to their beliefs, rather than indecisive or attempt to appease multiple conflicting interests. The internal conflict resulting from this wavering destroys one’s identity, since he no longer knows where he belongs and what he stands for.

Balak’s forty-two offerings outwardly appeared positive. Inwardly, his intention and purpose was to destroy the Jewish People. Generations later, forty-two children who were card-carrying members of the *Baal* rite audaciously reviled the prophet, Elisha. Their concept of good and bad was distorted, and they were the victims – on multiple levels.