

Parshas Balak: Polishing Diamonds

In this week's *parsha*, *Parshas Balak*, Balak, king of Moav, hires Bilaam, a prophet from the nations of the world, to curse the Jews, who seem to have spread over the eye of the land as they approach Eretz Yisrael.

Despite Bilaam's repeated attempts to curse the Jewish nation, he is wholly unsuccessful, and each time he opens his mouth to curse, beautiful, poetic, prophetic blessings come forth instead. The evil intention to curse the nation is thwarted by the word of G-d, placed in the mouth of wicked Bilaam, who becomes a mouthpiece for Divine blessings. But the wicked intention remains nonetheless.

When a frustrated King Balak and a dejected Prophet Bilaam realize that they cannot ruin the Jewish people through the power of voice, Bilaam offers a different approach. He advises Balak to ensnare the Israelite men, and lead them into idol worship of Pe'or, and physical temptation by the Moavite women (see Bamidbar 25:1-9, as well as Sanhedrin 106a).

The Sages have strong words to say about Bilaam, Pirkei Avos 5:22 -

כל מי שיש בידו שלושה דברים הללו הוא מתלמידי של אברהם אבינו. ושלושה דברים אחרים הוא מתלמידי של בלעם הרשע

תלמידי של אברהם אבינו: עין טובה, ורוח נמוכה, ונפש שפלה

תלמידי של בלעם הרשע: עין רעה, ורוח גבוהה, ונפש רחבה

Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the students of our father Avraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the students of the wicked Bilaam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Bilaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a wide soul.

Bilaam was motivated by his evil eye, which caused him to see the negative around him, by his haughty spirit which wanted more and more wealth and honor, and by his "wide soul" which could never be satiated, for nothing was ever good enough for Bilaam.

While our forefather Avraham was motivated by a good eye, always seeing the positive in situations and people around him, a meek spirit which motivated him to always serve man and G-d, and a humble soul, which strove to bring honor and glory to Hashem's Name, as he founded and built the *Umah Yisraelis* (the Jewish nation).

The Maharal praises the *middah* of a good eye at length, stating that is it the most useful characteristic in a person's life. "A good eye causes a person much good, for a positive perspective can be one's constant companion. At every moment, as a person sees others who possess wealth, greatness, and other advantages, his eye can view them positively. This trait, therefore, *is more continuously present than any other positive trait*, for a person cannot make use of those other traits unceasingly, whereas a person with this trait can look positively at others in the blink of an eye."

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R' S.R.Hirsch powerfully writes¹ that, "The disciples of Avraham *Avinu* love their fellow-men, they are modest, humble, utterly untainted by envy. These sterling qualities not only open for them the portals of bliss in the world to come, but give them serenity and happiness even here on earth regardless of the lack of material wealth and pleasures and the burden of trials and privation that life may bring..."

"As for the disciples of Bilaam, their malice, their arrogance and their insatiable greed and ambition not only make it impossible for them to walk upon the road to salvation in the world to come, but also keep them from finding one moment's true contentment, even in the midst of an abundance of riches and pleasures. Any joy, honor or prosperity that comes to others is a bitter drop in their cup of joy and whatever they may already have achieved loses all values in their eyes when they contemplate those of their desires that are still unfulfilled. Hence, *they do not receive a portion in either of the two worlds originally appointed for them*, even as they had been for all other men. The World to Come is closed to them and the happiness possible in this world is truly lost to them as well."

Rebbetzin Henny Machlis a'h taught the following lesson:

A certain rabbi loved every Jew very much. He once went to speak in the Diamond District in Tel Aviv. The first question they asked him was, "Why do you usually hang out with the low-class people?" So he said, "When you find a diamond and it's dirty, do you throw it out?" "No, we polish it." He said, "I do the same. Every Jew is even more precious than a diamond."

There was a fellow who was playing his violin in the subway. He had his violin case open, and for 45 minutes he was playing. And 1,000 people passed by and only six people stopped and listened for a while. He collected \$32 in his case. Afterward it was revealed that this was Joshua Bell, one of the world's greatest violinists, and he was using a violin that was worth \$3.5 million. People just didn't notice. They just didn't take the time to listen.

So I want to say that really everybody around us is like Joshua Bell. Everybody is important. Everybody is special. We really have to work harder to love every Jew like ourselves and to see their uniqueness, their specialness. We don't know who anybody is.²

May we always be of the students of Avraham, with an *ayin tova*. May we strive to see all the good that Hashem bestows upon us, and around us: the good in our world, the good in our lives, the good in those around us, as well as the good within ourselves.

בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום

¹ Commentary to Pirkei Avos 5:22

² *Eemunah with Love and Chicken Soup*, S.Y.Rigler, p.68-69