

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Balak  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Parashat Balak – Don't be a disciple of Bilaam

In this week's Parasha, we read about the wicked Bilaam and his unsuccessful attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael. Our Sages compare and contrast Bilaam with both Moshe Rabbeinu and Avraham Avinu.

For instance, the Torah sums up Moshe's career in glowing terms:

*And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moshe (Devarim 34:10)*

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> elaborates that while there was no other prophet like Moshe amongst Israel, there was another prophet, Bilaam, who was comparable to Moshe among the nations. This is a remarkable statement! Why would Hashem grant such a high level of prophecy to the other nations, and in particular to such a wicked person like Bilaam? The Midrash<sup>2</sup> explains that Hashem did not want the other nations to have an excuse for not serving Him. They could have argued that they didn't serve Hashem because they weren't granted prophecy like the Jews were granted prophecy through Moshe. So Hashem gave them a comparable prophet - Bilaam ben Be'or. But it didn't help. Bilaam was a wicked and depraved person who devoted his talents and energy to cursing others and satisfying his own desires.

Unlike Moshe, Bilaam had an ayin ra'ah – an evil eye. The Torah Temimah<sup>3</sup> compares Moshe and Bilaam to an eagle and a bat. Both creatures know the times of sunrise and sunset, but they look at these phenomena for opposite reasons. The eagle, with its sharp eyesight, seeks out the sun so it can enjoy the light. The bat on the other hand looks forward to sunset because it prefers to operate in the dark. Similarly, Bilaam and Moshe were able to recognise times of Divine favour and times of Divine anger. Bilaam sought out the times of Divine anger when his curses would be more efficacious<sup>4</sup>. Moshe, on the other hand, used the times of Divine favour to protect his beloved nation of Israel.

Bilaam is also famously compared to Avraham Avinu. The Mishna<sup>5</sup> lists the traits of the disciples of Avraham and contrasts them with the traits of the disciples of Bilaam. The traits of the students of Avraham are a good eye, a humble spirit and an undemanding soul. On the other hand, the disciples of the wicked Bilaam have an evil eye, an arrogant spirit and a greedy soul.

We mentioned above that Bilaam was a prophet that was in some respects comparable with Moshe Rabbeinu. How did he fall so low? The Tiferet Yisrael explains that Bilaam had the three negative character traits listed in the Mishnah and this led him to immorality and moral failure. This teaches us that it is not enough to have great potential and to be presented with amazing opportunities – if we don't work on our middot then we can fall very low.

Why does the Midrash refer to the traits of the *disciples* of the Avraham and Bilaam? Why not teach us about the traits of Avraham and Bilaam themselves? Perhaps this phraseology helps us to realise the Mishnah is speaking to *all* of us. We can all make the choice as to whose students we are. Do we want to

<sup>1</sup> Sifrei Devarim 357.

<sup>2</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 14.

<sup>3</sup> Devarim 34.

<sup>4</sup> See Gemara Brachot 7a.

<sup>5</sup> Pirkai Avot 5:22.

emulate the wicked Bilaam, or do we want to follow in the footsteps of our forefather Avraham? Let's look at some of the commentaries which discuss these character traits.<sup>6</sup>

With regards to Avraham "good eye", Rashi explains that this means one who is not jealous and who values his friend's honour as much as his own. The Rambam and the Bartenura explain that a "good eye" means that you are satisfied with what you have, and you don't begrudge others anything. Rabbeinu Yona understands that this person is generous, both financially and emotionally., The Sfat Emet understands the term as referring to one with an optimistic and positive outlook. The Tiferet Yisrael focuses on our relationship with Hashem – if one can maintain faith in trying circumstances and can see Hashem's kindness everywhere, then he has a good eye towards Hashem.

How can one work on this trait? It is human nature to focus on what is lacking and what could be better. We need to make a conscious effort to overcome this tendency and try to focus on what is good. And no matter how bad things may seem, there is always a lot of good that we can find if we actively seek it out and ask Hashem for help to see it.

With regards to Avraham's humble spirit, Rashi and Bartenura explain this to mean humility and modesty of spirit. Rabbeinu Yona adds that one should be humble towards Hashem and other people. The Chida explains that one who is humble-spirited does not chase after honour or prestige.

How can one work on this trait? I once heard an explanation in the name of one of the Chasidic masters as to why Moshe was so humble. Moshe spent most of his time with Hashem – either talking to Him, interacting with Him or thinking about Him. When Moshe would think about Hashem and His greatness, he was automatically humbled. We can also spend regular time thinking about Hashem. This can help us to feel His greatness and our corresponding smallness. Perhaps we also can strengthen our own humility by looking at those who are spiritually greater than us and focusing on their greatness. If we think about what these people have achieved and how hard they have worked at it, that can be a humbling experience.

With regards to Avraham Avinu's undemanding soul, the Meiri and the Bartenura explain this as the ability to exercise restraint and self-control over forbidden physical desires, or even permitted but excessive luxuries. R' Yona explains this as someone who is spiritually healthy and doesn't have a desire for lust or sin. The Tiferet Yisrael links this trait with being satisfied with one's lot. The Midrash Shmuel explains that one should try to diminish their animalistic soul so as to make clearer decisions without its influence.

How can one work on this trait? One approach that has been suggested is known as the fast of the Raavad. In summary, when you are enjoying a good meal, instead of polishing off the plate, leave a small amount on the side. This small and regular practice may help train you to be in control of your desires.

Interestingly, the Netivot Shalom points out that the main trait for which Avraham was known was his chesed. So why then is this not one of the positive traits that are listed in the Mishnah? He explains that the three traits in the Mishnah as outlined above are prerequisites to being genuinely kind to others. If we can work on these three character traits (by being happy with our lot, happy with the success of others, humble and undemanding) we will end up naturally doing a lot more chesed. Instead of being self-absorbed, we will become other-focused and will automatically try to help others to satisfy their needs.

Let's try something this week:

Try to work on developing the traits of Avraham Avinu – you can use the techniques we suggested above or any other techniques that work for you:

1. A good eye
2. A humble spirit
3. An undemanding soul

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>6</sup> The summary of the various explanations by the commentators was prepared with the assistance of Artscroll's Pirkai Avos Treasury. Please see there for further discussion.