

MEVASER TOV

*Essays on the weekly parsha by the Biala Rebbe shlita
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∞ THE PERILS OF ARROGANCE ∞

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Our Sages attribute to Bilam powers of prophecy that surpassed even those of Moshe Rabbeinu himself.¹ “*So speaks the hearer of G-d’s words, the knower of the Highest One’s thoughts, the seer of the Mighty One’s revelation, who falls with eyes uncovered,*” he said of himself.² Hashem granted him these powers to prevent the nations from ever claiming that had they been given a prophet like Moshe, they too would be righteous and worthy of the reward of the World to Come.

To quell their complaint, Hashem gave them Bilam. However, instead of leading them on the path towards Hashem’s service, he broke down the barriers of human decency and encouraged vulgar passions that had been shunned by the entire world ever since the Great Flood.³

How could Bilam have been such a deeply spiritual person on the one hand, yet so terribly corrupt and immoral on the other? His keen insight into the secrets of the Heavens should have turned him into an outstanding tzaddik, yet our Sages refer to him as “Bilam HaRasha – the Wicked Bilam”, branding him as the worst villain of his time.

Furthermore, since he was indeed such a *rasha*, how did his appointment as the prophet of the nations in any way quell their complaint that they lacked a spiritual leader like Moshe to lead them towards Hashem’s service? They were given a terribly wicked leader instead, who encouraged indecency and perversion. Could they be blamed for following his example? Had they been given a truly righteous leader like Moshe, perhaps they too would have led pure and noble lives.

¹ *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:19

² *Bamidbar* 24:16

³ Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:5

1

The Disciples of Bilam

Our Sages state in Pirkei Avos:

Those who have a kind outlook, humble spirit and unassuming soul are among the disciples of Avraham Avinu. Those who have a nasty outlook, arrogant spirit and greedy soul are among the disciples of the wicked Bilam.⁴

Bilam's mind achieved heights of spiritual awareness (*hasagos*), but his heart remained consumed by arrogance and selfish desire, as demonstrated by his dealings with the emissaries of Midian and Moav. He knew that Hashem did not want him to curse Bnei Yisrael, but he attempted to do so none the less, since his passion for wealth and honor overshadowed his recognition of the truth.

Bilam was widely admired for his prophetic knowledge and the miraculous power of his blessings and curses, yet these things are merely superficial. They are by no means the judge of a person's holiness, since real holiness can only rest upon a person whose body is free from sin, whose heart is free from selfishness and conceit, and whose behavior is true to the wisdom he professes.

Spiritual awareness is a gift from Heaven, but it is not enough to make one into a good person. Man perfects himself only through his own efforts to improve his character and adapt his life to fit the wisdom he receives, since the goal of life is not just abstract spirituality, but the perfection of behavior on a day-to-day basis. If spirituality is not coupled with a commitment to self-improvement, it can actually corrupt a person, deluding him into thinking that he is better and holier than others, and thus more deserving of wealth and honor. This is the path towards arrogance – the greatest of all evils.

Unlike Moshe, whose awareness of the Divine made him the most humble man on the face of the earth,⁵ Bilam prided himself on his powers of sight. His heart swelled with thoughts of his own greatness and the belief that he was so worthy and deserving of reward that Hashem Himself must ultimately concede to his selfish desire to curse Bnei Yisrael.

If a person does not make a concentrated effort to subdue his selfish ego, then any height of spirituality he may attain will only twist his mind into further contortions of arrogance. He will convince himself that he is better than others and may well abuse them for the sake of his own grandeur.

This was the very point of distinction between Bilam and the true Tzaddikim of Bnei Yisrael, the students of Avraham Avinu, who were marked by a kind outlook, a humble spirit and an unassuming soul. As they rise to ever greater heights of spirituality, they become increasingly aware of Hashem's greatness and their own relative insignificance.

⁴ *Pirkei Avos* 5:19

⁵ *Bamidbar* 12:3

Their prophecy thus inspires them to subject themselves, body and soul, to the selfless service of the Creator.

The Gemara states:

*“Not because of your greatness does Hashem favor you, for you are the smallest of all nations.”*⁶ Hashem said to Bnei Yisrael: “I favor you, since even when I bestow greatness upon you, you humble yourselves before Me. I granted greatness to Avraham and he said, ‘I am but dust and ashes.’ I granted greatness to Moshe and Aharon and they said, ‘What are we worth?’ I granted greatness to David and he said ‘I am a worm and not a man.’”

“But the idolaters are not like that. I granted greatness to Nimrod and he said ‘Let us build a city and a tower with its top in the Heavens, and we shall ascend there.’; to Pharaoh and he said, ‘Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice?’; to Sancheirev and he said, ‘Who among all the gods of the lands has saved its land from my hand, that Hashem should save Yerushalayim from my hand?’; to Nevuchadnetzar and he said, ‘I shall ascend the pedestal of the clouds.’; to Chiram king of Tzur and he said ‘I sat on the throne of G-d in the heart of the sea.’”⁷

2

When Torah Merges with the Soul

More than a merely intellectual pursuit of profound ideas, Torah study requires a practical commitment to put those ideas into practice. This demands the humility necessary to recognize one’s mistakes and improve. Only then can the Torah merge with a person’s soul, transforming him into a better, more noble person – until the very essence of his being, with all his thoughts and desires, thirsts only to perform the will of the Creator.

The Torah then becomes a part of his very being, until he finds himself physically unable to sin. Such was the case of many great Tzaddikim, who were unable to lift their hands to put non-kosher food into their mouths, even if they thought at the time that it was kosher. All this is contingent on the degree to which a person can surrender his selfish desires and subjugate his will in humble obedience to the Creator.

The Torah was given on the small mountain of Har Sinai to illustrate the importance of humility in Torah observance.⁸ Nevertheless, notes the Toldos Adam, it was given on a mountain, and not on a flat plane or in a valley, to teach us that although we must view ourselves as lowly, we must always strive to improve, and climb the mountain towards spiritual growth. Still, however high we may climb, we must never forget our

⁶ *Devarim* 7:7

⁷ *Chullin* 89a

⁸ *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:3

shortcomings, and remember that despite our rise to relative greatness, we still remain on the lowest of all mountains, with many more peaks ahead of us.⁹

Bilam lacked this sense of humility. Unable to recognize his faults, he could not adapt his lifestyle to fit the wisdom he was granted. Therefore his wisdom did nothing to improve him but instead fed his arrogance and wickedness. No manner of prophecy or revelation can improve a person who is consumed by arrogance and greed.

Our Sages thus warn that if a person studies Torah for its own sake (*l'shmah*) it becomes a live-giving potion, but if he studies Torah for his own selfish ends it becomes a deadly poison.¹⁰ When a person studies to prove himself smarter than others, not only does the Torah fail to uplift him and draw him close to Hashem, it becomes the cause of his ruin.¹¹ Such was the case with Bilam, who was the greatest of prophets but the most arrogant and greedy of all men.

3

The Book of our Ancestry

The Midrash states that when Hashem gave us the Torah, the other nations complained against the favoritism He showed us. Hashem answered by asking them to provide a book of ancestry that rivaled that of Bnei Yisrael, who received the Torah only in the merit of our illustrious forefathers.¹²

Priesthood and royalty are indeed the exclusive estates of certain elect families, but Torah greatness is available equally to everyone, regardless of their lineage. Why then did Hashem ask the nations to provide their books of ancestry?

Clearly the Midrash refers not to a mere matter of family prestige, but to the hereditary character traits that were necessary to make Kabbalas HaTorah meaningful and lasting. Without these traits, the spiritual ascent that was experienced at Har Sinai could have produced brazen and selfish villains like Bilam. Klal Yisrael was worthy of Kabbalas HaTorah only in the merit of the humility and selflessness we received as an inheritance from our forefathers. These traits are essential preconditions for Torah, and are the very measure of Torah greatness.

Tzaddikim may diverge on certain points of Torah law or ideology, but they all share the humility and selflessness that define righteousness. Since they are all kind and good-hearted people, they are by definition Tzaddikim. If these traits are lacking, then regardless of a person's scholarly wisdom or seemingly holy character, he cannot be considered a Tzaddik at all.

Anyone with a kind eye, humble spirit and unassuming soul can be considered a disciple of Avraham Avinu – since Avraham instilled these traits in the hearts of his descendants as our eternal inheritance. In contrast, Bilam polluted the hearts of man

⁹ *Toldos Adam, Behar*

¹⁰ *Taanis 7a*

¹¹ *Tosefos, Berachos 17a*

¹² *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 684*

with his nasty eye, arrogant spirit and greedy soul, such that anyone who would ever exhibit these traits could rightly be called his student, regardless of the heights of spirituality he seems to possess.

With this we can resolve the question of how Hashem quelled the complaint of the nations that they lacked a leader like Moshe, and had they been granted one they too could have become perfectly righteous and worthy of the reward of the World to Come. Hashem answered by providing them with Bilam, whose spiritual awareness rivaled that of Moshe. Although Bilam failed to serve as a role model for righteousness, this was no fault of Hashem's.

Hashem does not grant righteousness or wickedness. He grants only the tools necessary for each person to use in whichever path he may choose. It is up to man, however, to choose his own path. The attributes of arrogance and selfishness were so deeply embedded in the hearts of the idolatrous nations that even the greatest prophet who ever lived could not reform them, since he too would ultimately be corrupted by the megalomania driven by his prophetic greatness.

We alone merited to receive the Torah, since we alone can understand it in its deepest sense – that it is far more than an intellectual endeavor, but the pursuit of character perfection and the conversion of selfish ego to the selfless desire to fulfill Hashem's will. Therefore, we rightly merited a leader like Moshe who devoted himself to the perfection of his own middos, until he became the most humble person who ever lived, providing us with a sterling role model to follow.

In the end, Moshiach will arrive to awaken our latent potential for humility and selflessness, making us worthy of an even higher level of Torah revelation, about which Hashem promised, "*A new Torah shall go forth from Me,*"¹³ and through which we will all merit the eternal reward of the World to Come, may it be soon and in our days.

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¹³ *Yeshaya* 51:3