

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# TORAH LESSONS for the HOME

{ BALAK 5780 }

## OUR INNER BILAAM

---

### THE KING AND THE PROPHET

Balak the king of Moav, was very afraid of Am Yisrael after they managed to destroy Sichon, the king of the Emori. In order to prevent himself from suffering a similar fate, he summoned Bilaam, the gentile prophet. His plan was to send him to curse the Yidden, so that they will not have power against him.

The Torah then goes on to describe a long story; the whole back and forth between Balak and Bilaam, the talking donkey, and finally, Bilaam blessing the Yidden instead of cursing them.

We note that the entire story depicted in this week's Parshah, was not witnessed by anyone of the Bnei Yisroel. And yet, we learn about this episode in great detail. This is

all so that we can learn a lesson from what happened.

### AVRAHAM AND BILAAM

In Pirkei Avos (5:22) we learn that *“He who has these three good attributes, is from the disciples of Avraham Avinu, and whoever has three other attributes, is from the disciples of Bilaam the Wicked. The three good attributes are; a good eye, a humble demeanor, and a pure soul. Whoever has an evil eye, a haughty demeanor, and a soul that lusts, is from the disciples of Bilaam the Wicked.”*

Why are these two vastly different individuals mentioned in the same sentence? The answer is that Avraham and Bilaam were not all that different outwardly. Avraham was a leader and a *navi*, and Bilaam was a leader and a *navi*. Both merited to hear the Word of Hashem and guide their followers accordingly.

### THE INSIDE COUNTS

But their insides were very different, and these differences became apparent in their disciples. The way they conducted themselves made a subtle impression on the people they taught, and there the difference was obvious.

The core of Bilaam's wickedness was his utter selfishness. He wasn't an evil person, who was out to hurt or kill anybody. He was just completely self-absorbed, to the exclusion of everyone else. The Gemara in Sanhedrin says that his name, Bilaam, can be read as *“Beloi Am”* – without a nation. He was bereft, alone, nobody wanted to be in his company. His every word and his every action was only said and done for his own benefit. When we learn the deeper meaning of his dialogue this week, we can understand

the scope of his egotistical tendencies.

## DECODING THE PARSHAH

Sometimes, when we read a Passuk it's not readily apparent what the underlying meaning is. Rashi comes to the rescue, and shows us the different nuances so that we can gain a deeper understanding of what was really going on. Let's have a look at how Rashi explains the *pesukim* in this week's Parsha:

In Passuk 8 Bilaam comes across as a very gracious host. "Stay the night!" He tells his guests. And yet Rashi tells us that what Bilaam really thought was, "I doubt that Hashem will tell me to accompany such lowly people as yourselves."

Later, Hashem came to Bilaam and asked him, "Who are these people?" Bilaam answered that "Balak, son of Tzipor, the king of Moav, has sent me these emissaries." To the untrained ear it looks like a straightforward answer to the question. But Rashi points out that Bilaam was thinking, "Maybe I'm not very esteemed in Your Eyes, Hashem, but look how much honor kings give me!"

The further we delve into the dialogue and the more we read the story with Rashi's explanation, it becomes more and more obvious that everything revolved around Bilaam, and all he was thinking about was "me, me, me". And

yet outwardly, none of that was obvious, from the outside he looked almost like Avraham Avinu!

## THE REAL INTENTIONS

We sometimes, unfortunately, encounter people who sound just like Bilaam. Actually, inside every one of us resides an Avraham Avinu and a Bilaam the Wicked. If we are aware of what the sound of Bilaam inside of us is, we can try to quiet it down and tap into our Avraham instead. We must make time to review our thoughts and motives because we may fool ourselves into thinking we're acting like Avraham Avinu!

At the end of each day, try to review the things you said throughout the day. If most of your statements are entitled, haughty, and demeaning, then perhaps your Bilaam is getting too much exposure.

When someone gives you constructive criticism, is your retort, "Who are you to tell me that?!"? When you claim you deserve something, is it really because you deserve it or do you believe you have the entire world coming to you? When you tell someone "I told you so", is it because you were really trying to help them, or because you always have to be right?

Sometimes, we say something that looks benign, but really there are evil intentions behind it. When a

person close to us offers to help us and we dismiss their offer saying, "I don't need your help", is it because we really can do it ourselves, or because we don't want to owe anyone any favors?

We need to be extremely mindful not to allow our Bilaam to come to the fore. It is not always just about us. After all, we want to get along with those around us!

## LET OTHERS LIVE!

When Bilaam finally did reach the Jewish camp, the Passuk tells us, he raised his eyes and noticed that each *Shevet* was resting separately, with the doors of each tent facing away from the neighboring tent. We would think that it was due to *tznius*, so that nobody could see inside our homes. But that isn't what Rashi says. Rashi says "He should not be able to peek into the tent of his friend"! We faced our doors in opposite directions so that WE should not infringe on OTHER PEOPLE'S privacy! Bilaam was so impressed by our considerate and respectful gesture, that he couldn't help himself and blurted out a blessing instead of a curse.

The Ohev Yisroel of Apta once said, that Balak is *Roshei Teivos* "Veahavta leraiacha kamocho". You might correctly argue that only the sounds are the same, but the letters are quite different. Well, said

the Apta Rav, when it comes to liking others, we can't be so particular! We should be meticulous with our own selves, but when it comes to others, we need not be so exacting.

Giving someone else their space, allowing room for other's opinions and preferences, all of these are what makes us who we are. It's what classifies us as *talmidim* of Avraham Avinu. When we exercise our Avraham muscle, by looking out for the positive in everyone around us and thinking about what the

other person wants, we silence our inner Bilaam.

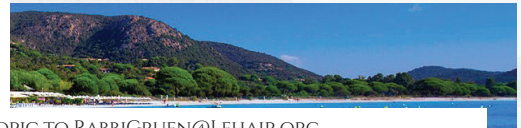
*Fargin*, be happy with someone else's good luck, be considerate and kind, and then you will live peacefully with those around you. If we will take this lesson to heart, then we will have achieved the goal set for us by this Parsha.

### CHINUCH: WHAT INFORMS OUR DECISIONS?

When we raise our children, it is absolutely imperative to keep our egos out of the

picture. When we make a decision, answer a question, discipline, or issue a command, it needs to be with the CHILD'S best interest in mind. Try to sniff out the situations where your Bilaam is interfering with your relationship with your children, and abolish it!

Listen to your child. Maybe he is right? By putting our own preferences aside, and making room for our children, we are opening the door to their hearts and making them feel safe and understood in our presence.



PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND ANY QUESTIONS, ON THIS TOPIC OR ANY TOPIC TO [RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG](mailto:RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG)

### QUESTION:

I have trouble making conversation with my children. When I ask them how their day was, all I get is a shrug of the shoulders and a noncommittal grunt. How can I foster a satisfying relationship with my children if they won't even talk to me?

### ANSWER:

When someone passes you in shul or at the store and throws out a casual "How are you? How's it going?" over their shoulder, do you feel compelled to answer? I'll bet that you do not. Why? Because you can plainly sense that the questioner isn't at all concerned with your answer. Is this the gist of the questions you ask of your children? Do they feel like all you're trying to do is make small talk, as opposed to having a real conversation with them?

Besides, your children spend eight long hours in school every day. It's very likely that when they finally get home, school is the last thing they want to talk about! Maybe it's just about finding a topic that interests your child, and then starting a discussion about that.

Instead of waiting for your child to tell you something, be the one to tell *him* something! Tell him about your day, about things that he likes to discuss, answers to questions that he has posed, and anything else you think might interest him. Initiate the conversation!

Once you establish a common area of interest, or you get yourself interested in something that he cares about, you will most likely succeed in making an inroad in your relationship with your child.

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call 718.841.6557 or e-mail [rabbigruen@lehair.org](mailto:rabbigruen@lehair.org)  
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email [parshalessons@lehair.org](mailto:parshalessons@lehair.org)