

A FOOL

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

A quick thought on this week's Torah portion in which we find Bilam, the infamous sorcerer, attempting again and again to curse the Jewish people. His persistence intrigues us. Bilam first takes up a position with Balak, the king of Moav, on a high promontory from where he could see---and then curse-the entire Jewish nation. Yet his curses were turned by Hashem into wonderful blessings. Bilam then moved to a different vantage point from which he could only see the edge of the Jewish encampment, but once again his wicked plans were foiled and his curses became blessings. Finally, Bilam turned to the wilderness and attempted to call down some additional curses.

Why did Bilam's frustration cause him to change his vantage point, increasingly narrowing his focus on the nation each time his curses were rendered harmless?

A quick look between the lines of the Parsha brings Bilam's character into sharp relief. Clearly, he had a bloated ego and an insatiable appetite for flattery. People who seek constant approval and adulation often tend to disparage and humiliate others. Since they suffer from diminished self-worth and feelings of inadequacy, they deprecate others in an attempt to pump up their own egos. Like a see-saw, they can only go up when others go down.

Bilam epitomized this characteristic. At first, he wanted to curse the entire people and anticipated a huge boost to his ego if he succeeded. When he failed in that endeavor, he narrowed his focus to only part of the nation, hoping that by highlighting the shortcomings of at least some of the people, he would gain relief and importance. After failing again, he tried to zone in on specific faults in the Jewish people and by talking in generalities about some of their setbacks. That too was ineffectual.

Two veteran elderly Gerrer Chassidim were engaged in a deep philosophical discussion about the chosen people. They stood at the front of the large Bais Medrash in the Eastern European town of Gur. One strokes his beard thoughtfully while declaring to his friend, "Simcha Bunim, we are both well into our eighties and have come into contact with all segments of the Jewish people. Let's reflect for a moment about the spiritual identity of the millions of Jews that live in the world. Who are Hashem's chosen and most beloved children? Of course, it is only religious Jews who believe in the Divine revelation of Sinai and cherish the Torah's commandments". His friend nodded sagaciously as the dialogue continues.

"Well Simcha Bunim, lets develop this thought a little further. Amongst religious Jews there are of course many different divisions and segments. We have the various Sephardic communities,

Ashkenazi communities, Modern orthodox and of course the Chassidic Jews that follow the traditions of the saintly Baal Shem Tov. Really now!" he exclaimed, "who does Hashem truly cherish? Of course', he announced triumphantly, 'it's we the hassidim. All other religious Jews are practicing the rituals robotically. They haven't tasted the joy, warmth and fervor that Hassidic practice has to offer. Only we understand, appreciate and practice Hashem's laws with true love'!

Well now" he continued, "let's analyze this one step further. Amongst us hassidim, you and I know how many sects and groups there are that think they have captured the message of the saintly Baal Shem Tov. But they are really emphasizing the frills and traditions without understanding or appreciating his essential teachings. Only in Gur have we plumbed the depths of the saintly Baal Shem Tov teachings. So now, who does Hashem have in his whole wide world that are His very own? It is only we, the Gerrer Chassidim !

'Well now', he continued to muse, 'let's look behind us at this entire Bais Medrash. You and I know that all the Chassidim that are present are greenhorns; they are too young to have really savored and appreciated the depths of our Gerer sacred tradition. Only we, the oldest amongst all the Chassidim, that sat at the feet of the saintly Chidushei Harim, Sfas Emes and Imrei Emes fully understand and appreciate the teachings of Hassidus at its very source'. His voice was becoming high pitched and his hands were flaying wildly as he reached closer to his final conclusion. Well now, who is Hashem left with for his very own amongst the whole wide world? It is but you and I that are privileged to be on the highest pedestal in Hashem's loving embrace. Well now', he continued, as he clutched the lapels of Simcha Bunim's jacket, 'between you and me you know who is inferior, its quite clear that you are a blithering fool"!

This humorous anecdote reflects our essential message. When we attempt to put others down we would do well to analyze what is motivating our negative behavior. More often than we are simply engaging in an exercise of self promotion that prompts us to highlight other people's perceived flaws and failings in order to artificially inflate our own. We would be far better off recognizing other people's bright spots and positive traits. In the process we will inevitably enrich our environment and community and ennoble ourselves in the process.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos.

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