

NEAR-SIGHTED FAR-SIGHTEDNESS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Bilaam's visual acuity was apparently the subject of much controversy. He describes himself as *shesum ha-ayin* / with the open eye;^[2] that elicited conflicting translations in tradition. Onkelos renders it, "the person who sees well;" the gemara,^[3] however, sees Bilaam as blind in one eye!^[4]

Chazal explain^[5] that Bilaam understood that each day carried with it some moment of Divine displeasure. Bilaam hoped to fixate upon that displeasure, and use it as an opportunity to successfully curse the Jews. Now, there are several synonyms for Hashem's anger in the Torah. *Ketzef* and *cheimah* are two of them. *Zo'em* is used in the *pasuk* that the gemara cites. It is the weakest of the three. It hardly conveys more punch than mild unhappiness or displeasure. We understand, therefore, why no single day can go by without it. We do not kindle HKBH's full anger every day, *chas v'shalom*. But we are all imperfect, which virtually guarantees that no day will pass without meeting up with Divine disappointment.

How did Bilaam know where to find the daily weak point? That was his "gift." Most of us can find some good even in the bad, just as we can spot some bad in what we will concede is generally good. Not Bilaam. He had a sharp eye that only saw the problems, the failures, the inadequacies. He could go straight for the spiritual jugular of anyone he examined. As the Grand Inquisitor of human failing, he "determined the [daily] moment" of Divine anger. Of the two eyes with which we look out at the world – one seeing the good, and one seeing the opposite – Bilaam lacked one of them. He could only see the bad.

Bilaam, however, had met his match in the Jewish nation. This was a group that had not lost its moral compass while held captive by a morally depraved Egyptian people. The imprint of the *avos* remained upon them. And from the time they left Egypt, they built upon it. By the time Bilaam met up with them, he could not really find the chink in the armor. The failure of his attempted *kelalah* was itself a great *brachah*.

The two translations of "open eye" thus merge. There is no disagreement. Bilaam was blind in the eye that would ordinarily detect goodness. Yet, despite looking for the unseemly, he could find none. Despite his best, expert efforts, he could expose nothing evil. Which meant, therefore, that what he scrutinized was exceptionally good! Bilaam saw exceedingly well!

When his mind caught up with his sight, he finally realized that so long as the Bnei Yisrael held on to

the purity of their souls, it would not be in his – or anyone else's – power to stop them. His inevitable conclusion, therefore, was that this purity had to be disrupted. Hence, his parting advice to Balak was to have the latter orchestrate a way to lure the Jewish men into sinning with the Moabite women.

Chazal^[6] assign a peculiar place to this plan. They extend the reasoning of the *pasuk* which explains why we keep Moabites out of the community ("On account of their not greeting you with bread and water when I took them out of Egypt"^[7]) to include Bilaam's hatching of this plot: "Also, for the advice." Now, "also" always introduces something of secondary importance relative to the main element. That doesn't seem to work here. Wasn't the plot to ensnare the Jewish men far more serious a crime than failing to offer box lunches to the Jewish travelers?

To address this enigma, we must first step back and examine a truism about human conduct. We never observe, as noted above, pure evil or pure good. We always can find something wrong with good, and a silver lining to the cloud of evil as well.

Ordinarily, there are few things we detest as much as falsehood and flattery. Yet, they can serve an important function. At times, they keep the peace. People will hide their feelings of contempt for others because of their need to kiss up to those with influence. Keeping feelings of enmity and animosity unexpressed is often better than giving voice to them.

We dislike hypocrisy. People's actions ought to be consistent with their values. Yet, hypocritical inconsistency yields benefits. It can move people to act charitably alongside their neighbors, even if they would not on their own. Those with wavering commitment to halachah will still feel embarrassed to sin publicly – unlike our youth today, who in the name of Truth will brazenly violate all transgressions.

Worst of all happens when people combine the deficiencies of each fault, without preserving any of the "hypocritical" good. We meet up with people who exude falsehood and flattery, but never think of preserving the peace. They feud and fight with everyone who gets in their way. When it comes to matters of observance, however, honesty becomes the supreme virtue, and they lose all inhibitions about public transgression.

This horrible combination is the key to understanding Moav in the *parshah*. But we will understand it better if we examine events closer to our times.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the European Enlightenment had taken hold of most of the Continent. Various rights were extended to Jews for the first time. Some, like the right for Jews to marry non-Jews, did not really work in our favor. Yet who would have criticized local governments for arguing that rights offered other people should not be denied to Jews? Who would call upon us to oppose measures that took on racism head-on?

Similarly, we note the polar opposite in regard to other measures – laws that assured the internal cohesion of a strong, Torah oriented community. Laws that kept us out of government schools, banned us from government service, forbade us from celebrating together with them, exempted us from serving in their armed forces, and made it impossible to intermarry – all of these thrust us into a better relationship with our Heavenly Father. Yet would we credit our enemies with anything positive? Never! We understand that their intentions were entirely hateful and murderous, designed to harm rather than help us. How could we know this with certainty? Because they not only barred us from entering their schools, but they shuttered ours as well.

We are ready for Moav. Each of their actions, in and of itself, could be seen as non-critical or even positive. We can think of worse things than not greeting us with bread and water. Their behavior at Baal Pe'or could be seen as noble and positive. We were a band of ex-slaves, wandering in the wilderness. Yet, they treated us non-prejudicially, as equals – even offering us their daughters! How progressive of them!

Looking at both of their transgressions together, it becomes impossible to put them in a good light. Each one illuminates their intentions in the other. Had they truly treated us as equals, they would have extended to us a bit of hospitality. They didn't. Taken together, we recognize their malice. By denying us food, they showed themselves to be contemptibly rejectionist and mean-spirited. We should want to have nothing to do with their progeny in the future. And also they ensnared us through their daughters – something that we would not have recognized as diabolical, had they approached us in a neighborly manner by offering a helping hand with our provisions.

May Hashem always preserve us from those who claim to favor us – but harbor hatred towards us in their hearts.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Balak, by R. Yechezkel Lifshitz zt"l.
2. Bamidbar 24:3.
3. Sanhedrin 105A.
4. I.e., one eye was open, but the other was closed (Rashi, Sanhedrin ibid.).
5. Sanhedrin 105B.
6. Yalkut Shemoni, Ki Setzei 933.
7. Devarim 23:4.