

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

After going through the "give-and-take" between Hashem and Bilaam at the beginning of this week's parsha, one is left wondering: Why did Hashem, so to speak, change His mind? At first, Bilaam's desire to accompany the Moabite dignitaries is vetoed outright: "Do not go with [these men]! Do not curse the nation - for it is blessed! (22:12)" After, however, King Balak sends additional dignitaries, "more numerous and honoured than [the previous ones]," Hashem seemingly acquiesces to Bilaam's desires: "If these men have come to call you, get up and go with them! (22:20)" What transpired in the meantime such that the once untenable is now being granted?

Rav Chaim Volozhiner zt"l, famed talmid (disciple) of the Gaon of Vilna zt"l, is said to have been the "father" of the modern yeshiva in Lithuania. Until his time, a "yeshiva" was merely a group of students who would gather to study Torah with the rav of the local shtiebel. Even in the larger towns and cities, the local rabbanim managed to teach only a handful of students. The lack of organized Torah study ultimately lead to a general decline of the Torah's esteem in the eyes of the masses.

Rav Chaim developed a plan which was at the time considered revolutionary: The establishment of yeshivos in which Torah would be taught in an organized fashion to all students who truly desired to study. Such a major decision required counsel, so Rav Chaim set off to Vilna to visit his rebbe, and eagerly outlined his plan. He described how his yeshiva would not only teach young bachurim (yeshiva students) the proper approach to Torah study, but would also shield them from "the street," and allow them to focus completely on their studies without having to worry about "worldly matters" (not the least of which was where their next meal would come from). Furthermore, he planned to contact other Torah centers in Lithuania, describing his plan and encouraging them to follow suit and establish their own yeshivos. His fervent hope was that the institution of the yeshiva would eventually restore the pride of the Torah among Israel.

After listening intently to Rav Chaim's plan, the Gaon, who usually responded to Rav Chaim's queries promptly, did not approve. Nor, actually, did he disapprove. Nor did he ask any questions, or request further clarification. The conversation moved on to other topics, and Rav Chaim was left puzzled as to why his rebbe had avoided replying to his seemingly faultless idea. He would never make such a major move without his rebbe's consent, yet he had been so sure that his plan was a positive one. What, he asked himself, could possibly be wrong?

Left with no choice, Rav Chaim shelved his plan, and returned home to Volozhin perplexed. Yet he

remained convinced of the merits of his bold idea. Day after day he turned it over in his mind, trying in vain to find in it fault - trying to discover what it was that had elicited such a strange response. He could find nothing.

Months passed, yet his dream nagged at him. Rav Chaim knew in his heart that this was a move that had to be made, and on a subsequent trip to Vilna, he decided once again to broach the subject with the Gaon. This time, when he spoke before his rebbe, he did so with far less enthusiasm than the first; he feared his raising the issue a second time would be considered audacious. Once again, he set out his plan to establish a yeshiva where Torah would be studied, analyzed, and explored by the young and developing minds of the coming generation. Amazingly, as if it were the first time he was hearing the plan, the Gaon enthusiastically gave his immediate consent. The idea, he said, was brilliant, and would surely restore the love of Torah to the hearts of Jewish youth!

Rav Chaim was both overjoyed - and stunned. Unable to contain his curiosity, he asked: "Why is it that the first time I tried to discuss my idea with the rebbe, the rebbe refused to consent?"

"A Torah institution," said the Gaon, "will only succeed if it is established with the purest of intentions. If one acts out of personal interest, his endeavors will likely meet with failure. Only when one acts out of a pure desire for truth do his efforts stand a chance. When you first came to me, you were so enthusiastic about your idea that I feared perhaps beneath the surface you had some personal interest at stake - which would ultimately be your downfall. Now, however, I see that you are calmer, and act out of only the truest motives. Thus, I am sure that your plan will be a great success."

Rashi explains Hashem's response to Bilaam's second request: If these men have come to call you - if their calling is of benefit to you, i.e. if you stand to gain personally by accompanying them, then by all means, get up and go with them.

When the dignitaries of Moab came to ask for Bilaam's help the first time, he was refused permission. Perhaps his intentions, though misguided, were in some way pure. Perhaps, out of a desire for "global equality," Bilaam thought that by cursing the Chosen People he would simply be "levelling the playing field," so that other nations that had not merited G-d's personal attention and blessings would also stand a chance. Perhaps he felt in some way that the Jews, after a disastrous forty-year sojourn in the desert during which they had fallen victim to sin on countless occasions, were deserving of Hashem's wrath. Whatever his intentions were, if he was indeed motivated by a desire for truth and justice, there was reason to fear that he just might succeed in "seizing the moment of Hashem's wrath," and bringing curse upon the heads of the Jewish nation.

Bilaam, however, gave his intentions away. "Bilaam answered and said to the servants of Balak: 'Even if Balak were to give me his entire houseful of silver and gold, there is nothing I can do without Hashem's permission!'" There was no pureness in his intentions. No desire for justice or truth. Just his own wealth, and his own honor. And thus, there was no need for concern about the efficacy of his condemnation. If, indeed, it is for your own personal benefit that these men have come, then by all

means, go with them - for one who disguises his personal desires and aspirations in a cloak of altruism and desire for the good of mankind will no doubt fail dismally.

It is said in the name of the Gaon of Vilna that were even one synagogue to be built by builders who worked with only the purest of intentions, with funds that were earned and raised purely for the sake of Heaven, it would be imbued with such sanctity that even one such building would have the power to bring about bi'as haMashiach (the coming of Mashiach). May this time come speedily, in our days.

Have a good Shabbos.

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