

FACING FACTS & AVOIDING DESTRUCTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed. (Bamidbar 22:6)

One of the questions that has to be asked about Bilaam is, "What was he thinking?" From the beginning he knew he was playing with fire and continued to do so anyhow. He spoke to God firsthand. God told him the direction from the start that events were going to go. Why didn't he just back down? Why did he allow himself to self-destruct as he did?

If we're going to ask the question about Bilaam, and people like Korach for that matter, we might as well ask it about ourselves, because we can. Most people watching us objectively in ways that we cannot, will see us do things that will make them ask about us, "What he is he/she thinking?" or, "How can they take such a risk?"

The answer is as old as man himself. When Adam HaRishon ate from the *Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra*—the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—against the expressed will of God, what was he thinking? When Kayin murdered Hevel in cold blood only because of jealousy, even after God had warned him that he was walking down a dangerously wrong path, what had been going through his mind?

Imagine looking at a series of numbers on a page about which you know nothing. You came in, sat down at your desk, and found a piece of paper sitting there, having no idea where it came from or how it got there. After staring at the page for several moments and unsuccessfully making sense of the numbers, you lose interest and put the page aside to deal with issues that are important to you. Within moments you forget all about it.

Some time later, your partner walks in and says, "Did you see a paper with a bunch of numbers on it?" Your first reaction is to say that you did not, having forgotten about the page. Then you realize that he is probably talking about the cryptic page, and reaching for it from the edge of your desk you say, "This? What is it anyhow?"

"The calculation for your yearly bonus," he answers matter-of-factly taking the page from your hand.

"What?" you say with newfound interest. "Wait," you say as he turns to walk out of the room, "can I see that for a moment."

"Sure," he says giving back the page.

Now you look at it very differently, interested piqued. All of a sudden, numbers that didn't make

sense the first time begin to make sense this time. Whereas the first time you barely concentrated, now you are alert and focussed until you barely notice how much time you have put into figuring how much extra money you are going to make this year.

It is one thing to be intellectually involved in something, and something altogether different to be emotionally involved in it. When something is approached from a purely intellectual point of view, it is possible to remain objective. However, the moment personal emotions become involved in a discussion it becomes impossible to avoid being subjective.

The Talmud makes this point when discussing how certain judges used to withdraw themselves from court cases because one of the parties involved did them a favor in advance of the court date. It did not make a difference to them if the delivery boy was merely doing his job as he would for others. The fact that he did it for the judge was enough of a reason to suspect that it might affect his clarity of judgment when the delivery boy's case went to trial.

Recently I received a somewhat negative response to one of my podcasts that I do weekly for Arutz Sheva. Thank God, I do not get very many, and when I do, they tend to be with regard to the same topic and from the same group.

Lately I have been recording sessions from a project I did years ago called, "The Big Picture: Thirty-six Sessions To Intellectual and Spiritual Clarity." It is a flagship presentation of mine based largely on the teachings of Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv, otherwise known as the "Leshem."

The book covers a whole spectrum of topics, including *Kibbutz Golios*, the War of Gog and Magog, and *Yemos HaMoshiach*. The topics in and of themselves are controversial since so little is known about them and they can prompt emotionally charged discussions. This is why I am very careful to stick to mainstream sources and leave personal opinion out of the discussion as much as possible.

Like anyone else, I would love to see a happy ending to Jewish history. Nothing would make me happier than to see God overlook all the assimilation and intermarriage and other unacceptable anti-Torah behavior and redeem us peacefully. I know that just as I can point the finger at fellow Jews for improper behavior, Heaven can do the same to me. I need as much mercy when God will lower the boom on history as the next guy, if not more.

Nevertheless, there are the sources, specifically the ones about the End-of-Days. They are quite threatening and scary. If the Torah's version of redemption when the Jewish people stray from Torah is not convincing, then there are the explicit words of the prophets, such as Yeshaya, Yechezkel, and Zechariah, et al. And lest one think that they only knew about their times, the Talmud echoes their words and updates them for more recent times, including our own.

Maybe events won't play out the way described in these very mainstream sources. Maybe they're only threats to make us do *teshuvah*, and God really has no plans to make good on them. Perhaps there is this amazing miracle waiting in the wings that we don't about yet that will save the day and

us without much more suffering or complication. Perhaps the Holocaust was the last major disaster the Jewish people had to confront in their long and often torturous history.

Perhaps, but perhaps not.

Intellectually it would be reckless and even potentially suicidal to assume that the scary predictions about the End-of-Days cannot come true. They are written, part of a longstanding tradition, and often quoted by great rabbis throughout history. Given how many times such predictions have been fulfilled throughout the course of three millennia of Jewish history, it would be very unwise to take warnings of future disaster lightly and throw caution to the wind.

At least, this has been my philosophy. I would much rather err on the side of caution than on the opposite side. I know that the message is difficult to accept, especially coming after decades of unprecedented peace and prosperity in recent times. I also know that certain recent Torah leaders have said just the opposite and that many of their followers adhere to their words as if they are prophecies. They do not like hearing the opposite, making this discussion an even greater emotional issue for them.

If their predictions did not run contrary to tradition that would be one thing. Or, if other mainstream Torah leaders shared their perspectives that would certainly booster the credibility of such predictions in the eyes of the rest of the Torah world. For the most part this is not the case, and though such followers may have a *mitzvah* of "*Emunas Chachamim*," compelling them to believe their leaders' words. The rest of the nation cannot and should not be chastised for remaining with the sources that are known and widely accepted.

It should be noted though that every individual bears personal responsibility for what he believes and does in the end, even if they are following the words of a Torah leader. When we ask a rabbi what to do in any given situation it is not in order to get "off the hook." If the rabbi errs and we end up sinning, it still counts as a sin, albeit an accidental one. It is still one for which we will have to do *teshuvah* and bring a sacrifice if we happen to be alive when the Temple is rebuilt.

The point of asking a "*shailah*" from a competent *halachic* authority is to limit the possibility of error. It is to fill in the intellectual gaps we may personally have from our own lack of learning. It is not to throw our personal responsibility onto the shoulders of another.

In fact, our own personal *Hashgochah Pratis*—Divine Providence—comes into play when asking our *shailah*. As the *Maharsha* explains in reference to *Gittin* 56b, a Torah leader gets Heavenly help to say or do what he does based upon the merit of the people for whom he is speaking or acting. Since the people of Jerusalem of the Second Temple period, he explains, did not have the merit to be saved, Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai did not ask to save them when Vespasian granted him three requests.

In other words, "*shidduchim*" do not occur only between potential spouses. They also occur between

other types of "pairs," including a person asking a *shailah* and the rav to whom he or she asks it. One's willingness to hear truth plays a major role in one's opportunity to be told it.

There is a story told about Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, one that has probably occurred many times through history with others as well. Someone had come to him with a *shailah*, and after hearing all of the details Rav Moshe gave the person his decision, after which he left and returned home.

On the way home however, the person realized he had left out a very important detail which he was sure would have impacted Rav Moshe's decision. As soon as he returned home (it was before the age of cell phones), he immediately called Rav Moshe and conveyed the missing information.

"That's funny," Rav Moshe said after hearing the missing detail. "The decision I gave to you was suitable for a situation with the information you just added, not without it as when you first presented the case." Apparently Divine Providence had given the person the truthful answer in spite of his own inability to recall all the details at the time he asked his *shailah*.

The same type of idea can be applied to last week's *parshah* as well. Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon HaKohen were denied access to *Eretz Yisroel* after hitting the rock to bring forth water for the thirsty Jewish nation. They had been told to bring from the water by talking to it. Hitting it represented less of a miracle and therefore, less of a sanctification of God's Name.

There is a lot of commentary on this very short yet very catastrophic episode. There are many *midrashim* that explain just exactly what went wrong and how. This is because it seems as if Moshe Rabbeinu had made a mistake he never should have made, begging the question about why and how he did.

The bottom line is that the people were unworthy of the kind of miracle that Moshe Rabbeinu was meant to carry out. Furthermore, they had lost the right to have Moshe Rabbeinu lead them into *Eretz Yisroel*, necessitating his death in the desert. This is something God had predicted all the way back at the end of *Parashas Shemos*, as Rashi explained. All that transpired was just the means to this end.

The bottom line is, the most important thing a person has to want is truth. To be human is to emote, and to emote is to be subjective. Part of being human however is also to live with other people who do not feel as strongly about the things we do. They can afford to be objective for us, just as we can for them when they become emotionally bogged down by their issues.

In response to the original question about Bilaam, "What was he thinking?" the answer is, he wasn't. At least not clearly, allowing his emotions to interfere with his intellectual clarity. Perhaps this was the intention of Balak when he added:

I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed. (Bamidbar 22:6)

This was more than a compliment. It was a challenge, intended to ignite Bilaam's pride so that his

emotions would override his ability to reason. Whatever objectivity Bilaam may have had prior to this he lost it all with this. This began his descent down the slippery slope of misplaced emotions, just as it had for Korach in his time, and for so many others in their time.

We all do this at some time or another for some reason or another. Acknowledging the problem is the first step to solving it. It is only by owning up to our emotional weaknesses that we truly become strong, or at least stronger. Pride, fear, jealousy, etc., have their place in life, but never in place of reason. This is especially so when they run contrary to strong and accepted sources, and as the Three Weeks now upon us are supposed to remind us.

Text

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