

PH.D. IN MORALS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This century, the bloodiest in all of human history, should have lain to rest two of the most cherished theories about mankind that the Enlightenment and Secular Humanism postulated. One was the idea that all moral questions, all issues of right and wrong, good and evil, were subject to being correctly decided on the basis of man's reason alone, without the necessity (better put, without the interference) of divine revelation or organized religion. Man, and man alone, would be the final and autonomous arbiter of morality. This idea brought with it as a necessary corollary, the firm belief that man, left to his own reasoning devices, would invariably choose to do what is right, what promotes life and fairness and the common good. This second idea of man's innate choice of goodness was aided and abetted by an arrogant belief that an educated person was more likely to do good than an illiterate one - that a Ph.D. graduate would be less likely to kill, harm, maim and destroy than a poor, hardscrabble, backwards farmer. But none of these theories have proven true. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Milosevic and the entire slew of other murderers of this century have all given the lie to these fantasies about human morality and rectitude. One-third of all of the commandants of the Nazi death camps held either a Ph.D. or M.D. degree. Man, left to his own reason, will not choose right. Reason, by itself, is death and destruction, oppressive theories and murderous social engineering. No faith, no belief, has led us to the brink of the social abyss of self-destruction.

In a powerful op-ed piece in the New York Times (May 24, 1998), Michael Novak states:... "our present crisis is better described as religious, or at least as moral and religious, rather than simply as moral alone. For the underlying question is deeper than moral. Why are our sentiments about justice so strong? Why do we long for universal unity? Why should we trust reason? Why should we be moral, especially when no one is looking and no one is harmed and no one will ever know?" Our society hungers for a return to self, to a system of eternal values, to a disciplined life-style and to the true liberty of faith, which will free us from the ills of mindless conformity.

Balak and Bilaam, the two main characters in the Torah reading of this week are powerful, respected, intelligent people. Bilaam even possesses the gift of divine intuition and prophecy. But they are both base, evil and immoral people. They are so convinced of their own powers, of their own ability to reason correctly, that they are convinced that they can hoodwink G-d and destroy the Jewish people, all without consequence and hurt to themselves. They exhibit all of the immoral traits of the dark side of human behavior - greed, corruption, jealousy, foul speech and causeless hatred. But their worst trait is arrogance - they know better, they are better, they deserve better. And the People of Israel, and through it, the G-d of Israel and His divine Torah, apparently stands in their way.

So, by denying God and destroying the People of Israel, the world will be somehow improved. We have seen the genocidal plan of Balak and Bilaam take on the flesh of reality in this century as well. We now know how dangerous such people are. But many, especially and inexplicably many Jews, are loath to relinquish the good old theories of the Enlightenment. And that is a truly sad and dangerous error. Jewry needs a healthy dose of realism and should forsake many of the utopian, naive and dangerous beliefs and theories that have characterized our journey in the modern world over the past two centuries. We should never forget that Balak and Bilaam are unfortunately real. But so is our faith and tradition.

Shabat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Text Copyright © 2001 [Rabbi Berel Wein](#) and **Project Genesis, Inc.**
