

USES AND MISUSES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The rabbis of the Talmud compared Bilaam to Moshe. On the surface at least this is a very strange comparison. Bilaam was certainly a master of prose and poetry, as was Moshe. But I do not believe that the rabbis were judging literary abilities in making that statement. Rather I believe they were talking about the potential to teach and influence masses of people, as well as generations yet unborn. Moshe uses that gift granted to him by God to transmit the values of Torah and morality to the Jewish people and through them unto the world. Bilaam uses his gift for unprincipled personal gain and the destruction of others. Bilaam in effect becomes a professional hired gun, willing to curse and destroy innocents because of his own personal wants, hatreds and agenda. Because of this startlingly different treatment of their seemingly similar gift of teaching masses and influencing others, we find Moshe raising himself to becoming the most humble of all human beings, while Bilaam on the other hand, sinks into the morass of self-congratulatory hubris and arrogance. Moshe says; "Compared to the holiness of my mission and message, I am personally insignificant in the scheme of God's world." Bilaam says: "Because of my message of negativity that I can control and inflict on anyone, I am the most important person in the world!" Moshe is a savior of mankind. Bilaam is a tyrant and murderer of humans.

The rabbis of the Talmud, in discussing the phenomenon of almost permanent anti-Semitism, stated; "He who attempts to harm Jews/Israel becomes a rosh - a head or a leader." The simple explanation of this cryptic statement is that being anti-Jewish is a shortcut to rising to leadership in the non-Jewish world. This does not mean that every world leader or national ruler is anti-Semitic. It does however point out the reality that from Haman to Sadaam Hussein, being against the Jews automatically gains one an audience and a platform if not, eventually, actual power. There are plenty of people around today in the world who prove the accuracy of this assessment of the rabbis. However, I would venture to offer an additional insight into this statement of the Talmud. Hatred of Jews (and I believe that unreasoning hatred of anyone) automatically makes one a rosh - a person with a swelled head and a view of one's self that is filled with hubris and arrogance. Bilaam is the paradigm model for this disease of the soul and personality. Bilaam is so confident of his greatness that he convinces himself that he can fool God, so to speak, into allowing him to curse Israel. The man of arrogance, by misusing the divine gifts granted to him, becomes a malevolent and evil person. Using one's gifts for persuasion and not demagoguery, for blessings and not curses, for enhancing G-d's standing, so to speak, in the world and not debasing it, means following in the steps of Moshe. Doing otherwise, dooms one to becoming a follower and disciple of Bilaam.

Shabat Shalom.

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