

HABIT FORMING

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

May my soul die the death of the upright, and my end be like his. Bemidbar 23:10

The onslaught of the Jews was imminent. Balak the King of Moab and his people trembled at the thought of battle with the people of Hashem. He knew that their strength was not with conventional weapons but instead with the power of their mouths. It was prayer and Torah study that made the Jews victorious and so he planned to fight fire with fire. He hired Bilaam the Gentile prophet to come to the scene of battle and curse the sons of Yaakob.

He knew he could not win in hand to hand combat but perhaps he would be victorious in mouth to mouth warfare.

Fortunately, Hashem intervened and the intended curses left the lips of the wicked prophet as blessings. Amongst the praises with which he glorified the Jews was the statement quoted above. Bilaam expressed a desire to die like the pious Jewish people. Our commentators explain that Bilaam was not willing to give up his bestial desires but would have liked to die by being righteous for the minimum amount of time before death. He did not want to live like a Jew but he did want to die like one.

The Talmud in Gittin tells of the conversion of Onkeleos, the nephew of a Roman Emperor. At a loss as to whether or not to proceed with the process of becoming a Jew or remaining a Gentile, he summoned the soul of Bilaam and asked him, "Who are the ones that are important and prestigious in the next world?"

"Yisrael" was the quick reply.

"Should I join them?"

"Don't seek their peace or their good ever!" replied the spirit.

It is quite shocking. A man living in the next world, the world of truth, sees the greatness of our people, and yet advises Onkeleos to hate them. How could he give such poor advice? Rav Hayim Zichik zt'l proposes that the answer lies in the fact that when one passes on to the Olam HaBah, one takes with them self the values and traits one developed here in this world. Bilaam who groomed a real hate for the Jews here could not abandon those negative feelings even when residing in the world of truth.

In his sefer (book) "Kol Dodi", R Shalom Shwardron zt'l points out that many people work on repentance throughout the month of Elul and through the ten days of teshubah and yet return to their sinful habits soon after the High Holy Days pass. He reveals that the nature of a beaver is to walk in a straight line. The beaver is not able to circle past a trap even though the creature's life depends on avoiding a hole in its path. The beaver stands at the edge of the trap - whines a bit - and then moves forward right into the clutches of the hunter's lair.

This may explain the saying of Resh Lakish (Eruvin 19a): "The wicked, even at the doorway of Gehinom (Hell) do not repent!" Stubborn in their ways and restricted by their bad habits they do not improve or repent even when faced with the punishments that await them.

Breaking a habit is one of the most difficult endeavors a man can attempt. We learn from Bilaam that if one does not accomplish self-improvement here on Earth then one takes his or her flaws with oneself to Eternity. Therefore, each of us should resolve to begin a lifelong self-reclamation project. One should commit to small improvements day by day. Everyone should work on the flaws so that one truly dies the death of the righteous and goes to the next world (after a full good life here) ready to enjoy the World of Truth. To die like a Jew, one must live like a Jew.

Shabbat Shalom

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