

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

9 Tamuz, 5768 Vol. 9, No. 10

Parashas Balak

“HOW GOODLY ARE YOUR TENTS, YAAKOV” (BAMIDBAR 24:5)

A SIMPLISTIC READING OF PARASHAS BALAK might give the impression that Bilaam’s attempt to curse the Jewish people was completely foiled by Hashem’s intervention, and once he was rebuked, he tried to act righteously and blessed them wholeheartedly instead. A deeper reading, using the powerful searchlights of our Sages, reveals a different picture.

He was using these very same praises as a method to bring about their downfall

The Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 1:2, see also Rashi on Mishlei 28:23) tells us that while Bilaam was praising B’nei Yisrael, he was using these very same praises as a method to bring about their downfall. “*Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov...*”, Bilaam told the Jews that they were great – their tents were aligned in such a holy manner, modestly arranged to safeguard privacy so that no Jew would be able to look out the door of his tent and into the door of his neighbor. While on the surface this statement seemed to be sincere, our Sages teach us that Bilaam treacherously used this statement to inject the poison of haughtiness into B’nei Yisrael. Bilaam understood that feelings of conceit could bring the Jews to sin, and in fact his plan succeeded, when the Jews fell prey to the entrapment of immorality with the daughters of Moav.

How could praise of the B’nei Yisrael’s *tzniyus* lead to a failing in the exact same area of modesty and morality? One would think that praise of this beautiful *midah* would reinforce their awareness of its importance and cause a greater focus on its observance. Imagine praising someone for their careful and safe driving technique. Would you expect that person to respond to such praise by driving without a seat-belt fastened and by running through red lights and stop signs? How then, could taking pride in their spiritual achievements, especially in matters of modesty, trigger such a terrible downfall of immoral behavior?

Arrogance is a spiritual illness

Arrogance is a spiritual illness that can have drastic and far-reaching effects on one’s *neshama*. Among them, the Orchos Tzaddikim teaches us in Shaar Ha Ga’ava, “And furthermore, *ga’ava* leads to *ta’ava*, because one who is arrogant, his heart is wide and he desires all types of things.” Simply put, an arrogant person has a greater lust and desire. It makes sense logically that feelings of self-importance should increase one’s desire for forbidden activities: “I am great and I deserve to have all my desires fulfilled!” Despite their superior accomplishments in morality and purity, the conceit that Bilaam planted in the hearts of B’nei Yisrael took root, and ignited the fires of desire, immorality and sin.

We can avoid slipping into complacency and conceit by keeping our eyes focused on the goal

It is certainly proper and even important to recognize our own accomplishments as well as those of our family members and students. We all need reinforcement and a feeling of progress to motivate us to strive further. At the same time, let us beware of the dangers of arrogance. Pride, even from positive achievements, can lead to heinous sins if not kept in the proper perspective. As we walk the tightrope of life, we can avoid slipping into complacency and conceit by keeping our eyes focused on the goal, on how much more we have to accomplish. True, we must acknowledge our progress and be grateful to Hashem for helping us succeed thus far, but we must also feel the continued responsibility to go further and use the gifts He has granted us to achieve higher levels of perfection. May we protect ourselves and our families from negative influences, from messages of arrogance and self-indulgence, and may we nurture and cultivate feelings of humility, self-control and constant spiritual growth.