

“HE WHO POSSESSES THESE THREE QUALITIES: AN EVIL EYE, A HAUGHTY SOUL, AND AN INSATIABLE SPIRIT – IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF BILAAM THE WICKED.” (AVOS 5:19)

He would never have suggested it

THIS MISHNA LISTS three negative character traits manifested by the wicked Bilaam, and teaches us that anyone who exhibits these qualities is considered a disciple of Bilaam. An evil eye, the Rambam explains, refers to the desire for monetary riches; an insatiable spirit refers to a craving for immoral acts. The Rambam goes on to point out that it was only Bilaam's overwhelming desire for immorality that enabled him to suggest his lewd plan to Balak: have the Moabite women debase themselves with flagrant promiscuity, and thereby entice the *B'nei Yisrael* to sin. Had Bilaam not been immersed in the filth of immorality, testifies the Rambam, he would never have suggested it, because the activities, advice and plans of a person reflect his nature and his attitudes.

Bilaam would suggest any workable plan that would get the job done!

As the words of the Mishna emphatically state, Bilaam was a haughty, arrogant and incredibly wicked individual. In his obsessive pursuit of money, he was willing to curse *B'nei Yisrael*, attempting to destroy the entire nation – men, women and children – perhaps the first recorded effort at genocide. He was not above trying any dirty trick that he could think of – and he was a very wise man who knew many dirty tricks. Why does the Rambam insist that Bilaam's degenerate strategy was only due to his own immoral desires? Couldn't any creative and intelligent evildoer devise such a lustful plan? Bilaam would suggest any workable plan that would get the job done (and fill his coffers)!

The Rambam is revealing to us the refined and noble nature of every human being. The natural state of any person, Jew or non-Jew, good or evil, is that of *tznius* and modesty. No one, even a person as wicked, arrogant and greedy as Bilaam, would suggest such immoral concepts, unless he had corrupted his natural state. The most money-hungry, malicious and genocidal criminal would not be able to cross this red line of basic human decency, because his natural state of purity would rebuff any salacious ideas, regardless of fame and fortune to gain. Only a breakdown of personal standards, a self-destruction of one's higher moral compass through one's own licentious behavior, can allow someone to promote a perverted plan such as Bilaam's.

The Rambam reminds us that our natural state is to be pure and holy

In the society we live in, much of the media and commercial world has sunk to depths of depravity, where modesty is trampled upon and refinement is discarded as being archaic and old fashioned. Movies, newspapers, magazines, billboards, the Internet and even the circulars in our mailboxes spew forth images and values of an immoral culture dictated by Hollywood and Paris. Like a breath of clean air in a polluted atmosphere, the Rambam reminds us that our natural state is to be pure and holy; what society calls “normal” is in a reality a result of the inner moral breakdown of the individuals involved. Had they not degraded their personal modesty, they would never have been able to suggest their lewd concepts. Let us focus on the greatness within us, on the true beauty of *tznius* and refined behavior, and not succumb to the onslaught of our surrounding culture. Our restraint, modesty and self-control over our desires will reflect the hallmarks of a descendant of our forefather Avraham and the nobility of the Jewish people.