



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת בלק תשס"ח • Parshas Balak 5768

WHO IS YOUR MENTOR

BACK TO SCHOOL

Imagine that you were taking a test, and one of the questions read as follows:

“Question # 1: Describe Avraham Avinu.”

“Great! This is simple!” you might respond. “Avraham Avinu? He was the father of the Jewish people; he recognized Hashem and taught others to believe in Him; and he was a tremendous *tzaddik*, excelling especially in the field of *chessed*.”

“Question #2: Characterize Bilam *Harasha*.”

“Bilam *Harasha*? This test is a breeze! Bilam was just that: one of the biggest *reshaim* ever to walk the planet! Public enemy #1 of the Jewish people! Not to mention the fact that, in general, he was a real *mushchas* (debased lowlife).”

Let’s turn to the Mishnah in Avos (5:19) to see how we did. The Mishnah states:

כָּל מִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ בְּיָדוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הֶלְלוּ, מִתְלַמְּדוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אַבִּינוֹ. וְשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים אַחֲרָיִם, מִתְלַמְּדוֹ שֶׁל בְּלָעַם הַרְשָׁע. עֵינַי טוֹבָה, וְרוּחַ נְמוּכָה, וְנִפְשׁ שְׂפָלָה, מִתְלַמְּדוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אַבִּינוֹ. עֵינַי רָעָה, וְרוּחַ גְּבוּהָה, וְנִפְשׁ רְחֵבָה, מִתְלַמְּדוֹ שֶׁל בְּלָעַם הַרְשָׁע.

“Whoever possesses three particular qualities is considered to be a ‘disciple’ of Avraham Avinu; if one possesses three different ones, however, he is considered a ‘disciple’ of the wicked Bilam. A ‘good’ (satisfied, content) eye, a humble spirit, and moderation, are all trademarks of the disciples of Avraham Avinu. A greedy eye, a haughty spirit, and an indulgent nature, are trademarks of Bilam *Harasha*’s disciples.”

From the Mishnah it appears that we didn’t do so well. When describing the characteristics of Avraham, the Mishnah didn’t mention anything explicitly about faith or kindness; similarly, when describing Bilam, the focus was on certain traits, as opposed to the general vileness for which Bilam was notorious.

However, the Mishnah itself seems to beg explanation. Why *did* it veer away from the more obvious choices we mentioned above, and instead choose to dwell on these seemingly lesser-known attributes of these famous figures?

For that matter, the Mishnah’s choice of personalities is also somewhat perplexing. If this is a study in contrasts, why not choose a pair that at least were players in the same scene, such as Moshe and Pharaoh, or Mordechai and Haman. What do Avraham and Bilam have to do with each other?

Finally, what is all of this talk of ‘disciples’? Did Bilam have a *yeshivah* of some sort? *What is this Mishnah trying to tell us?*

TRIAL AND ERROR

The Vilna Gaon (*Aderes Eliyahu, Parshas Balak—2nd edition, 22:30*) reveals that actually, a stunning parallel exists between these two personalities: Bilam was tested with ten trials, just as Avraham Avinu was. Avraham’s tests are well known; he was instructed to leave his home, to sacrifice his son, etc. The Gaon lists Bilam’s trials. They include: Hashem’s initial refusal to permit Bilam to accompany Balak’s officers, the attempt by the angel to disrupt Bilam’s journey to Moav, and many others. Avraham passed all of his trials, while Bilam failed his.

לדין בנימין ב"ר ברוך שלום הי"ד

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of אברהם בן יצחק ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his Neshamah.

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By studying the nature of these different sets of trials, the opposing results seem even more astounding. R' Isaac Sher (*Leket Sichos Mussar, vol. 1, beginning of Parshas Balak*) spells out the difference: Passing Avraham's tests was a real accomplishment, since Hashem tested Avraham with difficult and trying circumstances. If a lesser individual were told to sacrifice his beloved son, his faith might be shaken; yet Avraham remained loyal. Through his perseverance, Avraham demonstrated to what extent he was willing to overcome his natural tendencies in order to fulfill Hashem's will. In so doing, he rose to greatness and received abundant reward.

Bilam's trials, on the other hand, were of a much different nature. Hashem was actually trying to help Bilam be able to serve Him more easily! When Bilam tried to flout Hashem's Will, He placed obstacles in his path to prevent him from sinning. For this reason, He sent the angel to block his way, and even tried to shock Bilam into compliance by having his donkey start giving him *mussar*! Stopping just short of removing Bilam's free will, Hashem made it virtually impossible for him to make the wrong choices. Despite all of the assistance, Bilam still failed. Like Avraham, he overcame his natural reactions to the circumstances; unlike Avraham, however – who overcame the temptation to fail – Bilam overcame the desire to do the right thing!

IT ALL STARTS FROM HERE

The Mishnah's purpose should now be much clearer: it was citing an example of two pivotal figures, each of whom was subjected to a series of trials. The opposite results in each instance teach us a vital lesson, as R' Yeruchem Olshin explains:

Of course, everyone knows that Avraham was a great and kind *tzaddik*, and Bilam a horrible *rasha*. The Mishnah is not speaking of the end product of what each one became, but *how they arrived there*.

That is why the Mishnah chose to speak of these specific things: *middos*. *Middos* are the key to one's growth. Avraham became the pillar of faith and good deeds in the world; but his massive spiritual achievements were grounded in and resulted from basic *middos tovos*. Rooted from the beginning on a straight path, he was able to withstand the most difficult challenges and grow ever higher. Bilam, on the other hand, was rooted in base *middos*, which he never bothered to change or improve. As a result, he was set from the start to spiral continually downward.

The message of the Mishnah is clear. One wishing to emulate Avraham – to be one of his 'disciples' – should begin first and foremost to learn from his *middos*. Otherwise, instead of becoming a follower of Avraham, he may find himself counted amongst the 'disciples' of Bilam.

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