

Parashat Balak, 5773, 2013:

Dare to Be Like Avraham

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

In a well-known Mishnaic statement found in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:19, *Chazal* (our Sages) compare Avraham, the embodiment of purity of soul, to the evil prophet Bilam, the main protagonist of our *parasha*:

Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our father Abraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a gross soul. What is the difference between the disciples of our father Abraham and the disciples of the wicked Balaam? The disciples of our father Abraham benefit in this world and inherit the World To Come, and as is stated, “To bequeath to those who love Me there is, and their treasures I shall fill” (Proverbs 8:21). The disciples of the wicked Balaam inherit purgatory and descend into the pit of destruction, as is stated, “And You, G-d, shall cast them into the pit of destruction; bloody and deceitful men, they shall not attain half their days. And I shall trust in You” (ibid., 55:24).

(Translation, <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=2099> with my emendations.)

Allow me to clarify the essential points of comparison between Avraham and Bilam, as presented in the Mishnah:

- Avraham’s disciples have “a good eye” (Hebrew, “*ayin tovah*”). In contrast, Bilam’s students have “an evil eye.”
- Avraham’s students have a “meek spirit,” whereas Bilam’s followers have a “haughty spirit.”
- Avraham’s followers have a “humble soul,” while Bilam’s disciples have a “gross soul.”

The following discussion focuses upon the analysis of one of the stellar characteristics of *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Abraham), namely, *ayin tovah*.

Rabbeinu Ovadiah Bartenura (1450-1516), known as “the Rav” and “the Bartenura,” explains “a good eye” as referring to someone who is satisfied with what he has. Such an individual does not desire other people’s money or possessions. The Bartenura suggests that this *middah* (ethical characteristic) was clearly demonstrated by Avraham in *Sefer Bereishit* 14: 21-24, when he refused to accept any monetary payment from the King of S’dom. Note that this entire interchange took place prior to our role model’s name change from “Avram” to its complete form of “Avraham”:

The king of Sodom said to Abram, ‘Give me the people. You can keep the goods.’ Abram replied to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand [in an oath] to G-d Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth! Not a thread nor a shoelace! I will not take anything that is yours! You should not be able to say, ‘It was I who made Abram rich.’ The only exception is what the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them take their share.” (This, and all Torah translations, *The Living Torah*, by Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*.)

A different approach to the concept of “a good eye” was offered by Rabbeinu Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550-1619, known as the “Kli Yakar” after the name of his commentary on the Torah), in his glosses on *Sefer Bereishit* 24:22. Let us briefly examine the background verses found in 24:17-21:

The servant [i.e. Eliezer] ran toward her. “If you would, let me sip a little water from your jug,” he said. “Drink, Sir,” she replied. She quickly lowered her jug to her hand and gave him a drink. When he had finished drinking, she said, “Let me draw water for your camels, so they can [also] drink their fill.” She quickly emptied her jug into the trough and ran to the well again to draw water. She drew water for all his camels. The man stood there gaping at her. But he remained silent, waiting to determine for certain whether or not G-d had made his journey successful.

In his commentary, the Kli Yakar intimates that Eliezer had witnessed Avraham’s *chane*, *v’chesed*, *v’rachamim* (grace, kindness, and mercy) on a first-hand basis. Therefore, he knew that the most important *middah* that a potential wife for his master’s son, Yitzhak, could possibly possess was that of *gemilut chasadim* (loving kindness). When coupled

with *ayin tovah*, such a woman would be the worthy successor to *Sarah Emanu* (our Mother Sarah). Hence, the Kli Yakar asserts that these qualities alone became the litmus test by which Rivka was tested:

Based on all of this, Eliezer did not examine Rivka's character except in regard to whether or not she had an *ayin tovah* and if she was a *gomelet chasadim*. Therefore he said: "I will not ask anything of her other than to give me water to drink. If, however, she responds and says: 'Drink and I shall also provide water for your camels,' then I will know without a doubt that she is a practitioner of loving kindness, since she will give me more than that which I will ask." (Translation and underlining my own)

Within the purview of Rav Luntschitz's thought, *ayin tovah* emerges as the desire to do more for someone than what has actually been requested. It is, in a word, consummate kindness and ultimate compassion.

Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), in his monumental commentary on the Torah entitled, "*Torah Temimah*," focused upon the holistic nature of *ayin tovah* in his commentary on the first chapter of *Shir HaShirim*:

And the general interpretation of this matter is a metaphor for the innermost ethical characteristics of an individual. If his "eyes are good," which means he has a positive valence in regard to all of man's *middot*, then we can readily hope that he is in the category of one who has perfected his Torah and his *ma'asim tovim* (positive behaviors) in the manner in which he comports himself in the world at large. As it is written: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk discreetly with your G-d." (*Sefer Michah* 6:8, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) – This should be interpreted as fulfilling G-d's commandments as they pertain to Him, and to one's fellow man.

Thus, for Rav Epstein, conscious and active development of an *ayin tovah* is the best way to fulfill the Torah's dictum, "And you shall do what is proper and good in the eyes of Hashem..." (*Sefer Devarim* 6:18). This is especially apropos since the Torah, itself, employs the anthropomorphism of "the eyes of Hashem." In other words, when we have an *ayin tovah*, we are ultimately modeling ourselves after our Creator.

Regardless as to whether we follow the approach of the Bartenura, the Kli Yakar, or the Torah Temimah, our task is clear: We must ever follow Avraham's beacon of light amid the darkness and confusion of our world, and emulate his *ayin tovah*. May the Master of the Universe, and the Guardian of Israel, grant us the wisdom to walk in Avraham's ways and be his true disciples. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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