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The Evil That Men Do Lives After Them

The twists and turns that befell our people during those burning, dusty years in the desert were partly due to the finagling of crafty, scheming individuals who primarily looked after their own pernicious interests. Last week, we had issues with Korach and his cohorts; this week, we are embroiled with Bilaam.

Can these two individuals be compared? For Korach's conniving arose from long-standing bitterness, from a feeling of being discriminated against by Moshe and Aharon, whom he accused of nepotism. On the surface, Korach was aristocratic, wealthy, and wise, with much leadership potential; he grew up in the ranks.

Bilaam, a descendent of the wicked Lavan, came from Aram (Midrash); he had limited powers of sorcery but had, nevertheless, predicted the rise of Balak, the ruler of Moav (Rashi). But perhaps of greater import, Bilaam appears to be an agent designated by Hashem to acquiesce to the bidding of the Moabite king, now petrified of the mighty Jewish army approaching his border.

In truth, Balak's bidding to Bilaam was

that he should curse the Jews sufficiently to scare them off his borders. But, if we follow events carefully, Bilaam intended to destroy an entire people.

Korach and Bilaam were both highly skilled manipulators. However, while Korach employed brainpower, Bilaam used necromancy, along with a bag of tricks and pagan rites.

Nevertheless, Bilaam's journey exhibited a strange, ambiguous relationship with the Almighty. While Moshe implored Korach (unsuccessfully) to come to his senses, it appears that Hashem let Bilaam follow his greedy, malevolent path even as the enchanter's attempts to curse the people inevitably turned to blessings (cf. Bemidbar 22:20).

On the other hand – as with the episode of Bilaam's talking she-ass and the “invisible” angel – Hashem would impede and discredit the false prophet.

But akin to Korach, the gathering momentum moved the foreign agitator along at its own forceful and fateful rate, mustering steam along the way to disaster. Bilaam's irrational hatred of the Jews rushes him blindly, even to the point of his “rising early and saddling his donkey” in pursuit of his evil designs (ibid, v. 21). Furthermore, following each “failure” to deliver a curse, Bilaam politely and agilely dismisses Balak's rantings by twisting things around and blithely passing the blame on to God.

As with Pharaoh, blind hate and denial of Hashem's prowess appear to drive one to that critical point when the heart is hardened, and "*Hester Panim*" takes over. Then, evil predominates at its own pace. Indeed, when all was said and done, Bilaam achieved his goal of undermining the spiritual level of the people. He induced the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Jewish menfolk, thus becoming attached to Baal Peor.

Hate, greed, power, and personal ambition fester insurrection and falsehood. So, while they sing our praises, let us be wary of those who flatter us. Let us be on the watch for that guile that attacks our Achilles heel. And let us pray to Hashem for our ultimate salvation. ■

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