



## REBBETZIN SHIRA SMILES

FACULTY, OU ISRAEL CENTER

# Meticulous Middot

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (*Avot* 5:22) teaches us that there are two primary approaches to life, those that follow the virtues of Avraham Avinu and those that align themselves with the unsavory character of *Bilam Harasha*. To be a disciple of Avraham Avinu is to possess three principal values: a good eye, a humble mind, and an undemanding soul. A disciple of *Bilam Harasha* exhibits the opposite: an evil eye, a haughty mind, and a demanding soul. The Mishnah then asks, what is the difference between these two? The Mishnah answers, the students of Avraham Avinu enjoy goodness in this world and inherit the eternal world, Bilam's students descend into the abyss for eternity. Is this the only difference? Does there exist a continuum between the two extreme positions?

Let us see how we can apply the lessons of the Mishnah on a personal level.

In *Matnat Chaim*, Rav Matityahu Salomon discusses the frightening implications of this Mishnah. One can be involved in learning Torah and doing acts of chessed yet possess the character traits of Bilam. It is not enough to possess wisdom and follow the dictates of Torah law. One must do the internal work to achieve an integrated, balanced character guided by Torah values. Thus, we can understand how the second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because of baseless hatred even though the people at that time were learned in Torah and engaged in kind deeds. One can open a gemach, a free loan enterprise, but look uncharitably upon others who open a similar gemach in the same neighborhood! The Mishnah's question highlights the challenge of discerning one's character by looking at their outward presentation.

Bilam is the archetype of one who possesses wisdom but has not worked on refining his character. Such a person is capable of destroying an entire nation, literally or figuratively, for the sake of money or prestige. As a modern example, we have witnessed how the Germans, who prided themselves on intellectualism and culture, could act so barbarically and commit unthinkable atrocities.

Rav Shlomo Heiman *zt"l* explains that the Mishnah is sharing a significant insight into Avraham Avinu's success in drawing so many people to believe in Hashem in a generation full of idolatry. The refinement

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of one's middot allows him to clearly see Hashem's Presence in this world. Conversely, Bilam lived in a generation where Hashem's Presence was obviously perceived, even to the nations of the world, and yet, his malice, arrogance and insatiable greed did not allow him to recognize Hashem's supremacy.

The time period between 17 Tammuz and 9 Av, notes the *Netivot Shalom*, is like the black background to bring the period of Elul and the High Holy Days into focus. It provides us with a perspective to prepare once again to make a yearly accounting. We cannot be satisfied with superficial improvement, rather, we must ensure to align ourselves with the ethics of Avraham Avinu – a good eye, a humble mind and an undemanding soul. ■

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