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## Bil'am's Trap

**Bil'am's method of initiating the Israelites' downfall** was to ruin the link between the Almighty and His Chosen People. He attempted to do this twice:

1. By planning to curse Israel. That first time he was unsuccessful, because, "G-d did not wish to listen to Bil'am, but because (He) loved you, He turned the curses into blessings" (Devarim. 23:6).
2. By making it possible for Israel to sin through idol worship and sexual immorality in the incident of Baal Peor. After Bil'am had to face Balak's wrath for his failure to curse the Israelites for the third time, he said to Balak, "Come, let me advise you...". The Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) brings the tradition that the advice was to incite the Israelites to take part in prostitution with the eligible ladies of his kingdom: "Their god hates sexual immorality." The 'passport' to a Moabite woman was participating in the worship of Baal Peor (a particularly obnoxious procedure detailed in the Midrash: Sifre 131). Thus the second time Bil'am did succeed in ruining the links between G-d and the Israelites: the twenty-four thousand Israelites died by plague in consequence of the sin of Baal Peor.

In his unsuccessful efforts to undermine Israel by cursing them, the Torah mentions

Bil'am's name over and over again. In his successful efforts to undermine Israel through initiating the sin of Baal Peor, his name is not mentioned even once in the main account. Only much later on, in a different context, does the Torah explicitly connect Bil'am with Baal Peor: Moshe said to his military officers, "Did you indeed let every female live? Behold! – They caused Israelites to commit treachery against G-d, by the word of Bil'am, in the matter of Baal Peor, and the plague occurred..." (31:15-16)

**Why therefore does Bil'am's connection with Baal Peor not appear in the main account?**

The Rashbam suggests that the connection actually does occur in Bil'am's final words to Balak where he gives him a piece of advice without elaborating on what the advice was: "Let me advise you..." (24:13) That advice, the Rashbam says, was given in whisper; 'not for publication at this stage'. His sage insight passed on the information that if you want to get the Israelites into G-d's disfavour, don't waste their time trying to curse them, but tempt them with idolatry and forbidden sexual relations.

Perhaps one reason that the advice was not explicit is to teach the following. As long as people are aspiring and doing their best to act correctly, they should trust that G-d is behind them. The second generation of Israelites in the desert had not been involved with the downfalls of the Golden Calf and Spies. Enemies appeared here and there,

openly and behind the scenes. Bil'am was the latter: he worked entirely without the Israelites knowledge at the time. His agenda was not the success of Moab, but the fall of Israel. He did his best, but G-d frustrated him.

But once a person or for that matter a community acts in a way that negates positive values, such as *avoda zara* and *gilui arayot*, they do not need an outsider to undermine them. They are the ones who do the undermining for themselves. Bil'am opened the door, but the offending Israelites walked through it. They didn't have to. But they did. With the consequence of 24, 000 dead (25:9).

The situation may be compared to an owner of a jewellery shop that goes home for the night and leaves the business unlocked. Thieves enter in the middle of

the night and take out the pearls, diamonds, and rubies. When arrested and on trial, the thieves cannot excuse themselves with "it wasn't us: the owner did not lock the door". Of course it was them. Leaving the door open does not alter the fact that the people entered and stole the valuable jewellery.

Bil'am is like the owner of the shop, and the B'nei Yisrael were the thieves. As the Israelites fell for the temptation of Baal Peor, they could not blame Bil'am for giving in to their own temptations.

And that is the message of Bil'am's absence from the last section of the Parasha. It teaches us that as long as we are positively true to our roots, we should not worry about what others think of us. But once we abandon our principles we can weaken and even destroy ourselves. We ourselves are to blame; we cannot put the blame on others. ■

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