



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Who Was Your Teacher?”

Except for the saints among us, we all boast. Sometimes we boast about our own natural endowments, our good looks, or our athletic prowess. Often we boast about our achievements, social or professional.

There is one type of boasting that seems to be unique to the traditional Jewish community. That is a boasting not about oneself, but rather about one’s teachers, or *rebbeim*. Thus, you will find young people saying, “My *rebbe* is greater than yours!” Or, “I am a student of so-and-so, so you better respect me for that!”

For some of us, it sounds strange that a person would claim religious or intellectual superiority on the basis of the identity of his teacher. After all, the piety or wisdom of a teacher does not necessarily filter down to the disciple. Nevertheless, boasting about the greatness of one’s master is fairly common in some of our circles.

My paternal grandfather, Reb Chaim Yitzchak Weinreb of blessed memory, was particularly perturbed about this phenomenon. As loyal readers of this column know, my *zaide* taught me many things. One lesson which he repeatedly emphasized was the importance of not falling prey to the

tendency of boasting about whose student one was. He felt it was much more important to be able to claim that one was actually walking in the footsteps of the master, behaviorally emulating his virtues and accomplishments.

One of the prooftexts which he adduced to help drive this lesson home was a passage in the fifth chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, *Ethics of the Fathers*, which reads:

“Whoever possesses these three traits is one of the disciples of our father Abraham; whoever possesses the three opposite traits is one of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. A generous eye, a modest demeanor and a humble soul are the traits of the disciples of our father Abraham. An evil eye, an arrogant demeanor and an insatiable soul are attributes of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. What is the difference between our father Abraham’s disciples and those of the wicked Balaam? Our father Abraham’s disciples enjoy this world and inherit the world to come...The wicked Balaam’s disciples inherit *Gehinnom* and go down to the pit of destruction...”

My grandfather would expound upon the above text by saying: “Imagine that a person studied for years under some great Chassidic Rebbe, dressed like him, and imitated his every gesture. Or imagine the student who attended the lectures of some great *yeshiva* head and could actually repeat every word verbatim. But if that person or student was guilty of envy, of arrogance, or of selfishness, he would be categorized by our Sages not as

a disciple of the great Rebbe or Talmudist, but as the disciple of the wicked Balaam.”

He would continue to drive home his point by stressing the flip side of the teaching of *Pirkei Avot*: “On the other hand, imagine the person to whom circumstances denied the privilege of spending time with a great Chassidic Rebbe or the chance to study under the tutelage of a Talmudic giant. But if that person was generous, modest and humble, he could lay claim to the title ‘disciple of our father Abraham’.”

Balaam is the main character in this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Balak* (*Numbers* 22:2-25:9). There is much to be gained from a careful study of Balaam’s behavior. One major lesson is that a person can be wise and famous, internationally renowned, and endowed with mystical powers and the gift of prophecy, yet be done in by the flaws of his personal character.

I no longer remember whether or not I asked my grandfather the question that occurred to me long ago about this passage in *Pirkei Avot*. I remain puzzled by why our Sages choose not to compare Balaam with his contemporary and adversary Moses. Why do they instead choose to contrast him with Abraham, who lived centuries before Balaam?

I have come to believe that our Sages had good reason for preferring the Balaam/Abraham comparison. I suggest that our rabbis were fascinated by the many similarities between the two. They were both prophets, but prophets whose missions were not confined to the Jewish people. Balaam was designated as a prophet for all the nations of the world, and Abraham, although the biological father of the Jewish people, was also the *av hamon goyim*, the spiritual father of

all of humanity.

Both Abraham and Balaam shared the unusual power of being able to bless others effectively. Of Abraham, it is written, “I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” (*Genesis* 12:2-3) And Balak, king of Moab, is sufficiently confident of Balaam’s abilities to say, “For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.” (*Numbers* 22:6)

Furthermore, both Abraham and Balaam set off on long journeys, one to the binding of Isaac, and the other to nefariously undermine the people of Israel. Both wake up in the early morning to load their donkeys in preparation of their journeys. And each of them is accompanied upon his journey by two young servants.

The message seems clear. Two individuals who are similar to each other in so many ways can ultimately be so different that one’s disciples “inherit the World to Come,” whereas the disciples of the other “inherit *Gehinom* and go down to the pit of destruction.”

One fails to properly use his Divinely given blessings and, because of his “evil eye, arrogant demeanor and insatiable soul,” becomes the archetype of perversion and treachery.

The other cultivates “a generous eye, a modest demeanor and a humble soul” with such success that those of us who emulate him, even if we live millennia after his death, can lay claim to being his disciples.

The next time someone asks you, “Under whom did you study? Whose disciple are you,” I hope that you can say that you are at least striving to become a disciple of Abraham. ■