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The Pirkei Avot (5:22) contrasts the virtues of Abraham with the vices of Bil'am: Whoever possesses these three qualities is a disciple of our father Abraham—a generous eye, a humble spirit and a meek soul; but one who possesses the opposite qualities—a grudging eye, a proud spirit and a haughty soul—is a disciple of the wicked Bil'am.

Why did the author of this passage specifically choose to contrast Abraham and Bil'am? The Torah is replete with examples of virtuous people, and also has no shortage of wicked characters. What is so unique about Abraham and Bil'am that makes them paradigms for good and evil?

Perhaps the answer is to be found in how each of them dealt with an external group of people with whom they had no particular connection.

The people of Sodom were wicked, and the Almighty planned to destroy the city. Abraham sought the Lord's mercy, pleading that the city should be spared if at least ten righteous people could be found within it. Abraham might simply have prayed for the salvation of his nephew Lot and family. Why did he intercede on behalf of strangers—especially when God had informed him that the Sodomites were worthy of destruction due to their sinfulness? Abraham had "a generous eye," he was concerned for the wellbeing of others--even strangers, even sinners.

Bil'am was hired by the king Balak to curse the Israelites. It was believed that Bil'am had supernatural power, so that his curses would be effective in destroying the children of Israel. Bil'am had no reason to hate Israel or to curse Israel. Yet, he was willing to use his powers against Israel; God intervened and made him utter blessings rather than curses. Bil'am had a "grudging eye." Unlike Abraham who prayed on behalf of Sodom, Bil'am was ready to curse a people who had done him no wrong and with whom he had no particular connection.

It is natural for people to be concerned about their own families, communities and in-groups. It is more of a challenge to be concerned about "outsiders," those of different backgrounds, nations, ethnicities. Disciples of Abraham demonstrate "a generous eye," an attitude that recognizes the essential humanity of all people and that feels responsibility for others, including "outsiders." Disciples of Bil'am demonstrate "a grudging eye," an attitude that feels no obligation to "outsiders," that is neutral or negative about the rights and feelings of others. Whereas

Abraham prayed for a wicked people, Bil’am stood ready to curse an innocent people.

The paradigms of Abraham and Bil’am continue to be relevant to us in our own time. Many millions of people live in poverty, in war zones, in lands of oppression. Hundreds of thousands of them flee their homelands in search of a better environment for themselves and their families. Their favored destinations are lands of freedom and economic opportunity. Yet even in these free and relatively wealthy countries, economic conditions are not ideal. The new immigrants—many of whom arrive illegally—create heavy burdens on the host countries, which are themselves struggling with economic problems of their own.

How do we view these “outsiders?” Do we have “a generous eye” like our father Abraham; or “a grudging eye” like the wicked Bil’am? Do we stop to remember that in recent generations, so many of our own parents and grandparents were refugees seeking safe havens—and who often confronted more Bil’ams than Abrahams during their times of danger and distress?

Surely, it can be argued that each country has limited resources and has the right to secure its borders from illegal immigrants. Surely, no country can allow itself to be inundated by waves of people who do not follow the proper legal channels for immigration.

But when policies are made and opinions are espoused, we need to step back and ask ourselves: are we disciples of Abraham or disciples of Bil’am? While even disciples of Abraham will have limits to how much they can do to help others, they will at least be approaching the issue with a humane and compassionate attitude. They will reach for their maximum, not settle for the bare minimum.

They will think and act with a generous eye, not with a grudging eye.

Angel for Shabbat