

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Balak

Are Entitlement Expectations in Relationships a Trait Inherited from Bilam?

How Does Letting Go of Expectations Help Keep Us Content?

Our unrealistic expectations cause frustration and disappointment. We make our lives miserable with any expectations we have of people, situations, and what we feel entitled to receive. With this kind of attitude, we can G-d forbid easily become addicted to material goods and expressions of appreciation. If I expect a sweet thank you phone call in return for spending time selecting a special birthday gift for my granddaughter, I could get upset if she only writes me a short thank you message. So, I have learned, that to keep myself happy I must stop expecting anything. If I didn't expect any expression of gratitude, I would be so grateful for a short thank you message even without any emoji. Over the years in my interactions with my students, I have noticed the difference between those who make demands and those who make humble requests, whether for getting their doorknob fixed, receiving more respect from fellow students, changing their tutor or study partner, or for a change in B'erot lunch menu. Beneath the demands are the disappointed expectations of a self-important person who feels entitled to be treated like a princess. Yet the exact same wants can be expressed completely differently when they derive from the humility of accepting that it may not work out to fill all their needs at a given time. "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" isn't limited to its superficial meaning that you can win people to your side more easily by gentle persuasion than by hostile confrontation. In my experience, I'm naturally much more prone to extend myself to do everything in my power to fulfill a humble request rather than an entitled demand. Whereas I'm repelled when people relate to me as a servant created to fulfill their needs, I will even anticipate, serve, and accommodate the unexpressed needs of others. Being the director of a midrasha with students from the four corners of the world, I have learned to appreciate the differences between some of those who emerge from the Western culture influenced by the greedy Esav always wanting more, and students from the East especially from India, who come from a very humble and respectful culture. Yet we Jews returning to Israel - to our ancestors' spiritual heritage - are learning to return to the character traits of a good eye, humility, and modest desires that Avraham our Father possessed.

What is the Difference between Spirituality and Holiness?

I often speak about the difference between spirituality and holiness. Whereas a person can be very spiritual but rotten to the core, holiness is G-dliness, and can only emerge from the light of a person with a refined character. Although Bilam was known as a uniquely spiritual person highly attuned to G-d's will, his spirituality was drawn from the depths of *tumah* (impurity). In contrast, the spiritual greatness of Moshe and Avraham was enveloped in the highest realms of *kedusha* - sanctity. Holiness is *ohr* - the pure refraction of Hashem's light that requires a suitable vessel - a receptacle of sterling character traits that match the light it needs to contain. Spirituality is at great risk of falling to a place of *tumah* and darkness without such a vessel to hold the light. Bilam is the perfect example of a spiritual person lacking holiness. Whereas Avraham was generous, humble, and modest, Bilam was self-centered, arrogant, and driven by money and all it could buy.

פרקי אבות פרק ה פסוק יט כל מי שיש בידו שלשה דברים הללו, מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו. ושלשה דברים אחרים, מתלמידיו של בלעם הרשע. עין טובה, ורוח נמוכה, ונפש שפלה, מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו. עין רעה, ורוח גבוהה, ונפש רחבה, מתלמידיו של בלעם הרשע:

Whoever possesses these three things, he is of the disciples of Avraham, our father; and [whoever possesses] three other things, he is of the disciples of Bilam, the wicked. A good eye, a humble spirit, and modest desires are the traits of the disciples of Avraham, our father. An evil eye, a haughty spirit, and unbridled desires are the traits of the disciples of the wicked Bilam (*Pirkei Avot* 5:19).

How Do the Rabbis Learn of Bilam's Trifold Negative Character Traits?

Firstly, Bilam's mission – for which he is hired – was to curse the Jewish people, by casting an evil eye upon them. He was suitable for this job since he was an expert at bringing attention to the negative points of others. Being a master of the evil eye, his magic was to highlight the dark points of others, thus claiming that they didn't deserve their blessings. Bilam also displayed his money greed – to which he felt entitled – by demanding a greater salary for his shady job:

ספר במדבר פרק כב פסוק יח ויען בלעם ויאמר אל עבדי בלק אם יתן לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב לא אוכל לעבר את פי השם אלהי לעשות קטנה או גדולה:

“Bilam answered and said to Balak's servants, ‘Even if Balak gives me a house full of silver and gold, I cannot do anything small or great that would transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d’” (*Bamidbar* 22:18).

Rashi explains that by mentioning A HOUSE FULL OF SILVER AND GOLD - Bilam exposed how he was greedy and coveted other people's money. He said, “He ought to give me all his silver and gold, since he has to hire many armies, and even then, it is questionable whether he will be victorious or not, whereas I will certainly succeed.”- [*Midrash Tanchuma Balak; Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:10]; (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:18). Moreover, Bilam wasn't embarrassed to display his arrogance and honor-seeking when he twisted the reason why Hashem told him not to go with Balak's entourage to curse Israel:

ספר במדבר פרק כב פסוק יב ויאמר אלהים אל בלעם לא תלך עמָהֶם לא תאר את העם כי ברוך הוא: (יג) ויקם בלעם בבקר ויאמר אל שרי בלק לכו אל ארצכם כי מאן השם לתתי להלך עמָכֶם:

“G-d said to Bilam, ‘You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people because they are blessed.’ When Bilam arose in the morning, he said to Balak's nobles, ‘Return to your country, for Hashem has refused to let me go with you’” (*Bamidbar* 22:12-13).

Although Hashem very clearly tells him not to go with the Moabite officers to curse the Jews because the Jewish nation is blessed, Bilam reports this to the Moabite officers: “Hashem has refused to **let me go with you.**” Inferring that he will only be permitted to go with greater nobles. This shows us that he was conceited and unwilling to reveal that he was under the control of the Omnipresent except in an arrogant manner. Therefore, Balak had to sent... again...” (verse 15) - [*Mid. Tanchuma Balak* 6, *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:10], (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:13). Entitlement is always toxic. It comes with arrogance, pride, and selfishness. Entitlement is operating under the delusion that you deserve something you have not yet earned.

All the Lonely People Where Do They All Come From?

I sometimes come across people who twist what others tell them in a way that sadly hurts themselves. My heart goes out to “all the lonely people...” although I may have a cue to answer, “... Where do they all come from?” They come from a place of misery that makes them feel entitled to their neediness. In their demand to belong, they feel abandoned, excluded, and ousted. I know such a lonely woman with a heart of gold, whose intense desire to belong causes her the most painful

rejections. Since she is going through such horrific hardships without adequate support, when someone reaches out to her and offers her a little loving companionship, she will hang on to it for dear life. This attitude of entitlement to belong sets a vicious circle in motion where the one who initially reached out must set proper boundaries so that the relationship will not become imbalanced by the intensity of her need to belong, which greatly exceeds the ability of others to include her. The feeling of entitlement causes the lonely person to view the one who sets boundaries as mean, insensitive, and hurtful. Yes, I have been blamed for such traits, and even worse, when I invited a certain lonely woman to join my midrasha for a Shabbaton. When she insisted on coming again the following Shabbat and possibly every Shabbat, to hang out with the students, I had to set clear boundaries to ensure she wouldn't overstay her welcome. I offered her to stay once a month in the company of the B'erot community where she feels she belongs. Had she only accepted my very best offer to be a monthly, beloved guest, she could have gained the companionship she so much craves. But no, due to her complicated family situation and her need for others to take on that role, she insisted that by limiting the times when she could join my midrasha, I was betraying her, sinning against her, hurting and breaking her. Sadly, she now shoots herself in the foot, refusing to wear any label and outfit upon which is written 'monthly guest!' which according to her "I think she should wear!" So my heart is crying for that lonely soul who can be so kind and loving at times, but who causes herself to remain in her loneliness through her grand expectations of others, which prevents her from receiving the finger as long as she cannot get the whole hand. I will continue to pray for this lonely unsupported woman who is going through so much hardship, what else can I do?

Gratitude Focus for the Week of *Parashat Balak* – Some Tips for Letting Go of Expectations

It may be natural to expect our loved ones to support us during tough times. Unfortunately, in life, our expectations are constantly disappointed. Inevitably, our friends let us down, and when our expectations are not met, we are left feeling disappointed, hurt, angry, and resentful. Even though I empathize with the pain of being disappointed, I also reflect how often we end up just hurting ourselves, when we put high expectations on others. I have realized that lowering your expectations is the key to healthy and happy relationships. Often expectations can turn into entitlement. We feel entitled to be treated in certain ways, and when we aren't, it can be confronting and disappointing. A common 'entitlement' expectation is in the way people communicate. For example, people who are reliable communicators will often become frustrated with others who are unclear, unreliable communicators. We may assume expectations of friends based on our values, not theirs. I was assuming that my friend also believed that you don't ignore the messages of someone you care about. Thus, resenting her for 'ignoring' me was actually coming from a place of entitlement.

- **Prioritize Appreciation Over Expectations** – Learn to trade expectations for appreciation, and your entire relationship – and life – will change. Instead of focusing on the negative, make a point to value what others can offer you. This will take you much further in your relationship. If you pay attention, there's always something to appreciate. Appreciate your invitations to monthly dinner parties even if you would have preferred to be invited to weekly feasts. Appreciation can help put an end to your unhealthy expectations in a relationship.
- **Demonstrate Consideration** – Healthy relationships hinge on consideration for others, their interests, and their relationship expectations. To show consideration, you must make a point to value your relationship over your relationship expectations. This is a real challenge since it's easy to view your expectations or 'rules' as the basis of your relationship. When you value your

partner over your rules, this paves the way for fulfilling both people's expectations.

- **Be Grateful for the Good Points** – Gratitude is our major defense against the wrath of entitlement that screams at others, and all they do, “It is simply NOT ENOUGH!” Yet, gratitude will help fill you with hope and belief in your friend, sister, daughter, or spouse.
- **Avoid Repetition** – If you are in an argumentative pattern in your relationship, change your approach. If you don't, you risk creating a circular loop where neither party is heard, leaving both feeling defeated. Take the high road and bow out of an argument. Take a break to regroup and consider what you're really arguing about. When you make this a habit, you set a high standard for what to expect in a relationship.
- **Never Question the Nature of Your Relationship** – When it comes to learning how to manage expectations in a relationship, one of the worst missteps you can make is questioning the intent of others. When you question the very nature of your relationship, it breaks down trust, which takes a toll on even the strongest connection. Just because you're having issues doesn't mean the relationship itself is a problem.
- **Never Threaten Your Relationship** – One of the primary expectations in a relationship is that there will be give and take and mutual dialogue. Threatening your relationship with ultimatums doesn't accomplish anything, since it shuts down communication. If you're at the point of threatening the other person, it's time to take a break and rethink the conversation.