

Torah Tidbits from Rabbi Larry Moldo

The portion we read this past week, and the portion we will be reading this coming week, are very closely connected. In addition to the plot connection (the aftershock of the final moments in this past week's portion are dealt with immediately in this next week's portion), both portions are named for people, and both describe different kinds of effective leadership. Not necessarily leadership we should emulate, but effective nonetheless.

The two leaders are Bilaam and Pinchas. Bilaam leads from behind the scenes. He gives important expert advice, even warning those who hire him concerning the limitations of his advice. However, sometimes he wants something particular accomplished, and the usual means of advice doesn't work. In that case, he finds another way to accomplish his goal.

What's the best way to conquer?

Render the other person's strength meaningless. Bilaam works to do just that. He noticed the strength of the Israelite people was in the apparent harmony and modesty of their home life. So he sent the equivalent of Victoria Secret models and the Chippendales to stretch the envelope a bit, and entice the people into a bit of idolatry while they were sampling the adultery. It worked, as God reacted rather quickly to the distracted behavior of even these desert born Israelites. Within a week or so, they would have been easy prey for the surrounding kingdoms.

Enter the flamboyant Pinchas. His style is to act when nobody else does, publicly, in such a fashion that if God had not equally quickly stopped the earlier reaction, Pinchas would have been condemned for murder.

What can we learn from this for today?

On the positive side, we learn that sometimes action must be taken to protect people, and that if one path doesn't do the job, another might. On the negative side, we learn that sometimes we might never know who is responsible for helping us mess with our own strong foundation, and that sometimes the process in place is more destructive than constructive.

May we all be leaders in our own right - stubborn when it is right to be so, and acting effectively when willing to accept the consequences.