

Balak

Sincerity, Interests, Relationships, and Peace

The question is often asked, is sincerity necessary when dealing with people? Do we really have to feel that when a person says something that he must be sincere? George Burns is quoted as having said, "Sincerity is everything and if you can fake it, you've got it made." Is sincerity, though, really needed in order to work with people? Many times we know that a person can do a lot of good, even when he is not sincere, even when he has dubious motives. A person can give charity to help a very worthy cause, not because he believes in that charity but because he wants his name in the papers or he wants a tax write-off or he wants to impress his banker. Nevertheless the poor people who benefit from this charity have been helped. This person who gave the money has not been sincere; however, the charity he has given has done a lot of good. On the other hand, there are people who can be very sincere but who can do great evil. In the early days of Communism there were many Communists who sincerely believed that what they were doing was right, yet, their sincerity caused the deaths of millions of people. The same can be said for people who sincerely try to help others but are totally incompetent. They end up by doing the people they are trying to help great harm. For example, people who try to administer first aid but do not know the first thing about it: they actually aggravate a person's medical condition, and they do not help at all.

We know in business how we have to deal with people whose crassness and grossness would normally cause us to shun their company. They are people whom we normally could never trust. However, in business many times we can deal with them. We can deal with them not because we believe in them or because we believe that they will sincerely want to do right by us, but we can deal with them because we know that it is in their best interests to deal with us fairly. Their business profits are tied to the deal they are making with us. We know that if they could make a better deal they would, but since they cannot, we can deal with them because we know that it is in their best interests to do so. Agreements are usually made by people, not because their values coincide, but because their interests coincide.

This, of course, is the argument that is being put forward by those who are pushing hard for extending the already-made agreements with the PLO. They say that the PLO has not really changed. They still do not like Israel, but it is in their best interests now to strike a deal with Israel; otherwise, their whole organization will fall apart. They also say that it is in Israel's best interests to strike a deal with the PLO, not because Israel likes the PLO or even believes that the PLO has changed its ultimate goals, but because the PLO is the only representative of the Arab people in the West Bank and Gaza with whom you can make an agreement and have it stick. Those, of course, who feel that these agreements with the PLO are a mistake feel that it would be better if the PLO would disappear. Israel can wait for other forces to appear. They also feel that the PLO cannot make any agreement with Israel stick. The terror and killing will just intensify and Israel will have put herself in a much weaker position from which to deal with terror and killing in the future.

The whole issue of sincerity is a very complicated one because it depends with whom you are dealing, and it has many levels. The *Ten Commandments* were written on two tablets. The first tablet deals primarily with the commandments between G-d and man, while the second tablet deals with the commandments between man and man. When we are dealing with the relationships between man and man, it is our actions which really count more than what is in our hearts. Even if we do good only for publicity or to get a tax break, we still have done good. It may not be the highest form of good but we still have done good. When we enter into a business deal with someone, even though we really do not have the other person's best interests at heart and even though we may not like him and in our heart of hearts want to hurt him, it is irrelevant as long as we both know we are going to profit by this arrangement. However, it could happen that when it is no longer profitable for the other party in our deal, he may double-cross us and cause us great losses because he never really was interested in looking out for our interests in the first place and, secondly, he may really have wanted to harm us if he could. This means that when we deal with people who do not share our values and who, quite frankly, would prefer that we were not around, we have to be very careful but still we do not have to like people to do business with them.

On the other hand, sincerity is 100% required when we deal in matters between man and G-d. G-d can read our minds. He can see into our hearts and know what our true motivations are. He knows when we have meant to harm people, even though the result turns out to be good. We cannot fool him with false acts of piety. But even in religious matters, the rabbis teach us it is better that you do certain religious practices, even though you do not completely believe in them because after you have done them and see their beauty and see the effect they have on you, you will then do them out of belief. To use religion to fool other people is a sin, but to pray when you do not feel like it or to come to shul when you do not feel like it or to keep kosher when you do not feel like it still has a positive value because by doing these things even when you do not feel like doing them, you will train yourself also to do things between man and man even when you do not feel like doing them. It is a greater mitzvah, the rabbis say, to help your fellow man even when you do not feel like it than when you do feel like it. When the baby is crying at night and you do not feel like getting up, you still have to get up to feed the baby. If a poor man asks you for charity and you do not feel like giving it to him, you still have to give it to him even if you do not feel like it because it is the right thing to do. If feelings and values ever conflict, values must take precedence. Secondly, coming to shul even when you do not feel like it, praying even when you do not feel like it, will eventually cause you to want to come to shul because you feel like it. Eventually a person realizes how much he gains from coming to shul and from keeping *Shabbos* and keeping kosher. In the beginning it may seem difficult but eventually it brings a person great feelings of joy and happiness and security. It is like learning to read. It is very hard to learn how to read but, after we have mastered the art, it is such a pleasure to pick up a book or a newspaper and read it

In the *Torah* portion *Balak* we learn about sincerity. We know how Bilam, a man of great insight, a prophet the rabbis say on the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, used his great talent for personal gain and not to help people. His talent was up for sale to the highest bidder. He was hired by Bilam, the king of Moab, to curse the Jewish people. He really wanted to curse the Jewish people but he could not. He tried three different times from three different perspectives to curse the Jewish people but, because

he was professionally honest (he could not say things that were not true and still retain his gift of prophecy), he was forced to bless the Jewish people. He tried his best not to. However, his blessings were not sincere. Part of what he said about the Jewish people, though, has found its way even into our prayer book. We say every time we enter the synagogue, "*Ma Tovv Oho-Lecho Yaakov*, how goodly are your tents, O Jacob." We quote Bilam even though he was not a friend of our people. After he was forced to bless us, he gave Balak advice on how to destroy us. He said, "If you will seduce the Jewish people through licentious pagan rites to worship your gods, I would then be able to curse them. They will have begun to destroy themselves." Bilam sincerely wanted to curse us but he could not without risking his own reputation and talents, but he could offer advice on how to destroy us. We learn later on that he was killed when he joined those who were trying to destroy the Jewish people.

We find even today many journalists and politicians who are forced to praise Israel and the Jewish people for the accomplishments that we have achieved against great odds but who have no love for us and are always offering all sorts of gratuitous predictions about how in the future we will revert to our so-called barbaric patterns of behavior. To many of them all of Israel is one big settlement and has no place in the Middle East and should be removed. To them each concession that Israel makes just means that she should make more concessions.

In marriage, too, sincerity can sometimes get in the way of the marriage. Many times in marriage we do things that we do not want to do but we do them because we want to please our spouse. We sincerely do not want to do the thing that we have been asked to do, but we sincerely want to please our spouse and show that we are willing sometimes to put his or her desires ahead of our own. Of course, it cannot be a one way street. The other spouse must also be willing sometimes to do some things that he or she does not like because he or she sincerely wants to please his or her spouse. Sincerity, then, can work on more than one level.

Bilam wanted to curse the Jewish people but, since he could not, he found a way to harm them in another way. We have to be very careful when and how we demand sincerity. Sometimes it is best just to demand civility and not sincerity. Civility will allow us all to live together; sincer-

ity many times may not. Sometimes it is better to hide our sincere feelings; otherwise, we may come out with hateful and vicious remarks and perpetuate conflict. Civility demands that we subordinate our sincere feelings about other people and their ideas so that we can sincerely live in peace.

Let us hope and pray that we will realize that values are more important than feelings and that if we sincerely believe in certain values, like the value of peace and harmony, we will sincerely hide our feelings and not express them on trivial issues so that peace and harmony can reign. Bilam put his sincere regard for money above everything else except his professional honesty. He, though, was not interested in peace or harmony. He was only sincerely interested in money. When he could not get it because of his sincere desire to retain his professional honesty, he gave sincere advice on how to destroy the Jewish people. Sincerity is nice, but values are more important. Let us all hope that we will always sincerely support the values of peace, harmony, compassion, and justice, even if this means that we sometimes must suppress certain feelings and learn to be civil. Let us always remember that values are more important than sincerity.