

Pirkei Avot 5:19

Students of Abraham

Whomever possesses the following three traits is considered among the disciples of our patriarch Abraham; and whomever possesses the opposite three traits is considered among the disciples of the wicked Balaam. The disciples of our patriarch Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit, and a lowly soul [or, a moderate appetite]. The disciples of the wicked Balaam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a limitless appetite ...

We will open with an allusion: The final letters of “eye spirit soul” (עין רוח נפש)¹ spell the word, “snake” (נחש). In Hebrew, the word “snake” is cognate with the word that means “to augur,” on the forbidden practices of the nations of the world.² Balaam was knee deep in augury as the verse states, “Balaam... did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens.” He is thus considered the snake of the impure husks who was eventually forced to admit, “There is no augury in Jacob”³ (כִּי לֹא נֶחֱשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב). In contrast, Abraham is the snake of holiness in the sense that the numerical value of “snake” (נחש) equals Mashiach (משיח)—Abraham’s goal is to bring the Mashiach, the true and complete redemption to the entire world.

Understanding the attributes

To understand the nature of the three traits discussed in the *mishnah*—a good eye, a meek spirit, and a moderate appetite—we need to translate, or map them onto a well-known, established, and developed model found in Chassidut. To begin, let us first see how *Rashi* explains them. *Rashi* writes,

A good eye describes someone who is not jealous of his friend, and that holds the honor of his friend to be dear to him.

A meek spirit describes one who is humble and submissive.

A lowly soul [also translated as, a moderate appetite] is one that lowers himself among people and engages them and is not crude.

But, the wicked Balaam had an evil eye, as it is written, “And Balaam lifted his eyes,” he had a haughty spirit, as it is written, “God refused to allow me to go with you [but, with others, I may go],” and a crude soul, as it is written, “Even if Balak will give me his entire home filled with silver and gold.”

From *Rashi*’s commentary, we can conclude that an evil eye, which is the opposite of a good eye, is having a jealous nature. A haughty spirit, the opposite of the positive meek spirit, refers to a person who has an inflated ego and seeks his honor and self-

¹ עין רוח נפש is a series of ascending numbers. The base of the series is 132.

² Leviticus 19:26. See *Rambam Sefer Hamitzvot Lavim*, 33. *Hilchot Avodah Zarah* 11:4 and elsewhere.

³ Ibid. 23:23.

aggrandizement. The gross soul, the negative version of a lowly soul, or one that has a moderate appetite, expresses itself as lust—having a limitless appetite. Thus, according to Rashi’s explanation, Balaam’s three negative traits are none other than those appearing in the previous chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (4:21): “Envy, lust, and honor remove a person from the world” (הקנאה והתאווה והקבוד מוציאין את האדם מן העולם). Except that in our *mishnah* the order used is envy, honor, and lust.

Now, these three traits reflect the negative state of the tripartite division of the psyche into three components: intellectual, emotional, and habitual (or behavioral).

part of psyche	negative trait	negative trait
Intellectual (wisdom, understanding, knowledge)	honor	haughty spirit
Emotional (loving-kindness, might, and beauty)	lust	crude soul
Habitual (victory, acknowledgment, and foundation)	envy	evil eye

Honor (קבוד), which is the result of having a haughty or prideful spirit represents the blemish of the intellectual faculties—wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. The value of “pride” (גאווה) is 15, which is also the value of God’s two-letter Name, *Kah* (כה), whose two letters corresponds to wisdom and understanding, respectively.

Lust (תאווה), the characteristic of a gross soul instead of a refined soul, is the blemish of the emotional faculties (*chesed, gevurah* and *tiferet*).

Envy (קנאה), an evil eye instead of a good eye, is the blemish of the behavioral faculties (*netzach, hod, yesod*), since a dark urge of envy eventually leads one to evil behavior, corresponding to the psyche’s habitual or behavioral layer.

Why does the *mishnah* in chapter 4—Envy, lust, and honor remove a person from the world—start from envy, corresponding to the lowest layer of the psyche instead of with honor, corresponding to its highest? The root of the behavioral faculties is to be found in the crown (*keter*), which is above the intellectual layer. Thus, at a deep level, one’s character follows one’s gaze—how one sees others and one’s surroundings. With a good eye, one will develop a favorable and rectified character, but with an evil eye, one eventually falls into, “envy, lust, and honor.” Indeed, this causal order is found in our *mishnah*—a good eye, a meek spirit, and a lowly soul—which begins with the rectification of the eye (corresponding to the crown and behavioral faculties), continues with the rectification of the spirit (the intellectual faculties), and ends with the rectification of the soul (the emotional faculties).

Three teachers

The characterization “disciple of” appears in another place in *Pirkei Avot* (1:12): “Be a disciple of Aharon.” Thus, we have one negative personality—Balaam—and two positive personalities—Abraham and Aharon—to consider. The way we should relate to each of these three personalities can be understood as paralleling the Ba’al Shem Tov’s famous three-stage process: submission, separation, and sweetening.



The impure husk of Balaam must be subdued into *submission*, and we must be careful not to become one of his disciples. Abraham is the first Jew to be circumcised, an act that separates him from non-Jews, thus it is from him that we learn the art of *separation*. Aharon the High Priest is the sweetener. The sages describe him as one who, “loves peace and pursues peace, loves people and brings them close to the Torah.” By being his disciples, we learn of *sweetening* reality.