



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת בלק תש"ע ❧ ❧ ❧ *Parshas Balak 5770*

WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?

Sometimes, people behave in a way that seems to defy logic.

DOUBLE TAKE

A prime example is provided by Bilam in this week's *parshah*. The Torah recounts the amazing interaction between Bilam and his donkey. En route to delivering a curse against the Jews, the donkey keeps stopping, as it beholds the presence of a threatening angel. Bilam, who does not see the Heavenly messenger, repeatedly beats the beast. Finally, the animal lodges a verbal protest, as the *passuk* states:

“And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Bilam: ‘What have I perpetrated against you, that you have struck me these three times?’” (*Bamidbar 22:28*).

Now, conversing with a donkey is not an everyday occurrence. If this would happen to you or me, I venture to guess that our reaction would be one of near-total shock. Imagine being answered back by your pet! We would probably be so flabbergasted as to be left speechless, staring silently in wide-eyed wonderment.

Observe, however, how Bilam responds:

“And Bilam said to the donkey: ‘(I have beat you) because you have mocked me; had I been holding a sword in my hand, I would even now have killed you!’” (*Ibid. v. 29*).

Bilam's reaction is nothing short of astonishing. Instead of reacting with bewilderment, Bilam seems totally unfazed by the fact that an animal was talking to him. Without missing a beat, Bilam simply talks back. In fact, he seems to actually become annoyed by his

donkey's chutzpah!

How could Bilam have been so apparently “out-to-lunch,” to the point that he seems to have totally missed the simple fact that talking animals are not exactly commonplace? How was he not “bowled-over” by the sheer novelty of the situation?

The *Ba'alei Mussar* (Sages of ethical teachings) perceive a powerful lesson in this particular phenomenon. Such is the (destructive) power of the trait of *ga'avah* (arrogance) and the hold it can have on a person. Bilam was so self-centered and haughty, he could not bear the thought that someone – anyone – would dare to cross him. His donkey not following orders? Much more outrageous – in Bilam's warped perception – than the fact that his animal spoke, was the fact that his animal inconvenienced him.

EXPLOSIVE SITUATION

There is yet another glaring illustration in Sefer *Bamidbar* of *ga'avah's* mind-numbing effects. In the *parshas* Korach issue, we spoke of the brazenness of Dasan and Aviram, that pair of troublemakers who felt they knew better than Moshe and Aharon. So convinced were they of the righteousness of their cause that they clung to their claims against the saintly leaders, even in the face of the most earth-shattering rebuttal. The extent of their refusal to admit defeat is outlined by the following explanation of the Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe, parshas Korach*):

Dasan and Aviram's downfall is depicted in the dramatic narrative of the earth's splitting, where they were cast alive into the netherworld. The bystanders who witnessed this chilling scene turned and fled in panic. What caused them to take flight? It appears

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that they ran not from what they saw, but, rather, from what they *heard*; as the verse states (*Bamidbar 16:34*), “And the surrounding Jews fled from the cries (of the falling rebels).”

This emphasis on the *voices* of the condemned leads the Chasam Sofer to a most novel interpretation of this section. He contends that the people fled because of what they were told by the evildoers as they sank into the abyss. Apparently, the rebels were not moved to admit the error of their ways despite the fact that they were hurtling toward Gehinom itself! Instead, they told the people that the entire spectacle of the ground opening was a hoax, cleverly engineered by Moshe through the use of some strategically placed TNT (of some obviously primitive variety)!

In other words, instead of finally acknowledging that their “gig” was up and that Divine retribution had been visited upon them, the rebels (literally) went down in defiance, attributing their demise to Moshe’s clever use of explosives! This is what gave the onlookers reason to flee. Had it been Divinely orchestrated, the bystanders – who had not actively participated in the rebellion – may not have run away so fast, secure in the knowledge that they themselves did not deserve punishment. Once they heard from and believed the rebels that this was all Moshe’s doing, they feared that the explosions would get out of control and that they could be engulfed as well.

Bilam, Dasan, Aviram – they may have been many things, but they were not necessarily dumb. Yet, their inherent *ga’avah* corrupted them so that they thought and acted in such outrageous ways.

LOSING ONE’S MIND

For this reason, the Mishnah includes “avoiding haughtiness” in its list of essential traits for acquiring Torah aptitude. The Mishnah states (*Avos 6:6*):

התורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים. ואלו הן...
ולא מגיס לבו בתלמודו.

“There are forty-eight prerequisite qualities through which Torah is mastered and acquired; and they

include the following... one who does not exhibit undue pride in his learning...”

In his commentary *Lechem Shamayim (Avos, ibid.)*, R’ Ya’akov Emden spells out the inherent danger in allowing one’s accomplishments to “go to his head” and explains why this trait is such an impediment to gaining true Torah knowledge. Simply put, arrogance actually breeds stupidity. As the Gemara in *Pesachim (66a)* states, “When one displays haughtiness – if he is a wise man, his wisdom shall vanish...”

(It could very well be, moreover, that this phenomenon was a contributing factor to another perplexing aspect of the episode involving Bilam and his donkey. The animal perceived the threatening angel right from the start, while its master, Bilam, did not see it until the last moment. What happened to Bilam’s vaunted prophetic powers? Yet, the above-quoted Gemara in *Pesachim* goes on to relate: “And if he is a prophet [and he succumbs to conceit], his prophetic ability is revoked...”)

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