

Parshas Balak 5771

LIVESTOCK LONGEVITY

עֲשָׂרָה דְבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֶשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאָרֶץ, וְפִי הַבְּאֵר, וְפִי הָאֵתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמָּטָה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַכְּתָב, וְהַמַּכְתֵּב, וְהַלְוִיחֹת. וְגַם אוֹמְרִים, אִף הַמַּזִּיקִין, וְקַבּוּרָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ.

“Ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath during the twilight period (i.e., right before the onset of the Sabbath), and they are: The mouth of the ground, the mouth of the well, **the mouth of the donkey**, the rainbow, the manna, the staff, the *Shamir*, the writing, the writing implement, and the tablets. Some also include the demons, Moshe’s grave, and the ram sacrificed by our forefather Avraham (in place of his son, Yitzchak)” (*Avos 5:6*).

The item from the list above that is featured in this week’s *parshah* is “the mouth of the donkey.” This refers to the incident involving the recalcitrant Bilam, who -- contravening Hashem’s Will -- acceded to King Balak’s request to place a curse on the Jewish people. En route to perform his famous service, Bilam’s donkey stopped repeatedly when beholding a threatening angel (a sight concealed from Bilam himself). These delays prompted harsh beatings from the donkey’s master, until “Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Bilam: ‘What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?’” (*Bamidbar 24:28*). According to the Mishnah, this “mouth of the donkey” originates from the Six Days of Creation.

Which gives rise to the following question: What about it, exactly, was created at that time? A very literal interpretation of the Mishnah’s term “mouth of the

donkey” would seem to intimate that the mouth itself was created; but such a prospect seems somewhat unlikely (i.e., a donkey-less mouth waiting around for a few thousand years for a donkey to be born to which it could attach itself). A more plausible explanation would be that the donkey itself (in its entirety) was created, with the Mishnah highlighting that unique aspect (its mouth) with which it was invested and for which it gained renown.

HOW OLD ARE YOU NOW?

Many of the commentators, though, do not favor this approach, either, as it entails a supposition that the donkey itself lived to a ripe old age of a couple-thousand years (from Creation until Bilam’s days). The *Tiferes Yisrael* raises the objection that -- had such an amazing anomaly actually occurred (the existence of a donkey blessed with such extraordinary longevity) -- some mention would surely have been made in the Scriptures themselves. In the *Tiferes Yisrael*’s view, the Torah’s silence on this issue is evidence that no such long-lasting donkey existed.

So, what, exactly, was created then? From Rashi’s comments, it appears that he understood similarly -- i.e., that Bilam’s donkey was of average age, having been born in Bilam’s era. What occurred on the sixth day of Creation regarding the animal is that the decree was issued that at some future point in history, Bilam’s donkey would speak. The *Tiferes Yisrael* himself follows a similar vein, interpreting (in a general sense) that many of the items listed in the Mishnah did not actually come into existence at the beginning of Creation; rather, the potential for the ground to swallow, for example,

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was implanted at that time, and such ability would only come to fruition at the appointed hour of the future. Regarding Bilam's donkey, the *Tiferes Yisrael* explains the phenomenon in a somewhat "practical" sense. He seems to state that it was a matter of genetics; that is, the first donkey possessed some "talking" gene, which he passed on to his offspring, and so on down the line, until, eventually, a donkey was born in the time of Bilam whose talking ability was put to good use.

YOUTHFUL CATTLE AND A WELL-TRAVELED DONKEY

Differing from this prevailing trend, however, is R' Ya'akov Emden (*Lechem Shamayim*), who understands the Mishnah to mean that Bilam's donkey actually was created on Day Six of Creation and lived the requisite number of years until Bilam's time. In fact, he is somewhat perplexed at the reluctance of the other commentators to explain likewise. To his mind, the existence of a two-thousand-year-old animal is nothing to get overly excited about; in fact, there is precedent for such a phenomenon. The Torah relates that the tribal chiefs donated wagons and oxen for transport at the time of the dedication of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) (*Bamidbar* 7:3). What eventually became of these oxen? The Medrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:18) records a dispute on this matter: According to R' Chama, these animals were ultimately sacrificed in the Beis Hamikdash itself, indicating that they existed from the time of Moshe Rabbeinu until the time of Shlomo Hamelech. Another opinion cited there states that the cattle are still in existence, and, in fact, remain in tip-top shape (having sustained neither blemishes nor deterioration).

Interestingly enough, the Medrash (*Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer*, ch. 31) supplies some additional information concerning the donkey of our Mishnah. While the Medrash doesn't explicitly take sides concerning our issue (the lifespan of Bilam's donkey), it does state that the original donkey had some rather long-living offspring. The original donkey begot another donkey,

which ended up serving Avraham (who rode him to Mt. Moriah to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak), Moshe (who rode him down to Egypt), and, eventually, will transport Mashiach himself.

The argument concerning the lifespan of Bilam's donkey extends to another animal listed in the Mishnah -- Avraham's ram. R' Ya'akov Emden maintains that the ram that Avraham sacrificed had sprung into existence during the week of Creation and lived until Avraham's time. The *Tiferes Yisrael*, on the other hand, interprets the Mishnah's statement (that the progenitor of Avraham's ram was created on the Sixth Day) to mean that the progenitor of Avraham's ram was created then, and a Heavenly decree was issued regarding the role that would be played in the future of one of its descendants.

The ram of the Mishnah raises some other intriguing issues, however, which we hope to address next week.

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