

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Eliyah *ben Aharon HaKohen a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Why the Donkey Spoke

PARSHAS BALAK 5776

Just recently (Parshas Korach) we beheld a poignant example of the care and concern Hashem extends to all of His creatures, including abject *resha'im* (wicked ones). As highlighted in *Mishnas Chayim*, it was for this reason that Elazar was instructed to gather the used fire pans of the burned members of Korach's company. Why wasn't this task charged to Aharon himself? After all, he was the protagonist, the very target of Korach's rebellion. But as was explained, it was precisely because of this that the mission was not granted to Aharon; as he was such a central figure to the whole episode, his involvement now would cause an added element of shame to the vanquished party. Thus, although the rebels had committed acts of treachery – and, moreover, were now either underground or consumed by fire – Hashem still sought to protect them from any additional potential disgrace.

This theme continues in this week's *parshah*, which, as we shall see, features a powerful manifestation of a similar idea.

To Uphold the World

There is a well-known Mishnah that lists certain items brought into existence at the very end of the Creation process. The Mishnah states (*Avos 5:6*):

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שְׁבֵת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֶשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאָרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֵתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמַּטֵּה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַכֶּתֵב, וְהַמְּכַתֵּב, וְהַלּוּחֹת. וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים, אֶף הַמַּזְיָקִין, וְקַבְנֵי שֵׁל מִשָּׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ.

“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** (who spoke to Bilam), 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 commentators clarify that this is by no means just a list of unrelated, random items; rather, they share a common thread. The Chassid Ya'avetz, for example, explains that these were all items that had to be created, for their existence would prove vital for the maintenance of the world and Yisrael. This factor is quite apparent in most of the above instances. The rainbow, for example, relates to the prevention of another global flood; the well and the manna provided food and water to B'nei Yisrael throughout their sojourn in the perilous desert.

But an issue arises with regard to the item that is featured in this week's *parshah* – namely, the “*pi ha'ason*,” the “mouth of the donkey.” This refers, of course, to the miraculous event of the communication that took place between Bilam and his mount. Acceding to the request of Balak King of Mo'av, Bilam undertook the journey to view the camp of Yisrael and place curses upon the nation. On the way, his donkey kept stopping, for it viewed what Bilam did

not: the presence of a threatening angel sent by Hashem. It was when Bilam succumbed to his fury for a third time and inflicted violence upon his donkey that the miraculous occurred: וַיִּפְתַּח ה' אֶת־פִּי הַאֲתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבִלְעָם מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רָגְלַי

– “And 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 22:28*). At that point the angel revealed himself to Bilam as well, and he came to realize how, in fact, the donkey had spared his rider from the angel’s sword.

But as wondrous as this event was, it did not prevent Bilam from continuing with his villainous mission. He resumed his journey, met up with Balak and proceeded with his efforts to curse Yisrael. It was only at that later point that his plans were foiled, as the words emerging from his mouth turned into blessings instead of curses.

And so the question arises: Why indeed was this miracle necessary? The matter is compounded somewhat when we contemplate another issue connected with this animal (elaborated upon in *Mishnas Chayim, Parshas Balak, 5771*). Recall that the Mishnah ascribes the origination of the “*pi ha’ason*” to the Six Days of Creation. Some commentators understand that this means the potential for a donkey to one day speak was decreed at the beginning of Creation. But others, such as the eminent R’ Ya’akov Emden (*Lechem Shamayim*), understand that Bilam’s donkey *itself* was created at the beginning of the world. That means that it existed for thousands of years, having been created and then lasting for so long just to be able to speak to Bilam. And, as we have seen, nothing particularly productive seems to have come from this entire effort. Why, indeed, is this item included in the list of things deemed so important to the world that they were already fashioned during the week of Creation?

Never Too Far Gone

R’ Chaim Shmuelevitz (*Sichos Mussar*) derives from here a most potent lesson, along the lines of the idea mentioned at the outset. We learn from this episode just how dear every single *nefesh* (soul) is to Hashem, and how greatly He desires that even a complete villain such as Bilam should return to Him. It is true that ultimately the miracle of the donkey’s speech did little to advance the salvation of Yisrael. Rather, it was intended for Bilam himself, in an attempt to get him to finally see reason and overcome his wickedness. Alas, Bilam still had free choice, which he obviously exercised poorly. But what we do see from here is the extent to which Hashem will go to try to bring back even those who have strayed far from Him. After all, He created a special entity from the Six Days of Creation for this sole purpose – to attempt to bring closer to Him a single individual – and, for that matter, an individual who was a complete *rasha*.

The following sentiment is expressed at various junctures in the works of Chazal (*cf., e.g., Makkos 24b*): וַיִּמְחַר לְעוֹבְרֵי רְצוֹנוֹ כִּדְ, לְעוֹשֵׂי רְצוֹנוֹ עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכְמָה – “If such (beneficence is extended) to those who violate His will, how much the more so (is it applicable) to those who fulfill His will!” This is the obvious lesson we can extrapolate from the events surrounding Bilam Harasha. We see how invested Hashem was in trying to bring him near, how He incorporated into the creation of the world the tool to give him yet another chance to improve his ways. And this was for someone whose detestable deeds and nefarious character are well documented in the writings of Chazal. Certainly Hashem’s care and concern extends in abundant measure to those who are truly earnest in their quest to serve Him in accordance with His will.