



A taste of Shabbat

Balak 5776

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Translated and edited by his students

When a donkey sees more than a man

With God's help

We all use the phrase "with God's help" – usually meaning that we want God to help us achieve our aims and get to where we want to go. This isn't exact, it means that we ask God to take us to where HE wants us to go. The source can be found in our parsha.

The story of Bilam and his donkey takes up fourteen verses of our parsha and seems superfluous – The Torah could have told us in one verse that the angel told Bilam he would be able only to say the words provided by God.

On the other hand, the talking donkey is so important that our Rabbis teach us in Pirkei Avot (Avot 5:6) that the Donkey's mouth, together with the two tablets and other miraculous articles were created on twilight of the first Friday of creation.

The angel of mercy

When God first talks to Bilam, the Torah uses the name Elokim (Bamidbar 22:9,12,20). This name signifies justice, the angel appears and is called an angel of YKVK – the four letter name signifying mercy, despite standing in Bilam's path to stop him with a sword.

Rashi (22:22) tells us that the angel was "*an angel of mercy to stop Bilam from sinning and destroying himself*". This could have been done without the story of the donkey who could see the angel when Bilam couldn't. Rashi tells us "*God gave the animal power to see more than man*" Bilam wasn't unable to see because he was wicked, but because he was human – the donkey wasn't special. Bilam, the human being, had limited sight. There is an angel in front of him, and unlike his donkey, he is blind to it.

When a stone says "miow"

The reason Bilam couldn't see is because he was stuck with a paradigm that made him blind to everything else. When we think we are right, we will fight to the end to prove it, and nothing will stop us. God tells him three times not to go to Balak, and that he will be unable to curse. Bilam is certain he will find a way around the problem despite reality. The angel was in

plain sight, bilam had blinded himself with his ideas and was blind to it.

R' Avrum Shapira ZTL would tell a story about two Jews who argued if a black object not far from them was a cat or a stone. In the end they decided to throw a stone at it, and if it moved and said "miow" it must be a cat. They threw the stone, the cat jumped with a loud miow, the one who disagreed said "amazing! a jumping stone that says miow!!!" – this is a paradigm! Bilam was blinded by his intelligence, the angel of mercy could only reveal himself to a donkey..

Doubt opened his eyes

After being stopped three times, the donkey begins a monologue ending in questions "why did you hit me" "have I ever disobeyed you?" only then ..

וַיֹּאמֶר: לֹא¹ "He said no"

And straight afterwards

וַיִּגַּל ה' אֶת עֵינֵי בִלְעָם וַיֵּרָא אֶת מַלְאָךְ ה' נֹצֵב בְּדֶרֶךְ וְסֶרֶבָּ שְׁלֹפָה בִּידוֹ וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לָאָרֶץ²

God opened Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel standing in front of him with a drawn sword.

The short "no" is enough to make a crack in the wall of Bilam's stubbornness, to break the paradigm, and allow him the sight at least of a donkey... The donkey sees the angel blocking the path, as an angel of mercy, "God's help", stopping Bilam going where he wants to go.

For God's angel to appear, you have to nullify yourself, even a small way, and admit even to your donkey that you were wrong.

The mouth of the donkey created in twilight is the call of the world, of nature, of the surroundings, who sometimes help us to see God's angel blocking the way we want to go, in mercy, helping us get to where we should go. When the donkey opens its mouth and we find ourselves blocked in a narrow alley, we see it often as a complication stopping us reaching our aims, it hurts, and we want to hit out. God helps us to say a small "no", a small amount of self doubt to break our paradigm, and allow us to receive his real help

¹ במדבר, כ"ב, ל'.

² שם, שם, ל"א.