

Shabbos Parshas Bolok – Keith Goldstein

י"ז תמוז תשע"ח - 30th June 2018 - שבת פ' בלק

In the פרשה this week it is written that " ה opened the mouth of the ass and she said to בלעם "what have I done to you that you should have smitten me on these three occasions?" The words these three occasions are written in Hebrew as שלש רגלים and Rashi brings from Chazal that she was hinting at a criticism of בלעם that he was seeking to destroy a people who would celebrate שלש רגלים every year.

Many commentators consider why these particular festivals were chosen for the criticism and give diverse answers. Apart from that question, it also needs to be explained why this criticism should be given specifically at the time when the ass is asking why בלעם had smitten her and why after that the ass concentrates only on her own past and relationship with בלעם with no further comments or complaints of any spiritual aspect beyond that.

I think it can fairly be said that the worst attributes a person can have from a Torah perspective are haughtiness and ingratitude. About a haughty person Chazal say that " ה declares that He and such person cannot live together in the world. As to ingratitude, we find that the people of Amon and Moab may not join themselves to the Jewish people by marriage because they failed to greet the Israelites with bread and water at the time of the exodus from Egypt. The reason why they, more than anyone else, were expected to do so, was because our ancestor, Avrohom, saved their ancestor, Lot, several hundred years earlier and they should have expressed their gratitude for that. In contrast, Amalek our sworn enemy eternally until the days of the Messiah, when he will be wiped out, is according to halachah, permitted to convert and marry into the Jewish people. The attribute of Amalek is diametrically opposed to haughtiness, being mockery, not showing importance to anything, including themselves! As Rashi brings, at the time of the exodus from Egypt we were attacked by Amalek whose objective was to lower the respect and awe in which the Jewish people were held following the splitting of the Red Sea. They did so at their own cost because they suffered casualties in battle but such sacrifice was considered worthwhile from their perspective.

In truth, haughtiness and ingratitude go together. If a person is haughty, he believes that he is above other people and everything in the world should come to him automatically, as a result. Accordingly, he will not be grateful for what other people do for him as such would be the natural position, so far as he is concerned. We find that among the bad traits which בלעם had, according to the Mishnah, were haughtiness and an evil eye which is explained by some to mean that however much he had, he considered too little for him and however little someone else had he considered too much for them and coveted it. In the words of the Mishnah he would be the person who would say what is mine is mine and what is yours is mine.

After his persistent entreaties we find " ה said to בלעם , according to the explanation of Rashi, that if he could earn money from the mission, he would be allowed to go but he would not be allowed to curse. Of course he did go, although he believed that somehow he would be able to circumvent the prohibition of cursing. Accordingly, we see that " ה did not wish to stand in the way of him receiving reward and bounty. The שלש רגלים are unique in that it is written of them that when the people come up to the Temple they must not come empty-handed but must, so to speak, give a gift to " ה as it is written ולא יראו פני ריקם איש . Accordingly, while בלעם had been given the opportunity by " ה to receive bounty, he wished to deprive " ה of receiving His bounty, so to speak, at the time of the שלש רגלים by destroying the people who would provide it. That is extreme ingratitude.

Asses, donkeys and mules are notorious for being obstinate, for stopping suddenly without any apparent reason and refusing to continue until they are smitten continuously. We see from what the ass of בלעם said that she had not done so ever before, contrary to the normal nature of her species.

Notwithstanding that, now, the first time that such behaviour from her had been experienced, instead of considering her supernaturally good character in the past, and asking himself why she was now acting in an abnormal way, בלעם simply treated her as if this had always been her character, like any other ass, again the height of ingratitude. Accordingly, the whole complaint and criticism of בלעם was directed towards his behaviour towards her, namely that he showed consistency in being an ingrate!

עקיבא יחיאל גאלדשטיין - לעלוי נשמות הורי אברהם יצחק בן מיכאל אליהו ושרה רחל בת ר' חיים ע"ה