



## PARSHAS BALAK - WARREN GREENWOOD

A number of difficulties arise from story of Balak & Bilaam.

Firstly, Hashem told Bilaam not to go with the messengers of Balak who wanted to curse the Bnei Yisroel. But after Balak's 2<sup>nd</sup> request and promise of great wealth, Hashem said to Bilaam "If the men have come to call you, arise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you, that you shall do" (Bamidbar 22:20). Yet when Bilaam got up and went with them, it says: "And Hashem's anger was kindled because he went" (posuk 22). It seems as if Hashem changed his mind. The obvious question is, why was Hashem angry with Bilaam who, after all had gone with the messengers only with His permission.

The Vilna Gaon derives an explanation from the wording of the Hebrew text. Two different Hebrew words are used in the narrative for the English word "with" – *et* and *im* (*itom*, & *imohem* "with them"). *Et* means together but not of the same mind and purpose. It denotes a union which is based only on physical proximity, but where an independent and separate point of view is preserved.

*Im* means with the same mind and purpose. It indicates that the two parties are journeying together with the same mind-set, having the same thoughts and ideas, merging their minds and personalities together.

When Bilaam was summoned to curse Israel, Hashem's response was "Do not go *Imohem*" (Posuk 12)– do not associate yourself with this suggested enterprise to curse the Bnei Yisroel. On the second occasion however, Hashem told Bilaam that if he wanted to travel with the emissaries of Balak, he could go "*itom*" - journey with them, but not with their designs in mind; although physically accompanying them, he was not to adopt their thoughts and ways. Yet when Bilaam arose that morning and saddled his ass, "he went with (*im*) the princes of Moab" – with their purpose in mind, to curse. Ignoring the implied warning, he hoped that he would be able to fulfil their request. It was then that Hashem became angry.

We all know how the sedra continues, with the donkey seeing the angel, and Bilaam not being able to, and how Bilaam struck the donkey in frustration at its seemingly strange behaviour. Miraculously, Hashem opened the donkey's mouth, and she asked Bilaam, "why did you hit me? Aren't I the same animal that you have ridden your entire life? Should not my strange behaviour give cause for concern?" (Bamidbar 22:28).

Our sages teach that this donkey was created at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation, inferring that this she-donkey possessed characteristics which transcend the laws of nature. What was the purpose of this dramatic deviation from natural law? This would be less surprising if the donkey had uttered some sublime lofty message, which was transmitted from on high, yet the donkey's message was "why did you hit me?" Why was it necessary to change the rules of nature for this modest statement? If it was so important for Bilaam to receive this rebuke, why couldn't the Angel transmit it?

The answer is, Bilaam still believed that **he** would be able to choose for himself what he would or would not say about the Bnei Yisroel. Hashem wanted to convince him once and for all, that the power of speech is a gift from Hashem, and is completely under his control. If Hashem wants a certain message to be spoken, then those words will be uttered. The most convincing way of demonstrating this principle is by having an animal, which doesn't even possess the capacity of speech, to open its mouth and talk.

When the angel, sword in hand, finally revealed himself, and chided Bilaam for striking the innocent animal, Bilaam was flabbergasted. He was left speechless save for one sentence. "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road. And if you want, I shall return" (Bamidbar 22:34).

What is disturbing is Bilaam's immediate admission of sin. If he could not see the angel why did he admit guilt?

Many riders would hit a donkey that presses their foot against a wall or crouches down amidst a group of a king's officers. Bilaam should have simply stated to the angel, "I did not know you were there and thought my beast was acting in a manner that required discipline." Why the apology? If he truly did not know that the angel was there, why did he admit to sinning?

Bilaam, the greatest of gentile prophets, realized that something must be wrong. A simple donkey saw the revelation of an angel. He did not. He realized that there are experiences he should have been able to grasp and appreciate. If he didn't, it was not the donkey's fault. It was not an angel's fault. It was his fault. He realized then and there that it was he who was lacking.