



## **Balak: Hearing the Message**

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We are often called the People of the Book, but perhaps we would be better described as the People of Miracles. It is difficult to comprehend how after thousands of years of persecution and barbaric treatment we are still here. Not only do we exist, but we continue to grow and thrive in both spiritual and material ways. Throughout our history, God has provided us with national and personal miracles. These miracles have sustained and inspired us in times of joy and distress. Miracles usually fall into two categories: There are utilitarian miracles, performed to remedy an immediate, necessary need e.g. the splitting of the sea, manna in the desert etc. Then there are teaching miracles which occur to impart to us a lesson or shape our ideology e.g. jug of oil which lasted 8 days.

In this week's Parsha we find a most peculiar miracle. After seeing the downfall of the two powerful Canaanite kings, Sichon and Og, Balak the King of Moav, realized that he could not defeat the Jewish nation through conventional means. Balak hatched a new plan. He dispatched messengers to the great gentile prophet, Bilaam with a simple request, "curse the Jewish people." As Bilaam traveled to the Jewish camp with the messengers of Balak, the Torah records an amazing episode. God dispatched an angel to stop Bilaam from carrying out this doomed mission, but Bilaam did not see the angelic emissary. However, Bilaam's donkey did, and as a result the donkey veered off the road and wandered into a nearby field. Bilaam, angered by this display of disobedience, struck the donkey. The Torah relates:

*"God opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Bilaam: 'What have I done to you, that you have hit me these three times?' Bilaam said to the donkey: 'Because you have ridiculed me; would that I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now.' The donkey replied to Bilaam, 'Am I not the very same donkey that you have been riding on all your life until this very day? Was it ever my habit to do this to you?' And he said: 'No.' God then enabled Bilaam to see, and he observed the angel of God standing in the way with his sword drawn in his hand. He bowed his head and prostrated himself on his face." (Bamidbar Chapter 22:28-31)*

This miraculous event begs a simple question. Why was this miracle necessary? What was the message being conveyed in this miraculous and supernatural event?

Rabbeinu Bachya (Spain, 1255-1340) explains: God performed this wondrous act, changed the regular laws of nature and allowed the animal to speak to teach us that even the animal understood that this mission was not appropriate and would not result in success.

In other words, the donkey was able to see what Bilaam was not. Already in the beginning of the Parsha when Bilaam was first approached by the messengers of Balak to curse the Jewish nation, Bilaam inquired of God as to whether he should go. God responded, "You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people because they are blessed." (Bamidbar 22:12) God made it clear from the beginning that if Bilaam's intent was to curse the Jewish people, he would not succeed. The people are blessed. But Bilaam was so intent on cursing them (either out of hatred or more likely because of the wealth and fame it would bring him) that he ignored the Divine warning and convinced himself he would succeed. He managed to convince himself to such a degree that he became oblivious to the signs unfolding all around him. His first attempted "curse" resulted in beautiful blessing. Then, his trusted donkey suddenly veered off course. There was an angel on the road with an outstretched sword. Sign after sign, yet Bilaam ignored each one. Numerous signs of Divine displeasure so obvious and clear that even the donkey understood what Bilaam did not.

It is here, in the midst of this story, that the Torah teaches us such a profound and crucial lesson. There are times in life when we are so desperate to believe that something is true. There are times when we feel compelled to perpetuate a particular reality. There are times when we have so much invested in our personality and life-style that even when we realize the need for change, we are reticent to do so. Instead we ignore certain realities and signs in order to sustain the life and identity we have created. Like the addict who refuses to see how his habit is destroying his life, we are often unable to see the realities of our life for what they are. We refuse to confront our demons and challenges. We prefer to live in a state of cognitive



dissonance in which we create an alternate reality for ourselves where our faults don't exist, our weaknesses are ignored and our problems remain unsolved.

Herein lies the true tragedy of the Bilaam story. God tried to prevent him from making this terrible mistake (that would later cost him his life). God spoke with him, sent messages and messengers, but Bilaam was too wrapped up in his contrived reality to see or heed what was really happening. God sends the signs but can't force us to see and internalize them.

We each put incredible amounts of time, effort and resources into constructing ourselves and our lives. As we continue on the journey of life, it is important to periodically take a step back to examine the lives we lead and the people we have become to make sure that we are travelling in the right direction. We should not keep living or acting a certain way by rote. If we possess negative traits or if our life *hashkafos* (values) are skewed or incorrect, we must find the strength to rethink and potentially restart. We must find the courage that Bilaam lacked and open our eyes, see the signs, modify, adjust and if need be - start again.