

## ***Balak*- What Did the Donkey Teach Us?**

This week, the *Torah* gives us a dramatic account of the attempt to destroy the Jewish people with an unusual type of warfare. *Balak*, king of *Moav*, requests that *Bilaam*, the resident prophet for the nations of that time, come and curse the Jewish people and bring *Hashem's* wrath upon them. *Bilaam* is very motivated to do so and sets off to meet *Balak* in the desert where they would choose a strategic spot to do the deed. On the way, *Bilaam* encounters an unusual problem. His donkey becomes very uncooperative and he cannot get her to stay on track, and eventually she refuses to move altogether. *Bilaam* is very frustrated and beats her with a stick. *Hashem* finally opens the mouth of the donkey and asks him why he is beating her. *Bilaam* seems nonplussed by his talking donkey and responds as anyone would when they are processing a disagreement with a peer. The conclusion is that the opposing angel who had been blocking the way becomes visible to *Bilaam* and tells him the donkey was right and that she saved his life.

This unusual story is difficult to understand. We know that *Hashem* did not give the power of speech to animals. Speech is one of the attributes which distinguishes man from the animals. Why would *Hashem* change that? Moreover, the *mishna* in *Avos* tells us that this donkey's ability to speak was prepared at the conclusion of the sixth day of creation. This implies that it was a critical "exception" to the natural course that *Hashem* planned for his world. It was so important that it was prepared over two thousand years in advance! Clearly this phenomenon of the talking donkey is really important. The donkey's speech doesn't seem to raise anything that great especially since the angel would reiterate the basic point to *Bilaam* that he was wrong to hit his donkey.

*Bilaam* is a caricature of a man who uses his human traits and abilities for all of the wrong things. He boasts that he "knows the mind of the One above," and he revels in the fact that he is a prophet. In Jewish thought, prophecy is the highest level man can achieve. *Bilaam* is vain, conceited, lustful and depraved. He thinks that he can "game the system" and use his unique powers to "coax" *Hashem* to do something that *Hashem* opposes. Like all humans, *Bilaam* is allowed his freedom to make choices and even to delude himself. He ends up leaving the scene humiliated, despised and exposed for whom he is.

The *Torah* tells us this story to show us *Hashem's* love for his people. However, it also is a cautionary tale for all human beings. We mustn't be fooled by the heights we achieve as humans. We still have an animal baseness, and we must keep that in check all of the time. If we don't, it will overtake us and destroy us.

This is the message of the talking donkey. It shows us that the externalities of human grandeur and ability are meaningless if it doesn't make us better, truer, more disciplined, kinder, etc. A donkey can talk and will remain a donkey. If we abuse speech or any other special human attribute, we won't be any better than an animal.