

WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE SADDLING OF A DONKEY

BY

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Goodness and evil manifest in so many ways, many overt, some subtle. Sometimes it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the two until it is too late. In our *parasha*, we see that either can begin in similar ways, that the same act can reveal very different outcomes!

The Torah describes two scenes that show the saddling of a donkey – one with Abraham, another with Bilaam. In these episodes, there is much that is shared – both arise early anxious for the task ahead; both forgo protocol to do the task themselves; both have a vision for the future. But here is where the episodes diverge, for one takes us toward love and meaning, the other toward hatred and nihilism. One envisions a noble future for a people; the other, destruction and pain.

Too often, we find our contemporary society on the path of Bilaam, as we, through tear filled eyes, hear news reports after news reports describing the horrible pain and suffering of mass shootings and other expressions of hate, of children losing parents and parents losing children.

We must ask ourselves; How did we arrive on this path? How, in the early morning mist, are we able to discern the good from the bad?

Rabbi Shraga Simmons notes in an article on *Aish.com* one example of the existential difference between Abraham and Bilaam. “The Torah reports that each of them ‘arose early in the morning and saddled his donkey.’ In Hebrew, the word for ‘saddled’ (*yayach vosh*) is closely related to the verb ‘to conquer.’ And the word for ‘donkey’ (*chamor*) matches the word for ‘physicality’ (*chomer*.)

“The interpretation is as follows – When Abraham ‘saddled his donkey,’ he conquered his physical drives in service of God. Thus, when Abraham went to receive prophecy at Mount Moriah, he leaves the donkey behind (Bereishit 22:5), as if to say, ‘I am free from the grip of desire.’

“Contrast this with Bilaam, who arose early in order to scheme the downfall of others in his pursuit of wealth and glory. In Bilaam’s case it is the donkey itself who gets the prophecy (Bamidbar 22:25) – proving itself on a higher level than Bilaam himself! No wonder God predicts Bilaam’s demise with the words, ‘Their forefather Abraham has already preceded you.’ (Sanhedrin 102b)”

What is one way to distinguish good from evil? When we can see, like Abraham, an ability and effort to see past greed, to overcome physical wants and needs in order to embark on a godly path we can be assured that we our leader is good. But what then drives Bilaam’s evil? And how can we recognize that path before it is too late?

After the forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness, the Promised Land was finally within reach. The Israelites had defeated two kings and now Balak, King of the Moab, was fully awakened to their might. In fear, he sent Bilaam, the sorcerer, to curse the Jews. Stealthily

approaching their camp, Bilaam embraced the king's fear and hatred and was prepared to do whatever necessary to curse and malign the Jewish people...

Chazal teach that deep hatred causes people to lose grasp of their most 'basic norms of conduct.' Here, Bilaam, the nations' prophet, found himself so filled with hatred that he dispensed with his dignity and *saddled his own donkey!* He did not wait for his servants and aids to do the task. He was rash, driven by his evil emotion. He never considered his donkey might be more perceptive than he. *Vayakam Bilaam!* Bilaam arose!

Rash and reckless! Wicked and hateful. Bilaam could not wait to lay waste to the Jewish people. If only he were an anomaly. But he is not. We see his image in the faces of antisemitism through the centuries and certainly in our own day. We see it in the eyes of the white supremacist who opens fire on innocents with weapons of war, cutting down lives, futures, worlds – potentials that he cannot imagine because he is blinded by hate.

Vile hatred. Hatred so wicked that, for Bilaam, it was his donkey herself that possessed the true wisdom.

The Torah devotes more than ten *pesukim* (Bamidbar 22:21-34) telling us about this donkey and her role in making clear Bilaam's folly and wickedness. Bilaam had taken on this "assignment" only with God's permission, hoping to ultimately and arrogantly flout His will. Fool! To demonstrate the weakness of Bilaam and his Moabite escort, God dispatched an angel with a drawn sword to block his way.

Driven by hatred and arrogance, Bilaam was blind to what his "lowly" donkey saw – an Angel of God blocking his way. What a strange scene! This "prophet", tasked to curse God's chosen, finding himself in a shouting match with his donkey (a shouting match he was doomed

to lose!) He curses the animal. He beats her. In response, the animal moves *sideways* rather than forward. Once, twice, *shalosh regalim* and still Bilaam continued to beat his donkey until God opened her mouth, so she could protest, “What have I done to you that you struck me these three times?”

“Because you mocked me!” Bilaam exploded. “If only there were a sword in my hand I would have killed, you!”

Rashi mocks Bilaam’s pathetic response, picturing him humiliated by his donkey. Here was a man who hoped to destroy an entire nation with his voice, yet he needs a sword to deal with one poor donkey!

Rav Dovid Feinstein Zt’l notes that when the donkey chastised Bilaam she said, “For you have struck me now three times (*shalosh regalim*).” (22:28) Generally, when the Torah uses the word *regalim* the term means “legs” or “feet”. If so, why use the term here? Why not use the term, *peamim* (times, occurrences)? Rav Dovid explains that *regalim* is also related to the word *rageel*, which means “habitual” or “regular”. So here we understand that the donkey was complaining that her master had become so *rageel*, so habituated, to striking her that he no longer recognized the singularity of her behavior. Evil had become banal.

Ultimately, God awakened Bilaam to the Angel, sword drawn, blocking his path.

In response to the Angel’s chastisement, Bilaam admitted, “I have sinned. For I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road.”

What kind of an answer is this? Why not just concede, “I didn’t see you?” or “I thought my donkey got lazy”? Yes, Bilaam was irate at his donkey but how did his outrage drive him to confess, “I have sinned”?

Was his sin that he beat the animal? It is doubtful he would have considered it so. Then was his sin that he hadn't seen the Angel? But if so, was that his fault? How does one "see" what one does not see?

Malbim tells us that Bilaam's sin was not that he didn't see but that *he should have seen!* Had he considered the meaning of his donkey's stubbornness rather than been driven by hatred, he would have known that an Angel was present. Not "getting it" isn't enough. *Why* didn't he get it? The Angel, of course, was as astonished as we are by Bilaam's blindness. "Don't you recognize an omen when it's right before you?"

Sefarim explain that a sin of omission is still a sin. Some things in life *must* be known. *Not* knowing or seeing certain things is the failure. The great *ba'al mussar* Rav Shlomo Wolbe said it perfectly, "In life we often find ourselves in situations in which we perceive only the donkey and fail to see the angel!"

It is on us to see the Angel!

Evil is not always in the seeing and doing! Sometimes, it is also in the *not* seeing and the *not* doing!

Yet, how can we teach ourselves to see the Angel? How can we train ourselves to see what is not readily apparent? To fully appreciate any truth, one needs to understand its contrast. Light is meaningless without darkness; freedom indecipherable without slavery; health unappreciated without illness.

To understand Bilaam's hatred, we need to understand and appreciate its opposite, Abraham's love. Like Bilaam, Abraham, "arose early in the morning, and he saddled his

donkey.” He arose to get the donkey ready for the long trip but in Abraham’s case, he arose early and took care of the saddling of his donkey because of love. As Rashi comments, “...love distorts the normal order of things.” Abraham didn’t wait for servants because love drove him forward, not hate.

Love. Hate. Both, of course, move us to action but it is on us to know *which* is our motivation!

Only by knowing – and seeing – both can we open our eyes clearly to the correct path.

It is not always easy to distinguish the Bilaams from the Abrahams in the early morning mist as they hasten to saddle their donkeys and hurry forward to their task. But distinguish we must for one, Bilaam, rises to hate and kill, the other, Abraham, to do the will of God, to *daven*, to learn, to help another human being....

The Seforno notes that it was God who opened the donkey’s mouth and gave her the power of speech so that Bilaam might “awake” to *teshuva*.

“Why did you hit your donkey three times” the Angel asks Bilaam. Seforno comments that, having seen all the “signs”, Bilaam *should have* concluded that going out to curse the Jews was unacceptable. The onus was on Bilaam to have seen what he chose not to see.

Too often, we are like Bilaam, too arrogant, greedy, needy and petty to see the right path directly in front of us. We intentionally blind ourselves to the Angel of mercy who stands in our path.

That is on us.

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It is our choice and obligation to open our eyes and to see, to rise early and to saddle ourselves with love.