Bil’am, and the lessons he learned from his donkey

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

This week’s Parasha is really unusual. We are not watching the same movie we were watching last week: the events of the Jewish people in the desert. The Tora’s camera now focuses on another scene, behind enemy’s lines. For a brief moment we are privileged witnesses of the dialogues and plans of those who want to destroy us. We see how they perceive us, and how they prepare to confront us. Three chapters of the Tora are dedicated to giving us a detailed look at the perspective of the adversary. A unique case in the Scriptures.

WHO WAS BILAM?

Although this Parasha is named after the King of Moab, Balaq, the main character is a very mysterious individual named Bil’am (Balaam). Who is Bil’am? According to our rabbis Bil’am was granted *nebuá* (prophecy), God revealed Himself to him, as He revealed to Moshe Rabbenu (Moses).

But we should not fall into the mistake of thinking that because God communicated with Bil’am, Bil’am resembled Moshe. Actually, the Sages point out, although both Moshe and Bil’am received a similar level of a prophetic message, the experience was processed by each of them in a completely different way.

MOSHE’S EXPERIENCE

The power to communicate with God made Moshe realize how small and limited he was. Moshe had questions, many questions to ask God. One of the issues that puzzled Moshe, for example, was the understanding (or lack of understanding) of God’s justice. How can it be that if God is *all good* (omnivolent) and all

powerful (omnipotent) and yet many righteous men suffer? However, after his encounter with God, this and other questions Moses had disappeared. But NOT because Moshe found a good answer to these issues; but because getting closer to God allowed Moshe to realize his insurmountable limitations. Communicating with God made Moshe Rabbenu understand *why he was not able to* understand. As he approached the Infinity of God, Moshe became aware of the infinitud of human smallness. Trying to understand "God's though" is completely beyond the cognitive abilities of a human being, however wise or intelligent he or she might be. That is why after experiencing the revelation of HaShem, Moshe, who was already a humble man, behaved with more humbleness. And it was thanks to the way he was able to process his closeness to God that Moshe became "the most humble man that ever was on the face of the earth" (Bamidbar 12:03).

THE EXPERIENCE OF BILAM

Bilam, on the other hand, also had a close encounter with God. A similar overwhelming epiphany experienced by Moshe Rabbenu. But Bil'am's reaction to this experience was exactly the opposite of Moshe's. When God revealed himself to Moshe, Moshe focused on God. But when God revealed to Bil'am, Bil'am focused on himself. Bilam thought that if God communicated with him, it was because he, Bilam, was a very special person. A unique individual. The chosen one. Bilam was convinced that he was the most important man on the face of the planet. And he acted that way. In this Parasha we see Bil'am behaving with extreme arrogance. Bil'am, for example, refers to himself in the third person (only Pharaoh acted on a similar manner). Bil'am also boasted that God spoke "through his mouth," as if he were His exclusive spokesman. Bil'am boasted of having the ability to destroy an entire nation, Israel, with the power of his word. Bilam thought that he could "force" the Divine will, and "make God do whatever he wanted." At one point he uttered the most arrogant phrase that has been written in the Tora,

yode'a da'at 'Elion, "[I am Bil'am], the one who understands the mind of the Almighty."

A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

We see how the same spiritual experience, the revelation of God, affected Bilam and Moshe Rabbenu in completely opposite ways. Moshe became the most humble man in history. And Bilam, the most arrogant.

A religious experience, ironically, can be "parve", neutral. There are religious leaders, of all faiths, who use their spiritual talents to help, to teach, to inspire. And there are others who in Bil'am's fashion, see their religious investiture as a way of feeling above others. Some religious leaders pretend to posses supernatural powers, and use them to take advantage of their naive congregants.

Nothing new under the sun…

WHEN DONKEYS SPEAK

As for Bil'am's conceited pretensions, our Rabbis pointed out that Bil'am received a lesson of humility from his donkey. When Bil'am was on his way to meet Balaq riding his donkey, the animal saw an angel, which frightened the donkey and made it turn off the road. Bil'am punished his donkey and threatened it with his sword. God, then, "opened the mouth of the donkey" and she revealed to Bilam that she had seen an angel.

Our rabbis explained:

Bil'am boasted that God "spoke through his mouth." Now, Bilam saw that even a donkey, who was never considered a very intelligent animal, could also speak and convey a Divine message, if God wanted it that way. Bil'am was not superior to his donkey!

Bil'am also claimed that he could destroy the entire nation of

Israel with its magical curses. But then why did he have to resort to his sword to kill his donkey? Bil’am’s superpowers were fake news!

Finally, Bil’am claimed that he understood the Mind of God. However, God shows Bil’am that he did not even understand the mind of his own donkey!

SHABBAT SHALOM