

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Balak)

5th January, 1895; the sharp sound of the sword broken over a soldier's knee reverberated across the Morlan Court of the Military academy in Paris. The captain stood at attention, but the sound made him flinch with the symbolic breaking of his sword and the even more painful and humiliating tearing of his rank-epaulettes off his shoulders, Captain Alfred Dreyfus' life was now broken. Accused of treason, he was sentenced to life imprisonment on the infamous Devil's Island, never again to hold his beloved children in his arms and or feel the caress of his wife's loving embrace.

The French command knew there was a traitor in their midst and as the enmity between them and the Germans grew in the period leading up to World War I, they were determined to find the person leaking secrets to the German High Command. Dreyfus, a Jewish Captain in the artillery assigned to the French High Command, was the natural scapegoat. It would take fifteen years before his defenders would be able to prove his innocence.

The real spy appears to have been Emil Esterhazy who framed Dreyfus; but it was the latent anti-Semitism of the day that allowed the courts, the military, and even much of the public to overlook the obvious discrepancies in the case and find Dreyfus guilty. (It would take over a decade for Dreyfus to eventually be fully exonerated and re-instated though no-one could ever return to him the years of his life he had lost, nor make up for the suffering he had endured...)

But Dreyfus did not suffer in vain, he was the catalyst for a momentous sea-change in Jewish history. France was one of the epicenters of European anti-Semitism, and as the mobs shouted, "Mort aux Juifs" (death to the Jews) a journalist assigned to cover the case realized that Jews would never be accepted as citizens of Europe. It was this terrible experience, this small trickle of Jewish independent idealism that would ultimately give birth to the nascent Zionist movement that would eventually become a raging river of determination ultimately giving birth to the State of Israel.

Alfred Dreyfus was ultimately the symbol that finally inspired the beginning of the Jewish people's return home, after two thousand years of wandering.

Incredibly though, Dreyfus never fully comprehended the role he had played, remaining a fully secular Jew until his death; feeling himself a wronged Frenchman rather than a targeted Jew.

There is a fascinating story in this week's portion of *Balak*. Bilaam, on his way to (he hopes) curse the Jewish people at the behest of *Balak*, the King of Moab, is confronted by a stubborn and rebellious donkey who seemingly refuses to obey his master's commands. Unaware that an Angel has blocked his path Bilaam begins to beat the donkey with his stick, until G-d opens the mouth of the donkey who actually has the chutzpah to talk back at his master. (Bamidbar (Numbers) 22: 27-30)

What is this story all about?

Interestingly the Mishna in Avot (Ethics of the fathers 5:1) cites the mouth of Bilaam's donkeys as one of the miracles created by G-d in the last moments of the six days of creation. Of course this raises some obvious questions: If prophecy in and of itself is a miracle then why was the donkey's mouth

specifically designated as requiring G-d to transcend the laws of nature as part of creation ; why for example does the Mishna not suggest that Moshe's prophecy was created by G-d as well?

Indeed, it is fascinating to note that Judaism juxtaposes the prophecy (and persona?) of Bilaam with that of Moshe:

Our Rabbis said:

*"No prophet like Moses has risen in Israel" (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 34:10)
There did not arise one in Israel, but among the nations there did arise one, and who was that? Bilaam. (Midrash Rabbah)*

Yet Moshe was considered the most humble man that ever lived whereas Bilaam is widely considered by Jewish tradition to have been extremely arrogant.

Moshe in fact eschewed a need for material things even claiming (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 16: 15) "... *I have not taken so much as a donkey from them...*"

Yet Bilaam clearly desired wealth, swayed as he was by Balak's offer of immeasurable financial reward. So how can humble Moshe be compared to arrogant Bilaam? And how could Bilaam have achieved the level necessary for prophecy as compared to Moshe *Rabbeinu*?

Perhaps the clue to understanding this episode is precisely in noting that Bilaam's donkey's ability to speak required a G-dly intervention; without a miracle a donkey could not speak, much in the way Bilaam could not, as an arrogant personality, have achieved prophecy were it not for Hashem's will and intervention causing a result outside the natural course of events.

Although many commentators disagreed with his position regarding the nature of prophecy, Maimonides (the **Rambam**) believed (*Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide to the Perplexed) 2:32), that prophecy is received by an individual who has perfected both his intellectual and imaginative faculties.

The intellect is defined as seeing and understanding what *is*.

The imaginative faculty (*Koach hadimayon*) is the intuitive ability to see what *is not* visible to the intellect.

In the Maimonidean model, God is always sending messages; human beings must refine their spiritual faculties in order to receive them. Additionally, in order to achieve the level of prophet, a person has to develop themselves to an ethical excellence that was the apex of the human experience.

Clearly, a donkey could not have achieved such a level, lacking as it does the personality and spirituality necessary (according to Maimonides) to be a vehicle for communicating G-d's word; as such it must be that Hashem intervened as it were and utilized the donkey simply as an empty vessel to make a point.

Hashem had to intervene and undermine the fabric of creation to allow this to happen. Bilaam was being told that despite his not having achieved such a level he was being used as a vessel to make a point; sadly, Bilaam, blinded by his own arrogance, never really gets it; he is a tragic, even evil messenger who misses his own message.

Much like Dreyfus, he has no idea of the role he played in the history of the world. What fundamentally separates Bilaam and Moshe is not just what they do, but who they are. Moshe is deeply impacted by the

word of G-d, and the experiences that surround him change him, and are a part of the process whereby he becomes a model of how a human being can come closer to the Divine, as well as have an enormous impact on the people and the world around him.

Balaam on the other hand, is like the donkey who, even after communicating the word of G-d remains nonetheless, a donkey. Bilaam is like a radio that transmitted a broadcast but when turned off remains the same radio. Despite the impact of his magnificent prophecy the one least affected by the prophecy of Bilaam, is Bilaam. (He will ultimately die as the protagonist in introducing the immorality and idolatry of the daughters of Midian...)

Prophecy changed Moshe forever, because Moshe changed himself in the journey that allowed him to receive prophecy. But prophecy washed right over Bilaam ...

Bilaam who described himself as "*He who knows the intentions of the Most High.*" was arrogant and thus was no better than his own donkey. Moshe however, was "the most humble man that ever lived ..." epitomizing the Rambam's approach of a human being who refined his character to such a high level as to be able to see G-d 'face to face'.

Bilaam is so full of Bilaam that nothing remains of G-d's word; he remains unaffected by the revelation he received. Moshe on the other hand created a vacuum by containing his ego such that there was room for his being filled with the presence of G-d.

Three thousand years later, do we choose to model ourselves as Bilaam, or in the footsteps of Moshe?

Are we cognizant of the incredible times in which we live? And are we aware that if we are too full of ourselves, we lose the opportunity to make room for others in our lives? Something to think about ...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman