

CHUKAS (NUMBERS 19:1- 25:9)

Will the REAL Jackass Please Speak Up?

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Who was the greatest of all the prophets? If you answered Moses you are right – sort of. In fact, the last three verses of the Torah confirm that Moses was the greatest of the prophets. However, in one aspect, Moses had some competition. Balaam, a non-Jewish magician, possessed a level of prophecy called, *"One who knows the mind of the Supreme One."* (Numbers, 24:16) Rashi explains that this means that Balaam had the ability to determine exactly when G-d was angry.

Balak, the King of Moab, contacted Balaam. Balak sought to take advantage of Balaam's unique spiritual talents. Balak was aware that the Israelites had defeated their enemies when they were assisted by G-d. He knew that he couldn't defeat them on his own. He hoped that a well-placed curse provided by the great sorcerer Balaam would lead to success. A group of messengers was dispatched to offer Balaam the job.

Balaam refused to go. G-d had appeared to him and told him that he was not to curse the blessed People of Israel. Balak then sent off a more distinguished delegation with a lucrative offer to convince him to change his mind. Balaam stood his ground -- sort of. *"If Balak were to give me a house full of silver and gold, I still would not be able to... violate G-d's word."* (22:18)

Still, he invited them to stay overnight to see if he might receive a new prophecy that would allow him to accept the job. This time, G-d gave Balaam permission to go with them. However, He warned Balaam that he would only be able to say what G-d would permit him to say. Balaam went. He didn't get it.

The rest of the Torah Portion describes events that were most frustrating to Balaam and Balak. An angel blocked Balaam's access on the road. The "great prophet" Balaam didn't see the angel, but his donkey did. Three times she refused to go past the angel. Three times he beat the stubborn donkey that wouldn't proceed. Miraculously, the donkey began to speak and reprimand him for beating her. The "great prophet" Balaam, who thought he could destroy an entire nation with his words began a desperate search for a sword with which to destroy his donkey.

Finally, the angel appeared to Balaam and showed him that apparently the donkey had more horse sense than her owner did. Still, if Balaam still wanted to go, he had permission, but would only be allowed to say what G-d would permit. Balaam went. He still didn't get it.

Once Balaam met with Balak on hills overlooking the Israelite camp, he had altars set up. The plan was to offer sacrifices to G-d before trying to curse His People. Balaam still didn't get it. Three times, Balaam tried to curse the Nation of Israel; three times, they came out as blessings. (One of his blessings, "*How good are your tents, Jacob, your Tabernacles, Israel*" (24:5), has become part of our daily prayers, recited when entering the synagogue each morning.) Fired from his job by Balak, Balaam went home in disgrace.

What was going on in Balaam's head? How could a great oracle who was "*One who knows the mind of the Supreme One*," make such a mistake? How could he be so blind to the fact that G-d didn't want him to go on this mission? How did this brilliant prophet allow his donkey to make a jackass out of him?!

The answer can be seen from one of Balaam's communications with Balak: "*If Balak were to give me **a house full of silver and gold, I still would not be able to... violate G-d's word.*" Balaam let his weakness show: "*If Balak were to give me a house full of silver and gold...*" Rashi points out that we see here that Balaam, for all his powers of prophecy, was motivated by simple greed. He kept trying different ways, different approaches, to get G-d to allow him to curse the Israelites, so he could collect a hefty fee.

This is especially fascinating when we realize that according to the Talmud, Balaam was a descendant of Laban, the father-in-law of Jacob. There are even some commentaries that suggest that Balaam was none other than Laban himself! Balaam/Laban was so blinded by the attraction of wealth that he was willing to curse his own flesh and blood!

Isn't it amazing what people will do for money? We often meet "devout" people (of all religions) whose religious scruples are checked at the front doors as they walk into work each morning. After all, they reason, religion is religion, and business is business.

I work part-time in the mortgage business. I have learned, unfortunately, from some of my "colleagues" that the easiest way to get customers is to be less than totally up-front with the client at application; there will be plenty of time to add on fees and change the rate before the closing. I once lost a client to a competitor who was lying to him. I lost the client because I refused to out-lie my competitor. The customer found out too late that he had to come up with more money for closing costs. Ironically, my ex-client became my best friend, advising everyone to come to me for their mortgages.

Balaam's logical thinking and fear of Heaven were distorted by his love of money. Our income for the year is decided on Rosh Hashanah. When we compromise our values by looking at the world through cash-colored glasses, we see only the dollar signs, and end up making donkeys of ourselves.

Have a great Shabbos Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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