

"And Hashem opened the mouth of the she-donkey ... And the she-donkey said to Bilaam, 'Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day?'" (22:28,30)

The "*mouth of the she-donkey*" -- or the miracle of the she-donkey's speech -- is mentioned as one of the ten supernatural phenomena which originated during the period of time between the end of the sixth day of Creation and the commencement of *Shabbos*. We can glean profound lessons from the necessity for such a miracle. We would like to place emphasis upon the actual statement the she-donkey made and the lessons we learn from it. *Horav Yitzchak Rabinovitz, z.l.*, who was better known as *Reb Itzele Ponievezzer*, used the following homiletic illustration to admonish a group of ill-mannered individuals who were determined to disturb a meeting by arguing about their respective pedigrees.

Reb Itzele said that the donkeys came to Hashem with a complaint, "Why are we always put down as the fools of the animal kingdom? Aren't we the most hardworking? Many animals roam wild, while we maintain our allegiance to our master. We never rest, we are constantly called upon to serve day or night. What is our reward for all this hard work? Frequent beating? Please Hashem, grant us the ability to speak, so that we may be able to communicate our pain and perhaps receive some consideration from our masters."

Hashem responded to their request, saying, "I will give one of you an opportunity I have never before accorded to any other animal. I will grant the power of speech to one of you, and we will see what will be the result." The opportunity came, years later, when the evil Bilaam left on a mission to curse *Bnei Yisrael*. Knowing full well the futility of this undertaking, his she-donkey challenged her master and attempted to prevent him from going.

Indeed, the donkey had prepared an eloquent speech, "Bilaam, you intend to kill a whole nation with your tongue, but for me you require a sword!" These striking words would have left an indelible impression on Bilaam. What did the donkey say, however, to fulfill his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Did she use *chochmah*, wisdom, or did she think like a donkey when she uttered her famous statement? When she opened her mouth to speak for the first time, she said, "*Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day?*" A donkey is a donkey! This "foolish" animal presented evidence why she lacked the power of speech with this statement.

The first chance she had to convey an important message, she started bragging about herself. The first thing that came to her mind was -- herself! Rather than take the opportunity to speak on behalf of *Bnei Yisrael*, she talked about her own pedigree and glory. Whereupon Hashem responded, "If this is how you apply My unique gift; if this is what you do with this glorious opportunity; if instead of defending others you glorify yourself, then, the power of speech will continue to be beyond your grasp. Return to your speechless state! Until you learn to live and speak for others as you do for yourself, you will continue being the dumb creature you have always been."

This "narrative" and its homiletic rendering are truly thought provoking. The power of speech is one of Hashem's greatest gifts. It distinguishes between man and animal. This gift should be used for the loftier things in life and thought, not as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement and vain pride. As *Horav Moshe Swift, z.l.*, notes, the test of a person's greatness is how he stands up in the defense of others. An individual who has the opportunity to come to the defense of others, but instead tries to absolve himself by saying, "I had nothing to do with it," is making the speech of a donkey.

Bilaam's donkey had the greatest opportunity, but used it to defend herself. We must learn from this narrative that we do not simply live for ourselves. Our purpose on this earth is to help others. The success or failure of our lives is commensurate with our ability to apply ourselves to attain this goal.