

"And Bilaam said unto the angel of Hashem, 'I have sinned for I did not know that you stood against me in the way.'" (22:34)

Bilaam's statement seems enigmatic. How could it be considered sinful if, in fact, he was not aware of the angel's presence? The commentators explain that this ignorance is in itself a sin. There are situations in which one must be acutely cognizant of who he is and before whom he stands. For example, a child can never justify striking a parent. Similarly, the king's closest aide can not claim that he is not aware of the king's identity. Likewise, a prophet must always be cognizant of the presence of the Eternal. For Bilaam to assert that he was unaware of the angel's presence is in itself a sin. This is Bilaam's refrain to the angel, "I sinned by not knowing, because as a prophet I must at all times be aware of an angel's presence before me."

There is a story concerning *Rav Chaim Sanzer, z.l.*, which should be noted by all community leaders, spiritual as well as lay leaders. *Rav Chaim* once asked the rabbi of a nearby city why he did not respond to the dire need of one of his congregants. The rabbi replied, "I was unaware of his serious situation." *Rav Chaim* was taken aback and responded, "Regarding Bilaam, it is written that he said, 'I sinned because I did not know.'" This teaches us that lack of knowledge is in itself a sin. A community rabbi must consider it his personal mandate to know if one of his members is suffering. If he does not know, he has sinned."

This statement should have a profound effect on everyone. It is indisputably our moral obligation to sensitize ourselves to the needs of the community. We must seek out individuals who are in need. Biding time often results in tragedy for the one in distress. Coming forward to request assistance requires an amazing amount of courage. It behooves us to find a way to prevent one who is in need from undergoing this humiliating experience. Perhaps in the merit of helping others, we will not have reason to be concerned for ourselves.