

"And the she-donkey turned away from the road and went into the field ... and the angel of Hashem stood in the path of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side ... and (the angel) stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn." (22:23,24,26)

Rashi cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* which explains that the angel's threefold appearance symbolizes that Bilaam's efforts to curse the Jews, descendants of the three Avos, Patriarchs, were all in vain. It was as if each time a different Patriarch blocked the path of Bilaam's donkey. The first time the angel appeared, ample space remained for the donkey to escape on either side. This indicated that had Bilaam wished to curse Avraham's descendants, he would have had two options. He could curse the offspring of either Avraham's son, Yishmael, or of Avraham's wife, Keturah. He was not, however, permitted to curse the offspring of Yitzchak, the true son of Avraham. The next time, the angel revealed himself on a path that allowed the donkey room to escape on only one side. This implied that if Bilaam had intended to curse the descendants of the second Patriarch, Yitzchak, he would have had to address only the offspring of his son Eisav. The third time, the angel appeared in a place that offered no escape for the donkey. This suggested that an attack against Yaakov's progeny would have proved futile, because they were all righteous.

Keeping in mind that each time the she-donkey stopped represented an encounter with a different Patriarch, we would like to suggest another explanation for this narrative. We will apply a famous homiletic exposition made by *Horav Elchanon Wasserman, z.l.*, to explain why Eisav's angel sought only to fight with Yaakov. Why did he not attack the two earlier Patriarchs? *Horav Wasserman* explains that each Patriarch personified a different attribute with which he served the Almighty. The first Patriarch, Avraham, embodied the quality of *gemilus chasadim*, performing acts of loving-kindness. This was his way of serving Hashem and teaching others about Him. He reached out to a pagan society with material and spiritual sustenance.

When Eisav's angel looked at Avraham and his good deeds, he did not become overly concerned. *Gemilus chasadim* is not the lifebreath of the Jewish People. True, the Jewish record in philanthropy is remarkable, if not phenomenal, but it has not been effective in counteracting assimilation or spiritual indifference. The dynamics of *tzedakah* and the overt concern we have shown to the downtrodden, ill, and impoverished is exceptional. It provides no guarantee, however, for the future of *Klal Yisrael*. Similarly, the first time the angel appeared before Bilaam's donkey, it represented Avraham *Avinu* and his embodiment of the attribute of *chesed*; there was room to move on either side, because *chesed* is not a guarantor against spiritual alienation. Bilaam could curse *Bnei Yisrael* despite their devotion to philanthropic and humanitarian needs.

We now return to Eisav's angel and the reason he did not attack Yitzchak. The second Patriarch personified *avodah*, prayer and worship. Yitzchak served Hashem through the devotion of prayer.

He was constantly in spiritual communion with the Almighty. The *Satan*, the angel most commonly identified with Eisav, was still not threatened by Yitzchak's manner of serving Hashem. Prayer is a wonderful and necessary medium. Jews have always been depicted as going to the shul, wrapped in *tallis* and *tefillin*, finding meaning in life through the beautiful and moving words of the *siddur*. Many individuals, however, become complacent with synagogue attendance. They continue to pray, but it has become a mundane and routine matter. For many, this has been the reason their shul attendance starts to wane. After awhile, they no longer pray at home either. We have built impressive, magnificent edifices to be used as houses of prayer, which -- unfortunately -- have been transformed into mausoleums, devoid of life and vitality. The *Satan* had no urge to strike at Yitzchak. His manner of serving Hashem did not ensure Jewish survival and continuity.

Similarly, the second time the angel appeared before Bilaam, he reflected Yitzchak's mode of devotion to Hashem. Although the level of religious conviction personified by "*avodah*" was greater than "*gemilus chasadim*," it did not preclude all avenues for cursing the Jews. There was still one side to which the donkey could turn. Bilaam could still harm us.

However, the third appearance of the angel precluded curse, as it was also the cause of greater concern for the *Satan*. Yaakov *Avinu*, the third Patriarch, was devoted wholeheartedly to one thing -- *Torah* study. He lived for *Torah* study. Every moment of his existence was an embodiment of *Torah* study. It was his guiding light, his source of spiritual sustenance during his darkest moments of trial and travail.

Despite his commitment to *chesed*, Avraham was not successful in conveying the *Torah* way of life to all his children. He succeeded only with Yitzchak who continued to serve the Almighty, but also focused upon prayer as the approach for serving Hashem. Prayer is not always sufficient to guarantee eternal commitment. Not everyone has the inner ability to pray. Yitzchak's son, Eisav, did not follow in his father's footsteps. Only Yaakov continued along the path to Hashem. Knowing that prayer alone was not enough, he served Hashem through the relentless study of *Torah*. Yaakov's devotion to *Torah* study produced results; his twelve sons all remained faithful, carrying on the legacy of their father. Now the *Satan* became "nervous." Yaakov's way of serving Hashem could prove "dangerous" and must be stopped at all costs.

Likewise, via the angel's third appearance, which represented Yaakov and his dedication to *Torah* study, Bilaam was given a clear message. He could not curse *Bnei Yisrael* if they remained committed to *Torah* study. It is their lifeblood and source of Eternity. The *Torah* links us with Hashem in a unique way. Our commitment to *Torah* study renders us impervious to the curses and condemnations of the Bilaams of every generation.