

“If Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem.” (22:18)

Rashi notes that by speaking of silver and gold, Bilaam revealed his true character: a greed-filled desire for money and the power that accompanies it. The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* 6:9, relates that the *Tanna* Rabbi Yose *ben* Kisma once met a Jew from another community who offered the sage the opportunity to move to his city where he would set him up with whatever material needs he would require. Rabbi Yose replied, “If you were to give me all the silver, gold and precious stones in the world, I would only make my home in a city of Torah.” Are we confronting a double standard? When Bilaam says it, according to *Chazal*, he is manifesting greed, whereas, when Rabbi Yose makes a similar declaration negating all the world’s wealth for a bungalow in a Torah community, *Chazal* view his comment in a positive light.

Likutei-Basar *Likutei* quotes the *D’vash v’Chalav* who explains that the difference lies in the ludicrousness of his demand. If a person is asked to perform a certain activity for which his response is, “Give me all of the skyscrapers in Manhattan and balance the Empire State Building in the palm of your hand,” one knows clearly that he is not interested in carrying out what the person is asking of him. His request is laughable and totally unachievable. He is obviously not serious. If, however, he demands the sum of one million dollars for the task, it is doable and indicative of his desire to perform the task – but at his price. He is not making a ridiculous, highly exaggerated request. It is achievable and within the realm of imagination.

Rabbi Yose was making a statement which goes beyond the improbable: All of the money in the world is an impossibility. He was thereby implying to the man that absolutely, no way am I interested in your proposition. Bilaam was a greedy malcontent who sought wealth and honor, but he was realistic. He knew that he could not have it all. He would settle for Balak’s house filled with wealth. To him, this was realistic.

Peninei Kedem takes a different approach – one which is very practical and, regrettably, all too common. Bilaam said, “Even if Balak gave me everything, I could not transgress G-d’s command.” He was therefore implying: “I would like to. I would do it differently. I really agree with you. I also hate the Jews; but what can I do? I cannot go up against G-d. He is more powerful than I.” Rabbi Yose said that there was no room for negotiation. He was not interested in discussing the matter further, because he would only live in a *makom Torah*, a community that was Torah-oriented and fully ascribed to Torah dictate.

How often do we “accept” what occurs in our life with the notion: “I really am not very happy with this. I would do it differently, but I do not have the power to challenge G-d. He is stronger than I am.” Perhaps we do not outright say this, but are we certain that we are not implying it by various expressions and excuses?