

"And Bilaam smote the donkey to turn her into the way... And she lay down under Bilaam and he smote the donkey with a stick." (22:23-27)

At first glance it appears, that Bilaam smote the donkey simply in order to turn her onto the correct path. The sequence of *pesukim*, however, seems to indicate that he smote the donkey in response to her ridicule, a public demonstration of lack of respect. *"And Bilaam said unto the donkey, for you have mocked me, if there were a sword in my hand, I would now kill you."* (22:29) It seems incredible that Bilaam would want to kill his donkey for exhibiting disrespect toward him. Indeed, as *Horav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Z"l* explains, this is the nature of an arrogant person. An arrogant individual is so obsessed with gratifying his own enormous ego that he might even demand "respect" from a simple animal. In fact, Bilaam was prepared to kill his donkey for its "insolence" toward him, even though he would be forced to return home by foot. He perceived this as a "small price" to pay, so that his donkey would be properly "punished" for its audacity.

As unbelievable as this may seem, there is a rational basis for Bilaam's action. People with feelings of inadequacy often attempt to sublimate these disturbing feelings into domination of others. This control is executed either through physical subordination or emotional manipulation and humiliation. Those who have appropriate self-esteem do not have the need to prove themselves at the expense of others. Power hungry people, either within a family structure or in a larger social framework, are usually individuals whose need to dominate represents an unconscious effort to overcome their own feelings of inferiority. Egocentrism causes one to limit his horizons, so that he cannot relate to the omnipotence of the Almighty. The closer one is able to move towards Hashem, the less central his own essence becomes. Thus, humility is the hallmark of a truly great person. Our individual potential will be realized in consonance with our ability to transcend our own petty narcissistic concerns and to redefine our aspirations toward serving Hashem.