

Bilaam said to Balak... “Am I empowered to say anything? Whatever words G-d puts into my mouth, that shall I speak.” (22:38)

Bilaam is a lesson in stark contrasts. On the one hand, he personifies evil and depravity at their nadir. Arrogant, condescending, avaricious and profligate, he was the consummate symbol of unmitigated evil. Yet, this same person spoke to Hashem and was able to maintain a dialogue on subjects that were of the loftiest esoteric and spiritual nature. How do these two polar opposites exist in one person? *Horav Eliezer HaLevi Turk, Shlita*, quotes from *Horav Chunah Kletzki, zl*, a student of the *Radin Yeshivah*, who, in his old age, made his domicile in Lakewood. He related that there was a man in Radin who was strange. He did things his way, regardless of how others perceived him. Additionally, he thrived on garnering attention for himself. As a result, he taught his dog to understand *Yiddish*! Even those Jews who felt the “need” to raise a dog “conversed” with it in Polish – never *Yiddish*. But, as I prefaced above, this man was not the run-of-the-mill, ordinary member of the community. The children of the community would follow the dog, attempting to get its attention. They pulled on his tail, his ears. After all, a dog that understood *Yiddish* was a novelty for them, and, thus, an opportunity for some fun.

Even a dog loses its patience, and one day after numerous assaults by the fun-loving children, the intelligent dog lost it and bit one of the young boys. They were shocked. How could such a “refined” dog act so viciously? He was acting like a dog! *Rav Chunah* explained, “A dog remains a dog regardless of its ability to speak *Yiddish*! The same idea applies to serving Hashem.” Continued *Rav Chunah*, “One who is deficient in his *middos*, his character traits, leaves much to be desired, does not change until he expunges these deficiencies and cleanses himself of his ethical and moral impurities. He will remain the same lowlife as before – despite his exposure to G-dliness.

This was Bilaam’s life story. A man who personified every ethical and moral shortcoming – yet received prophecies from Hashem. His comfortable relationship with -- and access to -- the highest spiritual spheres, notwithstanding, Bilaam remained Bilaam – a dog remains a dog – even if he is taught to speak *Yiddish*. In fact, he employed his unique knowledge of what angers Hashem – moral depravity – to cause the Jews to sin with the Midyanite women. He knew that Hashem loves us for our moral chastity. He sought to undermine that relationship.

I think this is why Bilaam could not come to grips with *mussar*, rebuke, his donkey issued to him. Bilaam was acutely aware that his moral hypocrisy was so blatant that even his donkey understood what he was. This was too much for him to grapple with. Nothing shatters arrogance like the rebuke of a donkey.