

Hashem opened the mouth of the she-donkey and it said to Bilaam, “What have I done to you?” (22:28)

Bilaam struck his donkey three times – unaware that it was Hashem who was impeding Bilaam’s path. The donkey just stood and refused to go forward. Bilaam was clueless to this, therefore, like most arrogant people who are incapable of accepting the truth, he lashed out at his donkey. Three words – “What have I done to you?” was all the donkey said in admonishing Bilaam. His reaction was, “If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you!” (Ibid. 22:29). All Bilaam could think of was the donkey’s impertinence to him. After all, he was the greatest pagan prophet to have lived, and this was a simple brainless donkey. How dare he speak to him so impudently!

The entire scenario speaks volumes about Bilaam’s evil arrogance. As the *Brisker Rav*, *zl*, was wont to say, “How low can a person become, how debased, to expect and demand honor from a donkey – who is not known for its sharp acumen?” Its reproof to Bilaam, “What did I do to you?” has become the example of even the simplest rebuke which an arrogant person could not tolerate. The truth hurts, because it makes us confront something which we have relegated through the medium of denial to a corner of our mind. Truth reveals the hidden lies we have denied or covered up. Bilaam could not deal with the sudden exposure to the fact that a simple animal could put him in his place. His response was to threaten to kill the donkey. He would rather destroy than chance exposure. As someone once said, “Arrogance is fear in denial.” An arrogant person cannot – or will not – confront a realistic evaluation of himself, for fear of confronting the truth: he has been living an imposter’s life. He is not really the person he presents himself to be. One can have no greater shame than that. Thus, Bilaam felt the need to kill the donkey – all because of three truthfully spoken words, *Mah asisi lach*, “What did I do to you?”