

DIVINING CONSISTENCY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The she-donkey said to Bilam, "Am I not your she-donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing to you?" He said, "No."

Be'er Yosef: A midrash² warns us to look closely at this dialogue, because it could spare us much future embarrassment. Told off by his favorite mode of transportation, Bilam is reduced to silence, to a "guilty as charged" response to a talking donkey. "Bilam, the wisest among the nations, still could not stand up to the rebuke of his own donkey...Yosef was the youngest of the brothers [whom he addressed], yet all of them could not answer him when he rebuked them...[Imagine how more intimidating it will be when] Hashem Himself comes to rebuke each and every person, according to what he is."

It is fairly easy to comprehend the connection between Yosef, talking donkeys, and Hashem's scrutinizing our lives at Judgment Day. On the level of simple pshat, the midrash warns us that we are going to be shown up on our day of personal reckoning, and that the experience will be devastating. We don't do well when we are shown up, as illustrated by the examples of Bilam and Yosef's brothers. Why, though, does the midrash emphasize that Hashem will rebuke every person "according to what he is?"

Rationalization is a powerful boon to transgression. While we sometimes sin by yielding to temptation, knowing full well that what we are doing is forbidden, more often we rationalize. We convince ourselves that the circumstances are exceptional; that the Torah's restriction was not really meant to apply to the case at hand. Or we tell ourselves that the Torah did not have us in mind when it imposed some law - that we are privileged to stand outside of it. We find it easier to transgress when we tell ourselves that we do nothing wrong.

The point of the midrash is that Hashem, who knows all of our deeds and thoughts, will destroy our rationalizations by demonstrating that our own behavior at other times was not consistent with the argument of the rationalization. If effect, we are forced by Him to convict ourselves through our own inconsistencies. We will be unmasked as hypocrites. We stand accused "according to what we are," i.e. according to how we behave at other times in a manner that unseats our rationalizations. Being exposed will hurt.

Thus the reference to Yosef and the brothers. Yehudah had just pleaded for mercy, not by insisting on their own innocence. That would have been impossible, after having been discovered pilfering

the royal goblet. Instead, Yehudah begged for mercy for his aged father, who would surely not survive the heartbreaking news of the loss of Binyamin.

Yosef's retort demolished the self-assurance of the brothers regarding Yosef's sale, many years before. "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" Perhaps you convinced yourself that I was a mortal threat to the rest of you, and you adjudged me to deserve to die. Let's grant that for a moment. But when I cried out to you for mercy from the bottom of the pit - as you just cried out to me for mercy, invoking the health of our father - why were you not concerned then about how Father would take the news?

They had no response. The argument they had just used to argue for clemency was inconsistent with their record of the past. Facing up to that inconsistency was painful.

The dialogue between Bilam and his she-donkey unfolds in the same way. Bilam strikes his animal for apparently veering off the road, and injuring the leg of the rider to boot. In Bilam's mind, this is perfectly appropriate. The donkey is an animal, and he is a human being. Humans are expected to rule over animals, and to compel their compliance with the wishes of their owners. Nothing extraordinary about that; nothing for which to apologize.

But the relationship between Bilam and his she-donkey, according to Chazal, had a darker side to it - a "romantic" relationship. The animal's speech is a veiled allusion to this. You've been guilty of bestiality. While a human may exercise certain privileges over animals, an animal in human garb may not. And you, Bilam, are nothing more than an animal yourself. As such, you have no business beating me.

Bilam had no effective response. And neither will we, to myriad inconsistencies in our behavior when they are pointed out to us on our day of judgment by Hashem who will judge each of us "according to what he is."

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 22:30
 2. Bereishis Rabbah 93:10
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