

TRICKS OF THE TRADE -- TRADE OF THE TRICKS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

"Those who live by the sword," the clichéd expression goes, "die by it as well."

What about those who live by other means of evil? What happens to those who live by the curse, do they die by the curse? Or do they die by the sword as well?

Parshas Matos tells us of the fate of Bilaam ben Be'or, the world's most trusted and experienced sorcerer, whose curses never failed to hit their mark. Bilaam was hired by the king of Moav to curse the Jews and only through the merciful intervention of the Almighty's Divine Hand were his efforts thwarted.

After his original scheme had failed, Bilaam devised a plot that found the chink in our spiritual armor. He advised Balak to seduce Klal Yisrael to sin with Midianite women.

The Jews unfortunately fell prey to his plot and the wrath of Hashem was unleashed against His people. Thousands of Jews were killed in a plague and if not for the brave intervention of Pinchos, the grandson of Ahron, the toll would have been higher.

But now it was time for payback. Moshe amassed an army led by Pinchos, which struck Midian hard. The Torah tells us: "They massed against Midian, as Hashem had commanded Moses, and they killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian along with their slain ones - Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian; and Balaam son of Beor they slew with the sword." (Numbers 31:7-8).

The final few words of the posuk raise a question: Does it really make a difference how they killed Bilaam? They killed him. Does it make a difference if they killed him by drowning or they killed him by arrows. Perhaps the Jewish nation gave him a taste of his own medicine and cast a spell upon him like he attempted to do to Klal Yisrael? Is it really significant to tell how the Jews killed Bilaam? Why does the Torah tell us how he died?

The commentaries contrast the normal method in which Jews did battle — their mouths, with the way our Biblical nemesis Esav did battle — his sword. In this case, the roles seem reversed. Bilaam used his mouth, we used the sword. Is there a lesson in that as well?

World champion heavyweight boxer Joe Lewis reigned for over a decade from the late 1930s to his retirement in 1949. As a black man, he endured racist abuse despite his status as a major sports hero.

During his period of army service, he was driving with a fellow GI when he was involved in a minor

collision with a large truck. The truck driver got out, yelling and swearing racial epithets at Louis, who just sat in the driver's seat smiling.

"Hey you're Joe Lewis! You're not gonna let him get away with that! Why didn't you get out and knock him flat?" asked his buddy after the truck driver had moved on.

"Why should I?" replied Joe. "When somebody insulted Caruso, did he respond by singing an aria?"

Rashi explains the Torah's underlying aim in telling us how Bilaam was killed. Bilaam was a descendant of Esav, whose existence and métier was decreed centuries before by his father Yitzchak, "'And by your sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40). Yaakov's weapon of choice throughout history came from Yitzchak's words, "the voice is the voice of Yaakov," it is through Yaakov's mouth — through prayer and petition, persuading and cajoling that he was most successful. Bilaam did not use his trademark weapon — the sword — against Israel. Instead he attempted to cast a spell upon the Israelites, Bilaam switched venues and used the mouth — the instrument of brother Yaakov.

And so, explains Rashi as Bilaam exchanged his métier for the métier of Israel, Hashem showed the world that we do not have to rely solely upon our weapons of choice. As Bilaam exchanged his weapon, we, too, exchanged ours.

When it comes to dealing with our enemies, we have to use every appropriate means that fits the needs of the hour. Despite the fact that we are the people of words, we must know when to put our forte aside and use a different tool. Because in order to survive, we need not only know the tricks of the trade, but also how to trade our tricks!

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