

WRINKLES!

by Rabbi Label Lam

"Behold! a people has come out of Egypt. Behold it has covered the eye of the land and it rests opposite me. So now come and invoke a curse upon this people for me, for it is more powerful than me; perhaps I will succeed, we will strike at it and I will drive it away from the land, for I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." (Bamidbar 22:5-6)

In this moment of desperation Balak appeals to the lone prophet of the gentiles, Bilaam to work the wonders of his craft upon the Jewish People. With which instrument is he to attack? His mouth! He is to launch words! He has no atomic bomb or standing army or secret weapon except for his power of speech. Isn't that odd? The entire threat of against the Nation of Israel, ready to enter the promised-land, is in the form of a few dangerously distributed daggers of the tongue. How can that possibly spell a credible peril?

Words are not benign items like decorative furniture that they exist for our convenience or beauty alone. King Solomon had acknowledged that "Life and death are in the hands of the tongue!" The famous British poet Rudyard Kipling expressed it this way, "Words are the most intoxicating drug known to man!" Isn't it so!? Lives rise and fall on a single word! People get courage to carry on or so discouraged to end it all, based on the slight turn of a phrase. It makes a world of difference if the message says, "I love you!" or "I hate you!" Feelings rush and roar and rage in one direction or another depending on whether "You're hired!" or "You're fired!" How many professions are built on the artful science of combining letters and mixing words? Psychologists and writers and lawyers and teachers and statesmen and salesmen and many more are all earning their worth almost entirely by merely fashioning phrases.

Why is it, that words are so central to our existence? Is it only because we need to share practical information? I don't think so! The entire world was created by G-d with words! We say every day in our liturgy, "Blessed is He Who spoke and the world came to be!" That G-d said, "Let there be light! And it was so... so light continues to run at 186,000 mile per second to this very day! That heavenly mandate still reverberates through the cosmos! Since humanity was created in the image of G-d, with a breath of life, our ability to speak is unique and a feature we share with the Divine! We can create or utterly crush worlds with mere utterances of the tongue! Those articulate sounds are not just waves that temporarily tickle our ears! Words are forever!

Bilaam had a terrific talent for words! He painted the ultimate portrait of positivity about our ancient

people with his few well-chosen words. We live on them till today, even though it was not his original intent. "How goodly are your tents Yaakov..." Had he been allowed to push his wicked agenda and say anything other than the truth who knows how he would have distorted our image as the Merchant of Venice or some other libelous lie that taints our legacy and haunts us now for thousands of years! The Bilaam's of the world are still on the prowl and we are frequently torpedoed with titles we don't deserve like "racist" for just daring to exist?

On the local level though, we can all appreciate how people are broken or built by just a very few words! An elderly woman and her little grandson, whose face was sprinkled with bright freckles, spent the day at the zoo. Lots of children were waiting in line to get their cheeks painted by a resident artist who was decorating them with tiger paws.. "You've got so many freckles, there's no place to paint!" a girl in the line said to the little boy. Embarrassed, the little guy dropped his head. His grandmother knelt down next to him. "I love your freckles. When I was a little girl I always wanted freckles," she said, while tracing her finger across the child's cheek. "Freckles are beautiful!" The boy looked up, "Really?" "Of course," said the grandmother. "Why just name me one thing that's more beautiful than freckles." The little boy thought for a moment, peered intensely into his grandmother's face, and softly whispered, **"Wrinkles!"** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.