

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

by Rabbi Label Lam

G-d's wrath flared because he was going, and an angel of HASHEM stationed himself on the road to thwart him, and he was riding on his she-donkey, and his two servants were with him. The she-donkey saw the angel of the Lord stationed on the road with his sword drawn in his hand; so the she-donkey turned aside from the road and went into a field. Balaam beat the she-donkey to get it back onto the road. The angel of HASHEM stood in a path of the vineyards, with a fence on this side and a fence on that side. The she-donkey saw the angel of HASHEM, and she was pressed against the wall. She pressed Balaam's leg against the wall, and he beat her again. The angel of HASHEM continued going ahead, and he stood in a narrow place, where there was no room to turn right or left. The she-donkey saw the angel of HASHEM, and it crouched down under Balaam. Balaam's anger flared, and he beat the she-donkey with a stick. HASHEM opened the mouth of the she-donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam said to the she-donkey, "For you have humiliated me; if I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." (Bamidbar 22-29)

What a bizarre episode! Bilaam defies explicit instructions from the Almighty not to go and curse the blessed Nation of Israel. Meeting with continual frustration by his blundering beast of burden, he remains undeterred, and even gets into a fight with his donkey. If at any early point he would have gotten the "hint" and turned back this chapter might never have been recorded and he may have saved himself from the ugly title "wicked". Those bumps and bruises on the road should have given him pause to arrest himself and reverse directions. His overpowering desires blinded him to the obvious warning signs, as he drove recklessly into the abyss of human history.

Cogitating on Bilaam's condition awakens an incident from more than 34 years ago when I was yet an unmarried Yeshiva student. (I have often shared this story in the quiet of my office when counseling boys who felt compelled to hit someone when provoked by not more than an unkind word.) I was spending a summer in Lakewood New Jersey. I pulled into a gas station and rolled up to the second pump politely leaving room for the next customer. When my car was parked and I was about to open my door, I felt a jolt. The car pulling in had bumped my car. I turned around and there was the car that hit mine backing up slowly.

I was about to get out when suddenly I experienced another jolt. He did it again. The first time I was willing to believe was an accident but the second time was certainly intentional. I quickly measured and weighed my response options. I was ready to go back there to confront him!

I thought to myself, "If he's crazy enough to do this then maybe he's crazy enough to do something worse. Perhaps he's got something concealed in his pocket or under the seat that gives him wild confidence. Maybe he doesn't have anything and I can readily handle him. Either way I'll bring a mountain of legal or physical trouble on myself. If I win I lose and if I lose I can really lose." All this thinking happened in a nano-second. I look back with pride years later. I am happy to be alive to tell the tale. I did not step out of the vehicle. I put my car in gear and drove away. "Discretion is the better part of valor." "Don't be right! Be smart!" I was not married then. I did not have a family yet. Had I confronted him who knows what the result would have been?! I could have hurt him or been hurt.

It wasn't easy at the time. My ego was raging but my intellect was advising me to get the message **before it's too late.**