

FRUITS OF PASSION

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

This week's Torah portion revolves around the saga of the evil prophet Bilam who was commissioned by Balak, king of Moav, to curse the nation of Israel. The Torah describes Bilam's repeated futile attempts to curse the Jews and the subsequent blessings that flowed involuntarily from his lips.

When Bilam initially asked permission from Hashem to accompany Balak's messengers, Hashem instructed him not to acquiesce. "Do not curse the people for they are blessed," Bilam was told. However, after Balak sent a second, more prestigious group of messengers, and Bilam again asked Hashem for permission to go, Hashem permitted him to travel to Balak, to carry out the king's dark mission.

Immediately afterwards, the Torah tells us that Hashem's wrath was directed at Bilam 'ki holech hu'; "for he was going [with the messengers]." The commentaries all ask the obvious question: If Bilam was given permission to go with the emissaries, why was Hashem angry at him for doing so? The commentaries explain that Hashem's wrath was directed at Bilam because he had flaunted Hashem's true intent, which was that Bilam should accompany the delegation and follow Hashem's instructions upon arrival. 'Kum lech itam'; you may accompany them," the posuk says. But instead of merely traveling with the delegation, Bilam joined them with great gusto, as the Torah hints with the words, 'vayelech im sarei Moav. He was impressed with the status of these ministers-senior officials of Moav-and embraced their mission.

Bilam relished the thought of being able to curse the Jewish people and was determined to take full advantage of the opportunity to topple them from their exalted state. In retaliation, Hashem sent an angel to block Bilam's way and to strike him. In a spectacular miracle, Bilam's donkey opened its mouth and reprimanded him, humiliating the arrogant Bilam.

The commentaries observe that if demonstrating passion and excitement to commit a sin provokes Hashem's fierce anger, applying this same passion and enthusiasm to the performance of mitzvos must surely elicit a dynamic response of an opposite nature-an outpouring of Divine favor and grace that cements our bond with Him. The strength of that connection is entirely dependent on the spirit and love that we invest into performance of His mitzvos.

The noted educator, Rabbi Shmuel Dishon, conducts a highly successful outreach camp in Russia during the summer months. A few years ago, a Bosnian girl approached the camp directors and

expressed her desire to embrace the Jewish religion. After being repeatedly rebuffed by the camp's administrative staff, she begged to be able to speak to the camp director, Rabbi Dishon. When Rabbi Dishon arrived from the United States, he invited her into his office and asked her why she would want to become Jewish. She outlined her spiritual aspirations and expressed her deep desire to share in the Jewish people's destiny. Rabbi Dishon tried to dissuade her. 'You realize', he told her, "that if G-d forbid another despot like Hitler tried to destroy the Jews, you too would be targeted."

"That is a small price to pay for an eternal connection to the Divine," she replied. "But you could gain a passport to the world to come by upholding the seven Noachide laws," Rabbi Dishon responded.

"True, I could keep the Noachide laws but the sanctity and intimate connection with Hashem cannot be acquired through the Seven Noachide laws," the young woman said. "I am not interested in simply expanding my portfolio. I want to be truly one with Hashem."

Bilam recognized that the true source of the Jewish people's unique connection with Hashem was not simply their observance of His commandments but rather the love, devotion and zealousness with which they performed His mitzvos. It is the level of that commitment to devote one's life to carrying out His will with love that defines the quality and depth of our connection with our Creator in Heaven.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos.

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