

# SODOM FOR SODOMITES!

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Do not oppress a stranger. You know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt<sup>[2]</sup>.*

The work we know as "the *Mesorah*" shows parallel expressions throughout Tanach. It then becomes our job to understand the connection. In our *parshah*, the *Mesorah* connects the mitzvah of celebrating the three *regalim*<sup>[3]</sup> / pilgrimage festivals with the peroration of Bilam's donkey: "What have I done to you that you struck me these three *regalim* / times?"<sup>[4]</sup>

The connection is fleshed out by Chazal.<sup>[5]</sup> The she-donkey meant to say, "You wish to destroy a nation that celebrates the three pilgrimage festivals!" It is not immediately obvious, however, why this was regarded with such horror by the donkey!

"If the men came to summon you, arise and go with them, but only the thing that I shall speak to you, you shall do."<sup>[6]</sup> Rashi explains, "If the summons is legitimately yours, i.e., you wish to receive payment for it, then you may go." Why would a check made out to Bilam change the immorality of his assisting Balak in his evil plan?

Perhaps we could explain as follows. Evil becomes much more powerful when its perpetrators convince themselves that they are really doing wonderful things, and they are acting on instructions from G-d. Hashem was telling Bilam that he was welcome to play along with Balak (albeit constrained from conveying anything but messages from Him) so long as he realized that his behavior was born of personal avarice, but nothing more valuable or holier than that! Realize that you are in it for the money – but not for any redeeming agenda.

Now, Bilam in particular should have been impressed by the behavior of the donkey. Bilam was a believer in signs and omens. According to Chazal,<sup>[7]</sup> the reader of omens<sup>[8]</sup> is one who takes to heart cues from occurrences around him. When bread falls from his lips, or he drops his staff, he assumes that he is being warned from Above that this is not going to be his day. When his donkey veered from the path she was going – and finally balked at going further at all – Bilam would have been expected to take this as an omen that he was not going to gain anything from this Balak-financed junket.

How do we know that reading the signs, as it were, is not an foolish enterprise – that Hashem guides,

limits, encourages us along the way of life's journey? We see that He intervenes to prevent harm from befalling us - just as He did in blocking the progress of Bilam's donkey. We see this in His promise to those who left their homes unguarded three times a year when they ascended to Yerushalayim for the festivals. Their property was not molested by their enemies, because He protected them from harm. The take-away from this, say Chazal,<sup>[9]</sup> is that "those on the path to perform a mitzvah are not susceptible to harm."

This was the donkey's message - and what the Mesorah meant by pointing out the link to the three pilgrimage festivals. Do you think that you perform a vital service when you attempt to destroy this people? Think again. You seek to destroy a people that G-d protects from harm in extraordinary ways when it sets out to perform a mitzvah - just like He now protects them by blocking your progress. They are the ones who have found favor in His eyes - not you. Don't delude yourself into thinking that you are doing a mitzvah in responding to Balak's plea for help. It is nothing more than an opportunity for you to make a few dollars. A mitzvah it is not.

If you find it strange that Bilam could convince himself that he was doing good, you should also think again. We see it around us today. In many countries, even among otherwise refined and intelligent people, we see persecution of the outsider, the stranger. We see it as an ideology promoted as a holy obligation of every nation to preserve its own culture and identity, lest it be swallowed up by the outsiders who have arrived within its borders.

Sodom for Sodomites, they seem to be calling! This is not the way of the Torah! Thirty six times it exhorts us to love the *ger*. The sheer number of times that the Torah stresses this mitzvah says much about its importance; the fine details of how the Torah speaks about it reveals its far-reaching implications, as we shall see.

"When a stranger lives among you [singular] in your [plural] land, do not oppress him. The *ger* who lives with you [plural] shall be like a native among you. You [singular] shall love him like yourself."<sup>[10]</sup> The multiple shifts between singular and plural must be explained.

We will begin by observing that even the National Sodomites have their principles. They don't appeal to rank xenophobia, but to economics, and to history. They argue that their resources are inadequate to support a population of outsiders. They wish to protect the rights of "natives," which means people with established legal rights within that country. When these arguments are in place, a protectionist government has two choices. It can choose to deny the newcomer rights of citizenship, leaving the outsider as a second-class non-citizen. If the government is too embarrassed to legislate such a policy, it will not be able to deny equal protection to all. Rather, it will uphold the right of the individual to decide for himself with whom he wishes to do business, or who should be elected to a public position. In other words, the government will see to it that where *de jure* discrimination is impossible, *de facto* discrimination nonetheless remains an option.

The Torah prohibits even this gentlemanly rejection of the stranger! This is all hinted at in the *pesukim* above. "When a stranger lives among you [singular]," i.e. when there are so many of them that each person can legitimately feel that the outsiders are encroaching, and creating a personal burden;" "In your [plural] land," i.e., in the land in which a large group of people have recognized privileges as full citizens;" "Do not oppress him"..."[Do not bar him from attaining rights of citizenship. Rather,] "He shall be like a native among you." Moreover, don't think of individually treating him in a discriminatory manner as some sort of pariah. Instead, "You shall love him like yourself."

There are places where discrimination against Jews is selective. The controlling group knows of ordinary Jews and "better" Jews; where people differentiate between privileged Jews and undesirable ones. In some of these places, the entitled Jews go along with the distinctions, and assist in keeping the others at a distance.

The Torah addresses this as well. "You know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." *Shevet Levi* was not pressed into servitude. In effect, Egypt knew of two classes of Jews: persecuted slaves who had no rights, and members of *Shevet Levi* who enjoyed the rights of citizenship. Yet, *Shevet Levi* did not feel comfortable in Egypt, and did not reject their brothers. While spared the indignity of forced labor, they felt the sting of the contempt their neighbors had for Jews. Because they were on a more elevated spiritual plane, it is likely that they were even more sensitive to the humiliation than all the others!

Part of the takeaway from our *parshah*, therefore, should be a commitment within our own circles to unequivocally love our brothers, and not treat them as outcast strangers.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Mishpatim (2), by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Shemos 23:9.
3. Shemos 23:14.
4. Bamidbar 22:28.
5. Yalkut Shimoni, Balak, 23.
6. Bamidbar 22:20.
7. Sanhedrin 65B.
8. Devarim 18:10.
9. Pesachim 8A.
10. Vayikra 19:33-34.