

# MONEY ORDER - GETTING OUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

While Bila'am seems at first reluctant to heed Balak's request to come to Moav and curse Bnei Yisrael, he ultimately acquiesces. All the same, he warns them that he can not control the outcome:

*Bila'am said to the servants of Balak, "If Balak were to give me his houseful of silver and gold, I am still unable to disobey the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or large." (22:18)*

Chazal are critical of him for these words.

*Whoever has these three traits are among the disciples of the wicked Bila'am: An evil eye; an arrogant spirit; and a greedy soul. (Avos 5:22)*

Rashi (here) explains that we see Bila'am had a greedy soul because he said, "Even were Balak to give me his houseful of silver and gold..." - "he was obviously greedy, and coveted the property of others."

What is intriguing and somewhat problematic is that a very similar statement was made by one of our great sages:

Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma said: I was once walking on the road when a man met me... He said to me, "Rebbi, would you be willing to live with us in our place? I would give you thousands upon thousands of golden dinars, precious stones, and pearls." I replied, "Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah." (Avos 6:9)

Rabbi Yosi is obviously not to be counted among the disciples of Bila'am, yet his response - that he could not transgress Hashem's word no matter what the price - seems startlingly similar to that of Bila'am. (M'rafsin Igrei vol. 6)

Let us raise another difficulty: How did R' Yosi know that this gentleman's city was not a place of Torah? It would not be surprising that even a Torah'dig city would want the honour of having one of the generation's great sages among its midst. What was it about his offer that led R' Yosi to assume that the city in question was devoid of serious Torah study and appreciation?

Mr. Isaac Friedman was one of the thousands of holocaust survivors that arrived in the United States as refugees in the early 1950's. In order to keep Shabbos, Mr. Friedman scraped together just enough money to open a small drapery store on the lower level of his apartment building in Philadelphia. Business was slow. Nonetheless, every Friday before sunset he would close up his store and go upstairs to get ready for Shabbos.

One Friday, just before closing, three people entered. "My name is Henry Ballod," said the leader. "We've come from Wildwood, New Jersey, and we need drapes for our motel. It's got eighty windows - can you handle it?"

Realizing that such a large job would require many hours of material selection, Mr. Friedman knew there was no way it could be completed before Shabbos. Politely but firmly, he said, "I'm a religious Jew and I don't work past sunset on Friday. Please come back after the weekend and I'll be glad to help you."

"Are you mad?!" shouted Mr. Ballod. "We came from over a hundred miles away. We don't have time to wait for you. We'll go elsewhere." And they stormed out.

"I'll do a cheaper and better job," Mr. Friedman called after them. "Just come back after Shabbos."

Monday morning, to Mr. Friedman's great surprise, the men returned. Without mentioning a word about Friday's incident, they chose their drapes and gave him a deposit. Mr. Friedman completed the job, and they were satisfied.

After that, business really picked up. Mr. Friedman was ordering supplies by the truckload. Just weeks ago, he was an unknown penniless immigrant; now he had a booming business.

Months later Mr. Friedman was in Wildwood, New Jersey, when he heard a voice from across the street. "Friedman - I sent them all."

Mr. Friedman looked up and saw Mr. Ballod beaming at him. He told Mr. Friedman that at a recent hotel and motel owner's convention, he took the podium and told the whole audience about his experience. "How you insisted on closing the store before sunset on Friday, despite the fear of losing such a big job. I told them how impressed I was by the way you respected G-d more than money. Your morals are more important to you than the bottom line. And in the end, you did a good job for a good price. Someone like you, I told them, can be trusted!" (Adapted from Visions of Greatness, R' Yosef Weiss, 1993)

How did R' Yosi ben Kisma know that the man came from a place devoid of serious Torah study and

values? He tried to sway R' Yosi with money - as if to equate the monetary gain of living among them with whatever losses he would suffer as a result of the move. He tried to "buy off" his Torah with gold and silver. In a place where the true value of Torah was understood, R' Yosi told himself, they would understand that the value of money in comparison to keeping G-d's word was so unimportant that it would be juvenile to use monetary wealth as the initial "bait" with which to lure a renowned Talmid Chacham to their city. Sure, dollars and cents would at some point have to be discussed, but that it should be first and foremost - this man could only be from a city barren of true importance for Torah.

In response to his proposal, R' Yosi replied, "You presume to equate Torah with jewels and precious metals. All the money and wealth in the world could never sway my resolve and cause me to compromise my adherence to Torah study and its principles!" (see D'muyos Hod 3:20 quoting R' Meir Don Plotzki z"l, author of K'li Chemdah)

Bila'am's response differed greatly. In Balak's offer, no specific mention was made of wealth. It was Bila'am that brought "his houseful of silver and gold" into the conversation. Also, Bila'am did not say, "Even were Balak to give me... I would not transgress Hashem's word," but rather, "I am unable to transgress the word of Hashem" - i.e. gold and jewels could sway my resolve, but things are beyond my control.

Those who fear the word of G-d don't even give wealth and riches a second thought; those who don't covet them and are easily swayed from their "principles."

Have a good Shabbos.

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