

BUILDING ON SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Who can count the dust of Jacob and the seed of Israel? May my soul die the death of the straight and may my end be like his." (Bamidbar 23:10)

Who can count the dust of Jacob: It is incalculable the amount of Mitzvos they (the Jews) do with dust... (Rashi)

In spite of his bad intentions, Bilam was compelled to speak only words of truth. We need to know, though, why he coupled these concepts together in the same verse. What about observing the countless number of Mitzvos Jews do with dust caused Bilam to want to die the death of the straight ones?

The Talmud Sukkah 52A gives the following futuristic account: "Rabbi Yehuda learns that in the future The Holy One Blessed Be He will bring the Yetzer Hora-the evil inclination and slaughter him in front of the righteous and in front of the wicked. To the righteous he will seem like a mountain and to the wicked like a strand of hair. These ones will be crying and these ones will be crying. The righteous will cry and exclaim, "How were we able to conquer such a high mountain?" The wicked will be crying and saying, "How is it that we could not overcome a single hair?"

What's this metaphor of the hair and the mountain about? With a searing insight the Maharsha points out that the archetype opponent of Jacob, Essau eventually settled in a place called Har Seir or literally the Mountain of Hair. How does that help us? The wicked are bemoaning, in that moment of clarity, that what prevented them from making personal and moral progress was something as feeble as a hair. People hold themselves back from Mitzvos because of some unfounded fear like "what other might say" only to see how proportionately minute it really is in the grand scheme of things. The righteous, on the other hand stand back in awe and can hardly believe that they were able to accomplish so much in a lifetime. How did they do it? What is so remarkable about this tall mountain? It is a mountain of hairs - constructed one courageous deed at a time.

One late Thursday night I visited one of the local bakeries to fetch a cake for "the guys". I was directed to the back room from where all the intoxicating aromas were emanating. There I beheld row after row- hundreds of racks, maybe thousands of freshly baked Challos for Shabbos! Then the baker himself emerged from the forest of delightfully baked goods wearing his white apron and all. Excitedly, I told him, "You should have in mind that all these Challos are going to be eaten for the sake of the Holy Shabbos!" With gleaming eyes he looked beyond me, and said, "Of course! Of

course I do!" It's such a simple thing. Every week, for a lifetime, with the dust of flour that emerges from the dust of the earth this simple baker weaves his way with intentionality onto thousands of Shabbos tables. I was in awe. Who can count the dust of Jacob?

Bilam too was stricken with a vision of the mountains and mountains of success that Israel would achieve over the course of its long history, one Shabbos at a time, and with the earthiest of stuff. Even still he couldn't push past that first follicle and join. No! Instead he foolishly exclaimed his wish to die like the righteous and share their ultimate rewards. Why is Billy so silly?

A friend who became a grandparent joked, "If I had only known how great it was to be a grandparent, I would have skipped being a parent and become a grandparent straight away." I told him what my father-in-law of blessed memory said - that it is like the fellow who entered a diner that advertised, "Second Cup of Coffee Free" and asked for the second cup. He was told, "In order to get second one free, you have to pay for the first cup." Now, that's a real Yiddishe Kup! Text Copyright © 2006 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **Torah.org**