

THE SIN OF "NOT GETTING IT"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Balak

The Sin of "Not Getting It"

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #600 - Ayin Hara. Good Shabbos!

The beginning of this week's parsha contains the strange, almost comical, episode of Bilaam's difficulty with his donkey [Bamidbar 22:21-34]. Unbeknownst to Bilaam, an angel of Hashem with a drawn sword was blocking his donkey's forward movement. In the presence of the officer's of Moab, Bilaam beat his animal, to no avail. The animal had no choice but to move sideways rather than forward, crushing Bilaam's leg against the wall, by the side of the road.

After this scene repeated itself a couple of times, Hashem opened up the mouth of the donkey and she said to her master: "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Bilaam responded: "Because you have mocked me! If there were a sword in my hand I would have killed you by now!"

Ultimately, Hashem uncovered Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his drawn sword. The angel chastised Bilaam for having unfairly beaten his donkey three times. Bilaam responded: "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road."

Was this the right answer on Bilaam's part? Bilaam should have said to the angel "Sorry, I didn't see you! I thought my donkey got lazy." What was the sin here? If one doesn't see, it's not his fault. He simply didn't see!

The Malbim raises this question and explains that Bilaam's sin was that he should have realized that there was an angel there. In other words, he confessed that had he thought about it, he SHOULD have come to the conclusion that an angel was present. Under those circumstances, failing to understand that an angel was present was itself a sin. It is not sufficient to apologize and say "I didn't

get it. I didn't understand." That itself may have been your shortcoming. Perhaps you should have understood!

Rav Mordechai Kamenetsky relates an incident that took place during the capture of the Western Wall during the Six Day War. By June 1967, it had been more than 19 years since any Jew had been allowed to approach the Kosel haMa'aravi. It was now under Jewish control for the first time in 1,900 years. It was a most emotional moment. The religious soldiers in the unit that liberated the Kosel began crying.

There was one soldier in the unit from a totally secular background who also started crying. One of his fellow soldiers, who had over the years engaged in many debates about G-d, Torah and Judaism with this secular Israeli turned to him and said: "I can understand why I am crying -- but why are you crying?" The other soldier responded: "I am crying because I am not crying." In other words, he was crying because he saw through the reaction of his religious comrades how meaningful this momentous event should be to him, and he did not feel any special emotion. He was crying because "he didn't get it" and he realized that "not getting it" was something to cry about.

This is the same idea behind the "I have sinned" confession of Bilaam to the angel. "Not perceiving that there is an angel here is something for which I am to be blamed."

His Plan Will Become Established

The end of the Parsha contains the incident in which Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, had relations with a Moabite woman in the presence of Moshe and in the presence of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel. What was the reaction of those who observed this blasphemous act? "They were crying at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." [Bamidbar 25:6]

Rashi comments on Moshe's passivity and the people's reaction: "The applicable law was concealed from Moshe." He forgot that one who publicly cohabits with a non-Jewish woman may be slain on the spot by zealots. The people were weeping because in contrast to the incident with the Golden Calf, where Moshe stood up against 600,000 people, this time his hands became weak.

It is indeed amazing. Moshe Rabbeinu was not a person who was faint of heart. He has been confronting these types of challenges for the last 40 years. He stood up to Pharaoh. He stood up to the Jewish people time and again. The reason that G-d made Moshe forget this law, explains Rashi, is "so that Pinchas might arise and take that which was fit for him."

Pinchas became a Kohen because of this act of heroism and zealotry. Rav Simche Zissel Broide, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva, says that this incident is a moral lesson for us all. When the Almighty wants to give someone a position, a job, an opportunity, He will pull the strings and make it happen.

Logically, by the natural turn of events, Pinchas would never have become a Priest. But G-d had a

plan to ensure that Pinchas would become a Priest. He made a miracle, that the great Moshe forgot a law known to any Yeshiva student!

Rav Simcha Zissel notes how comical and pathetic it is, how people trouble themselves so much to maneuver and scheme and worry to achieve a certain outcome, or to try getting to where they think they need to get. The Almighty provides the sustenance and the appropriate position for each and every person. When He wants it to happen, it will happen. He may have to make miracles, but in the final analysis "the plan of Hashem will become established." [Mishlei 19:21]

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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