

# THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE DIFFERENT WHEN THEY COME FOR FREE

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape 820 -- K'rias Shemah Without Teffilin. Good Shabbos!*

This week's parsha contains the remarkable story involving Bilaam and his donkey "The donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; then Bilaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel of Hashem stood in the footpath of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on that side." [Bamidbar 22:23-24]

The Medrash writes in Bamidbar Rabbah that this scenario of "the fence on this side and a fence on this side" was a message to Bilaam: You will never be able to have any effect on these people, for these people are protected by the Two Tablets of Stone (Luchos) written by the "Finger of G-d" about which it is said that they are "written from this side and from this side". Obviously, this is a play on words. However, there must be something deeper here as well. There must be something about the Luchos concerning which it is written "m'zeh u'm'zeh hem kesuvim" that is the antithesis and the antidote for all that Bilaam stands for. What is the interpretation of this Medrash?

I saw an interesting explanation from the Tolner Rebbe [Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg (Jerusalem)], shlita, in his Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni. Chaza"l say on the pasuk "There never again arose in Israel one like Moshe" [Devarim 34:10] that in Israel there never arose one like Moshe, but amongst the nations of the world there was such an individual. Who was that? It was Bilaam, the son of Beor. The Almighty anticipated the argument from the nations of the world "if we had for ourselves a prophet of the stature of Moses we would have turned out better." He did not want the nations to argue "It was not fair. It was not a level playing field." Therefore, the Almighty made Bilaam - the prophet of the nations - equal to Moshe in prophecy.

The problem is that Bilaam is one of the most despicable characters in all of Tanach. He is the paradigm of the person who has rotten Midos. Tractate Avos catalogs his evil character traits. He was arrogant, he was lustful, he was jealous, and he was greedy. Name a bad trait - he had it! In addition to having all these bad traits, he was an immoral person. The Gemara infers [Sanhedrin 105] that the donkey he rode on by day was also the creature that serviced him at night as well.

How could it be that a person who was gifted with such prophecy and with such understanding of

the Almighty could remain the most despicable amoral and immoral person there is? The answer is because it was a gift on the part of the Ribono shel Olam that he should have this prophecy. Prophecy under normal circumstances is earned and achieved after years and years of work and self-improvement. Prophecy received "for free" is of a different nature.

The Mesilas Yescharim [Pathways of the Just] goes through the various human traits (based on the Beraisa regarding Rav Pinchas ben Yair) that are necessary to acquire in order to ultimately reach the top of the spiritual pyramid - Ruach HaKodesh [Divine inspiration]. A person must work his way through all the other attributes in Mesilas Yescharim in order to reach Divine Inspiration, let alone prophecy. A Jew who takes the life-long process spelled out by the Ramcha"l in Mesilas Yescharim reaches the ultimate destiny of Ruach HaKodesh and then Nevuah (prophecy).

Bilaam, on the other hand, received it all one day as a gift. There was no self-improvement. There was no working on himself. The Master of the Universe gave it to him "for free" for the reason we mentioned - so that the nations would not have a "complaint" against Him. But Bilaam remained the same horrible person he had always been, who had just received the gift of prophecy without working for it. Therefore there was no contradiction.

We can understand this dichotomy by considering the following scenario. One person works hard at his business, putting in long hard hours and effort to build it up from scratch. Little by little, he is successful. The business expands, and then later it expands even further following additional successes. Finally, it becomes a public corporation and the entrepreneur winds up becoming a multi-millionaire. That kind of person can usually handle wealth because he knows what it was to be poor and he knows how hard it is to make a dollar. He knows it is not "easy come; easy go".

However, another person, who only has an 8th grade education, suddenly wins the Power Ball lottery and now comes into 250 million dollars. Often, such people do not know how to handle their wealth. There are stories galore of these types of people who had such wealth ruin their lives because they do not know how to handle money. They are taking all this money into a "vessel" that is not worthy of that money.

This was the scenario with Bilaam. "You Bilaam will never have an effect on the Jewish people because the Jewish people have the Luchos that are written on this side and this side, engraved on the tablets". When a person wants to describe something as being permanent, the expression used is "carved in stone". The allusion the Medrash is making by saying that Klal Yisrael have the Luchos which are written "from this side and from this side" is saying that what the Jewish people have achieved they have achieved through hard work, such that it becomes a permanent part of their being, etched in stone, as it were. Bilaam, however, you are just a flash in the pan. What you have been given in prophecy is not part of your essence. You will never be able to have an effect on them.

## Being an Ingrate is the "Worst of the Worst"

The following insight is from the Alter of Slabodka. According to the Medrash, Bilaam said to Balak: Both of us are ingrates. Were it not for Avraham Avinu, there would never have been a Balak King of Moab in the world. For if not for Avraham's merit, Lot would never have escaped the destruction of Sodom. "How can you - a descendant of Lot - hire me to curse the descendants of Avraham? I, too, am an ingrate", Bilaam told Balak, "because if not for their father Yaakov, I would not be around either. Lavan only merited having sons - from whom I descended - by virtue of the fact that Yaakov lived in his house. How can I curse Yaakov's descendants? I too must be an ingrate."

This is a strange Medrash. It is as if Bilaam the wicked is giving a mussar schmooze [a lecture in personal ethics]. Since when was Bilaam into "midos tovos"? Why is this person, who has all the evil human traits in the world, expressing remorse - as it were - that he was an ingrate?

The Alter of Slabodka says we see from here that the worst character trait of all is to be an ingrate. Even a Bilaam, who was the prototype of evil character traits, felt bad about being an ingrate.

Rav Ruderman, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel, was a disciple of the Alter of Slabodka and this idea is very typical of the themes he would frequently speak about. There were basically three topics to which he returned over and over in emphasizing proper behavior to his students: Torah; Kindness (Chessed); and HaKaras HaTov [recognizing a debt of gratitude]. Rav Ruderman felt that if a person did not recognize those who did him favors, it called into question the person's entire humanity. We all have our failings and our foibles, but to be an ingrate is the worst of the worst.

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