

DIE LIKE A JEW

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

"May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his" [Bamidbar 23:10]

The character of the Gentile prophet Bilaam has undergone close scrutiny and intense analysis by our Sages. His story is told in our Parasha. Balak the King of Midian, fearful of the onslaught of the approaching Jewish people, hires Bilaam to come fight fire with fire. "The power of the Jews is not in their physical might but in their mouths," he concluded, "And so I will pay a King's fortune for you to come and curse them."

On the way, Bilaam's donkey stops 3 times in fear of an Angel blocking his path. Bilaam, who cannot see the Heavenly messenger, beats and scolds his donkey. Suddenly, the animal turns to his master and asks, "Why are you beating me? Can't you see the Angel blocking our path?" The Angel then reveals himself to Bilaam and reveals instructions from G-d with guidelines as to how to proceed with his mission.

Ramban asks, what was G-d's point in performing the miracle of giving the donkey the power to speak to Bilaam? Bilaam could have seen the angel and been rebuked directly!

It is a fact that it is more difficult to create something from scratch than to improve or reshape that, which already exists. By giving the donkey the power of speech, Hashem intended to teach Bilaam a lesson. He should have understood that if G-d can create a new creation, a donkey that can speak, then certainly Bilaam could be able to improve his power of speech by restraining himself from cursing the Children of Israel. But the lesson of G-d transmitted through the mouth of a talking donkey fell on Bilaam's deaf ears.

The Or HaHaim HaKadosh comments, "I have seen wicked people who have told me explicitly that if they knew they would die immediately after repenting, they would repent. But they do not repent because they know that they could not maintain their state of penitence for any length of time." Bilaam prayed, "May my soul die the death of the upright," but he could not come to terms with his sinfulness. He could not be sure that he would die immediately after repenting.

The lesson we can learn from Bilaam is that in order to die like a Jew one must live like a Jew. It is the life of a Jew that he should have prayed for and if he had lived that life he would have died like a Jew. As he himself said, "How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Israel!"

If we compare the personality traits of the greats of the Jewish nation with those of the non-Jewish

world, we are struck by the contrast. In the Gentile world knowledge and wisdom are not necessarily accompanied by sterling character traits and sublime conduct. Jean Jacques Rousseau could preach about child rearing and education, yet he abandoned his wife and children with no means of support. Aristotle, whose wisdom even Maimonides admired, was observed eating in a gluttonous manner. He justified his lack of refinement saying, "When I am hungry I am just a person who must eat. At other times, when I am satisfied, I can be Aristotle!"

"Her ways are the ways of pleasantness and all of her paths are peace." The Torah demands wisdom and character. To be great ALL of you must be perfected--not just your brain or your mouth. Bilaam had prophecy but lacked midot--character traits. He had wisdom but he lacked Torah. He wanted to die like a Jew but was not willing to do what it takes to limit desire, refine his character and LIVE like a Jew.

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