

## **Balak – Bilaam and the Donkey: Three Regalim Our Protection.** **By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh**

In Bamidbar chapter 22 we read of Bilaam riding his donkey and going together with the officers of Moav to curse Am Yisroel. Though Hashem gave Bilaam permission to go, Hashem's real desire was that Bilaam should stop himself from completing his intended mission. So Hashem sent an angel to stop Bilaam. The simple reading of verse 23 is that the donkey saw the angel but Bilaam did not but the major commentators differ in their understanding of what actually took place here.

Rashi states that the donkey saw the angel but Bilaam did not because animals sense supernatural beings more than humans. Humans, because of their higher level of intelligence would not be able to bear the sight of angels or other supernatural beings. The Ramban, on the other hand, explains that the donkey did not physically see but rather, sensed the presence of another being and acted as if the area was blocked. He proves his point from the fact that when the donkey did talk, she never said an angel is blocking her path which would suggest that the donkey did not actually see another being. The sword is a metaphor for fear. The Ramban proves his point further from the fact that when Chazal in Avos 5:6 list the miraculous items that were created just before the onset of Shabbos, they mention only the mouth of the donkey and no other heightened awareness of this donkey. The Ramban explains that the reason for this miracle of the donkey talking was to show that speech and muteness are in Hashem's hands alone. The Sforno explains that since Bilaam had two other men with him at the time, making a total of three people, he was prevented from seeing the angel. Chazal tell us that three people cannot see or be affected by these types of supernatural beings.

When the donkey talked she asked Bilaam why he hit her three times. Instead of *peamim* the Torah uses the word *regalim* for times. Rashi states that this is a reference to the three Yomim Tovim that Am Yisroel goes on their pilgrimage to Yerushalayim, Pesach Shavuos and Sukkos. Till this day, these three Yamim Tovim are referred to as the Three Regalim. This gives importance to the fact there were three times that the donkey stopped. There is clearly a connection between the three times that the donkey stopped and the three Yomim Tovim. Furthermore, Rashi, on verse 28 quotes Midrash Tanchuma that the donkey was hinting at the three *avos*, patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

The Sifsei Chachamim, on this Rashi, explains the linkage of all of these themes, the donkeys stopping, the three Yomim Tovim and the patriarchs, in the following manner. The first time the Donkey stopped there was a space on both sides. The second time the donkey stopped, there was space to turn one way but the donkey had to squeeze against the wall to proceed. The third time left no space to turn right or left. The Two ways to turn the first time symbolizes Avraham, who left two sets of descendents, Yishmael and Keturah, to be cursed. The second stop leaving one way to turn was a hint to Esav who also could be cursed. the third stop leaving no way to turn symbolized Yaakov who had no blemish in his children and therefore left no room whatsoever to be cursed. The *makon tzar*, narrow space corresponds to the phrase *Vayetzter lo*, and [Yaakov] was distressed. Both of these ideas, narrowness and distress have the same root *tzar*, meaning, becoming smaller. The Mitzvah of going to Yerushalayim is hinted at because this mitzvah involves appearing before Hashem. Not only is the mitzvah to appear before Hashem but the mitzvah is to be seen as well. There was a two-way, mutual communion between us and Hashem. We experienced Hashem's presence in this world but we were also seen by Hashem and given his divine protection. When Am Yisroel went to Yerushalayim three times every year, they were assured of protection day and night, a level of protection that is totally beyond our imagination. This is a major theme of our davening on every Yom Tov. We want to experience that splendid closeness with Hashem on the Yomim Tovim and let it permeate all areas of our lives. In merit of our davening for the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash, may we merit also to experience the Shalosh Regalim in their true glory and be awarded the special meritorious protection throughout the year and in all areas of our lives. Amen.