

Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

Parashat Balak –The Donkey Vision

I often get the feeling that animals perceive things of which we people are unaware. All of a sudden, my chickens will make strange sounds without any apparent reason. The dogs will bark and the donkeys bray. The U.S. Geological Survey verifies that there have been documented cases of unusual animal behavior prior to earthquakes. There are many stories about animals saving people from disaster. For example, the cries of the family cat, Oreo, coming from the garage woke up Dianne at 4:45 a.m. one morning. When she went downstairs to see what the fuss was about, she discovered her house was on fire. She quickly grabbed the cat and rushed back inside to wake up her husband and their five children. Although the fire destroyed the garage and a bedroom, none of the family was harmed thanks to the cat's cries. The family had not been too fond of the cat before this incident; however, Dianne's husband Jesse stated, "We love it now. It is getting some tuna tonight!" Another moving story about animals saving people took place in Texas, in 1982. A two-year-old child had been walking with his grandmother when Arf, the family dog, became so agitated that the grandmother thought it best to take the child inside. Mrs. Sparks, the child's mother, came out to find Arf in a fight with a 24 inch north-American coral snake, she shot the snake, but Arf had a lot of bites and scratches and was admitted into a veterinary hospital for 24 days. (<http://listverse.com/2010/03/14/top-10-cases-of-animals-saving-humans/>).

Animals are very sensitive in a different way than people. Psychic gifts have long been associated with the dog because of its ability to detect subtle energy frequencies often unknown to mankind (<http://www.manataka.org/page236.html>). Animals also have a sense of direction unmatched by humans. My neighbor's cat was brought to a new home in Jerusalem. A week later it appeared at their doorstep in Bat Ayin – approximately a 30 km distance from Jerusalem (about 18 miles). Perhaps, with a cat as a guide, I too would be able to find my way around! I was wondering why Hashem grants these abilities to animals, and why Hashem allowed the female donkey in this week's parasha to see an angel that most human beings are unable to see.

The Story of Bilam, his Donkey and the Angel Blocking the Way

In this week's Parasha, Bilam saddles his donkey to go with the Moabite dignitaries, with the intention of cursing the Jews. He doesn't care about acting contrary to G-d's prior explicit instruction not to go with them to curse Israel. "G-d said to Bilam, don't go with them and do not curse the people because they are blessed" (*Bamidbar* 22:12). On the road, Bilam's donkey sees an angel of G-d with a drawn sword, standing in front of them. The donkey turns sharply to avoid the deathly angel, until Bilam hits her to turn her back onto the road. Two more times the donkey sees the angel in front of them with its sword drawn, and stops to avoid death. Two more times Bilam beats her. Finally, G-d opens the donkey's mouth, and she berates Bilam for hitting her. "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?!" "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd kill you!" Bilam retorts angrily. The donkey points out that she has

always served Bilam well, and asks, “Have I not been a good and faithful donkey to you all these years?” “Indeed you have,” Bilam admits. Then G-d opens Bilam’s eyes to reveal the dangerous angel to him. G-d tells Bilam that he sent the angel to “come out as an adversary, since cursing the Jews is obnoxious to me.” “If you still disapprove, I will turn back.” Bilam offers. Yet the angel of Hashem tells Bilam, “Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you” (Based on *Bamidbar* 22: 23-35).

Pagan Attempt to Outsmart G-d

It seems like G-d keeps changing His mind back and forth while relating to Bilam. First G-d tells Bilam not to go with the Moabite dignitaries (*Bamidbar* 22:12), yet soon after He allows him to go (*Bamidbar* 22:20). Why is G-d then angry with Bilam for going, after He has just granted him permission? (*Bamidbar* 22:22). Why does He send the angel to tell Bilam that he is displeased with him for going on the way against the will of G-d? (*Bamidbar* 22:32), when soon after He reinstates His permission for Bilam to go with the men? (*Bamidbar* 22:35). Understanding about Bilam’s pagan worldview makes all the strange incidents in the story fall into place. In contrast to the Jewish faith that views G-d as all-powerful Master of the Universe, the pagans believe that G-d is not completely in control. For them G-d is only one out of many gods, none of which are completely in control. They can be influenced by fate, magic, manipulation, and proper timing etc. Bilam believed that G-d could be beaten. He thought that with enough cleverness, it would be possible to outsmart G-d. In all probability, Bilam thought to himself that G-d’s weakness made Him contradict Himself due to Bilam’s magic powers. He believed he would find a tactic to get away with cursing the Israelites against the will of G-d. Bilam didn’t understand that the reason why G-d seemingly contradicted Himself is according to the principle, “A person is being lead the way that he wants to go,” (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:35). G-d told Bilam not to go, while allowing him the free will to make his own decision. Bilam misunderstood this and believed that he somehow had fooled G-d into thinking he will not curse the Jews.

To Go or Not to Go Against the Way of G-d

At this point Hashem allows Bilam’s donkey to see an angel with a deadly sword blocking the way, while Bilam remains in the dark. Why does G-d grant a greater vision to the donkey than to Bilam? Donkeys are known to be rather dull, so the fact that the donkey was able to see more than Bilam was supposed to teach the following lesson: “You think you can outsmart G-d? You are not even as smart as your donkey!” From this, Bilam should have learned that he had not beaten G-d, but rather G-d had granted him the free will to choose his way. Yet, Bilam continued to fight G-d, thinking that he still had a chance to win over Him. In his stubbornness he neglected to get the point that, “One is allowed to follow the road he wishes to pursue, as it is written, “G-d said to Bilam, ‘You shall not go with them,’” and then it is written, “If the men came to call you, rise up and go with them” (*Babylonian Talmud, Makkot* 10b). Bilam had the free choice of listening to G-d or not. He could be grateful for his donkey, or repay the benefits he had received from her with evil – by beating her. The essence of humanity is Free Will. This is an expression of being created in “image of G-d.” Hashem teaches us how to live according to His will and thereby walk in the path of righteousness. Yet, at every juncture, we are still free to “go off the *derech*” (path). This

freedom gives us the ability to earn our righteousness through our own efforts by choosing life. When we sin, it is not because we have “defeated” G-d, but rather because the Almighty allows us to choose evil. To believe that we may contest the will of G-d is so foolish, that that even a donkey knows better. (<https://thinkjudaism.wordpress.com/2012/07/08/balaams-talking-donkey-what-did-we-just-read-14/>).

G-d Grants Greater Vision to Beasts than to Humans

To ensure humanity’s ability of freedom of choice, it is necessary for the human eye to be covered with darkness hiding the inner light of this world. We may choose between remaining in the dark or exert ourselves to discover the light beneath the veil of darkness. Therefore, this world is called –עולם/olam – hidden, as mostly true visions of the Divine reality are hidden from us. Only occasionally do we get a glimpse of spiritual reality, like at the revelation on Sinai. These rare glimpses of truth, that we may experience, help stir us in the right direction. Yet, freedom of choice can only exist when true perception of the Creator and the creation is withheld from us. Being able to clearly see the underlying spiritual reality of this world would undermine our Free Will, as the obvious truth of the Torah way would be too evident. In order to overcome this concealment we must actively seek truth and apply the greatest effort of our intellect, heart and soul to attain it. However, donkeys and other animals do not have Free Will. Therefore, there is no reason to withhold true perception of the spiritual reality from them. This explains Rashi’s statement that “The she-donkey saw, but [Bilam] did not see, for G-d permitted a beast to perceive more than a man. Since [man] possesses intelligence, he would become insane if he saw the threatening angel” (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:23). If we saw the process of creation and the Divine Presence everywhere, if we saw the flow of energy from the Infinite Source into everything, bringing it into being at every moment, it would force us to accept the reality of the G-dly presence, thereby eliminating our freedom of choice. Bilam’s donkey was not overwhelmed by the vision of the underlying spiritual forces, because it is unaffected by their cognitive implications. This is why an animal without a free will can see vast realities withheld from humanity. We humans are given discernment to pierce the veil of unawareness cast over humanity, if we so choose. To allow us the freedom of choice, this veil must remain locked in place until we open it by using the keys we are given. (Rabbi Shlomo Yaffe http://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/699480/jewish/Of-Donkeys-and-Discernment.htm)