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TORAH STUDY

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Power of prayer

Chukat-Balak, Numbers 22:2-22:38

RABBI SHRAGA YANKELEWITZ

When Balak saw the Jewish people approaching in this week's Torah portion, he became very afraid and hired the necromancer Bilam to place a curse on the Jewish people. Why was their military strategy to curse the Jewish people and not strengthen their own army and defenses, as a nation would ordinarily do?

The Midrash gives us perspective. Every nation has its own spiritual makeup and strengths. Balak knew that the spiritual power of the Jewish people lies in their mouths. By praying and calling out to God, the Jews can be successful. Therefore, he attacked using the power of the mouth by attempting to curse them and neutralize their influence. However, Balak and Bilam made a fatal error. There is no power in the mouth itself. The mouth is a doorway that allows a person's thoughts, emotions and desires to be expressed. It is our pure devotion and connection to God through prayer that protects us from harm.

Perhaps now, the bizarre picture of a talking donkey found later in the parsha will make sense. The Mishna in Avos says that this talking mouth was created at twilight of the sixth day of creation and later pinned on the donkey's face to speak to Bilam and dissuade him from going on this destructive mission. Why would God make a donkey talk? This was a lesson for Bilam that he was viewing the mouth as an independent entity.

The Jewish people have always responded to troubles with prayer. We must recognize how much we can really change things by asking God.

At the same time, it is our connection and relationship to Him that is so important. Rabbi Doctor Abraham Twerski tells the story of a young girl whose brand-new porcelain doll cracks. The desperate mother finally tells her daughter, "Go pray to God, maybe He will fix it." To her surprise, the girl is back a few minutes later and in good spirits. The girl explained, "I did ask God and He said, 'No.'_" What made this girl accept this answer? Because she recognized that she had created a relationship and in a relationship, sometimes the answer will be "no."

Furthermore, when we communicate with God, it creates the recognition that there is a God. Imagine if you were told to have a conversation with a rock. It would be quite difficult. It is only because we believe that there is Someone who is listening and responding to us that we can talk to Him in prayer. Developing this awareness is an amazing accomplishment. On the other hand, if we view prayer as just reading off a string of words, there is no way to identify with it or enjoy it.

The Talmud in Tractate Brachos relates how certain holy people would mentally prepare and wait an hour before praying every day. It may have been that this exercise took such a long time because they were creating a reality that their prayers would be an actual conversation with God.

There is a joke where a wealthy man buys a lottery ticket and goes to synagogue to pray for a win. Suddenly, he notices a man next to him praying with intense concentration asking God for \$100. The wealthy man quickly hands his friend \$100 and exclaims, "OK God, now that I have Your undivided attention, here's what I need."

In actuality, God has no problem focusing on every individual. He wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us, but it is up to us to recognize that He is there and to call out to Him.

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