

A Taste of Torah A True Hero

By Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

Whom do you admire? A rock star? Perhaps an Olympic gold-medalist swimmer? Or is it someone who has made a real, genuine contribution to better society?

I haven't taken any polls recently, but if I had to guess, I'd venture to say there are many, many people out there who idolize individuals who are less-than-ideal role models. And what did these people do to deserve such adulation? To be fair, some worked hard to get where they are today. But that isn't why they are so admired. The reason they are admired is because they have talent. Be it the ability to take a wooden stick and hit a ball 400 feet, to shout lyrics into a microphone over the deafening beat of drums and electric guitars, or to make a lot of money playing the market, these people are looked up to due to their talent.

In this week's parsha, we are given a lesson on how to view talent. Bil'am is hired by Balak to curse the Jewish People. Now, this may seem a somewhat strange tactic if you are looking for a winning strategy against an upstart nation, but the fact is that Bil'am was highly successful at deploying this unconventional weapon of mass destruction. In last week's Torah reading, we are informed of the complete and utter defeat of the Moavites by Sichon, as he took a sizeable piece of their land. And who engineered that

victory? That's right, Bil'am. Thanks to his curse against Moav, Sichon emerged victorious. And Balak was hoping for similar results against the Jewish People.

Our Sages make it quite clear that Bil'am possessed enormous talent in his power of speech. And Bil'am was quite haughty and arrogant about his talent. But Hashem taught him a thing or two about taking pride in G-d given talents. As Bil'am travelled to Balak, the donkey upon which he rode suddenly refused to cooperate. After being beaten by Bil'am, Hashem opens the mouth of the donkey, and she reproves Bil'am for the harsh treatment she has received from him.

Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), the famed Chofetz Chaim, points out that there was an additional message being sent to Bil'am. A donkey speaking is nothing short of miraculous, and occurs only because G-d wills it. Man's ability to speak is no different; the gift and talent of speech is only because G-d granted him with that ability. And just as the donkey can take no credit for its ability to talk, neither should Bil'am.

Talents and abilities are G-d-given. As we do not idolize a fish for its swimming abilities or a cheetah for its speed, it is foolish to admire a human for talents he was born with. What is worthy of admiration is one who chooses to use those gifts in a positive fashion, thereby bettering himself and the world we inhabit.

Ask the Rabbi A Grain of Salt

Sandra Block from Scottsdale, AZ wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I would like to know: Why do we put salt on bread? Is it on all types of bread or just challah? Do we say the

Continued on back

Stories For The Soul

Doorstep of a New Era

By Rabbi Yehoshua Schwartz

During the late-19th-century reign of Czar Alexander III, Russia's Jews suffered from extreme religious persecution.

At one point, the famed Baron Horace Ginzburg of St. Petersburg tried to alleviate the situation by arranging for a meeting between the minister of interior and some of the most prominent rabbis of that time.

The minister, a rabid anti-Semite, lost no time in expressing his hatred of the Jews.

"Jews are separatists and mock the religion of others," he asserted. "Jews are a cancer to humanity. Why did G-d bother creating them?"

Rabbi Yitzchok of Volozhin, son of Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, founder of the renowned Volozhin Yeshiva, stood up to defend his people.

"Your words remind me of a prophet who echoed your sentiment over one thousand years ago," he responded.

"Bilaam predicted that days would come when people would say, 'Even now it is said [about] Jacob and Israel, 'What has G-d wrought?'" (Bamidbar 23: 23).

"However," continued Reb Yitzchok, "I am heartened by your words, for our holy Torah continues, 'Behold, the people will arise like a lion cub.'"

"When the Jewish people will be so terribly degraded among the nations," he concluded, "we will know that we are at the doorstep of a new era, when the lion cub of Israel will rise again."

Continued on back