

# THE LANGUAGE OF ANIMALS



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT BALAK**  
**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN**

**“The human being is the only animal that...”** This sentence, Dr. Daniel Gilbert from Harvard University argues, is one which every psychologist at some point in their career attempts to finish based on their own line of research. Most attempts to finish the sentence are challenged by later psychologists looking for their own way to finish the sentence. As one example, many used to argue that **“The human being is the only animal that can use language,”** but were forced to retract when chimpanzees were taught to communicate using hand signs. While research with animals using language has its share of controversy, there seems to be ample evidence that chimps, gorillas, bonobos, dolphins, border collies, and African gray parrots can all acquire the ability to communicate using some form of language.

When Bilaam went with the servants of Moav to go to Balak, G-d, angry that Bilaam went with them, placed an angel on the road to prevent them from passing. While Bilaam was unable to see the sword-wielding angel, his donkey noticed it and veered off the path. Bilaam, frustrated with his animal’s behavior, hit it with his stick. The angel repositioned himself in front of the procession and the donkey, trying to avoid the angel again, pressed against a wall, squeezing Bilaam’s foot. Bilaam responded by hitting his donkey for the second time. The donkey, still confronted by the angel in front of her and nowhere to veer off to, laid down on the ground with Bilaam on top of her. Bilaam, in his anger, hit the donkey, once again.

At that point, a strange story became even more bizarre. G-d opened the donkey’s mouth and a conversation ensued between Bilaam and his donkey. The donkey, hurt after being hit three times, asked for an explanation. Bilaam, unphased by a talking donkey, responded by claiming that the donkey had made a mockery of him, and that if he had a sword, he would have actually killed her. Pleading her case, the donkey asked Bilaam to consider all the years they have been together and whether this was a regular pattern of her behavior. Bilaam acknowledged that it was not, and at that point, G-d uncovered his eyes and revealed the angel to him. The angel rebuked Bilaam for hitting his donkey three times and explained that the donkey actually saved his life by avoiding the angel.

How are we to understand a talking donkey? The most prevalent explanation is to chalk it up to a Divine miracle. The Mishna in Avot (5:6) lists the talking donkey as one of the ten miracles that G-d embedded into creation during twilight of the first Shabbat. A textual problem with such an explanation is that even though talking donkeys is within the purview of G-d's abilities, it presumably wasn't in the realm of expected for Bilaam and his Moabite escorts. The fact that they seem to just take the talking donkey in stride, presents a problem. Another possibility is to follow the Rambam's view that anytime anybody in Tanach encountered an angel, it perforce happened in the context of a dream state. If so, the whole episode, including the donkey talking, took place in Bilaam's mind.

A third possibility is presented by Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzato (19<sup>th</sup> century, Italy). Rabbi Luzzato pointed out that if you look carefully within the text, it never writes that the donkey speaks (d-v-r). He argued that in reality the donkey did not express a full, well-articulated statement. Rather, the donkey brayed and bellowed as a response to getting hit, *as if to say*, "why are you hitting me?" Bilaam responded to the donkey's cries by saying that she humiliated him, the same as any pet owner may converse with his or her pet. Animals may not be able to talk using speech to formulate sentences in the way we do, but they can use forms of language to communicate.

Perhaps, embedded in this strange interaction, is a veiled critique of Bilaam's broader behavior. One of Bilaam's flaws was his inability to hear, understand, and intuit what G-d really wanted from him. He couldn't pick up on the subtle cues and listen to the true essence of what was expected of him. It was a case of motivated listening, hearing what he wanted to hear and interacting accordingly. Bilaam's initial impetuous and violent behavior toward his donkey reflected this inability to attend to the not fully articulated feelings of the other. In contrast, midrashim are abound describing the empathy and care that great Jewish leaders such as Moshe and David exhibited as shepherds towards their flock. How one listens and responds to those who are more vulnerable and unable to fully communicate is a litmus test for their true character. A test that Bilaam failed, and one we can aspire to pass - if we listen carefully.

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