

Balak Dvar Torah 7.3.15

Balak, King of the Moab, had relied on the formidable Kings Sichon and Og as a 1st line of defense.

When they proved no match for Bnai Israel, Balak conferred with his neighbors, the Midianites, on how to respond. They suggested to send a delegation of elders to receive the counsel of Bila'am, a well known prophet of the time who had a reputation of being able to predict the future. For the non-Israelite tribes, Bila'am was their Moshe, in effect.

Bila'am will not give them an immediate answer. Instead he tells them to "Lodge here for a night" and he would answer them after he speaks with God.

When Bila'am asks G-d if he can go with the elders to meet with the King Balak, G-d tells him effectively: "No. You cannot go. They are a blessed people."

When Bila'am gives his response to the elders, however, (Verse 22:13), he only relates that "G-d has refused to let me go with you." He leaves out the other half of G-d's communication to him, that the Hebrew nation is blessed and that any attempt at evil spells and curses would be of no consequence.

Why does he leave that out? Commentaries explain that Bila'am, as a haughty, arrogant prophet, refuses to admit his limitations in the presence of Hashem and Bnai Israel. He merely says I was told I can't go. [He ends up going after further entreaties leading to the whole episode of the talking donkey and his voicing praises for Bnai Israel instead of curses or the prediction of their doom].

So what is the lesson? We all have strengths and weaknesses. Individuals with low self esteem can have difficulty admitting their limitations and will seek cover, instead of simply stating the truth: "I don't know," "I do not have those types of skills." But by stating "I don't know" one is not demonstrating weakness. It relays to others an understanding of one's limitations and informs them that you may need help.

You can't be good at everything, you can't know everything. But by showing honesty in the face of situations where you have limits, one demonstrates strength, self-confidence, truthfulness. You are comfortable in your own "skin" so to speak. This is an important lesson, and I think one that often comes with age, that we learn over the years. And by being honest with one's limits, we give others confidence in our abilities when we do provide an answer or take on a task.

So Bila'am's response can serve as a teaching point for many – I would include medical students, young physicians, and our own representatives in the nation's capital.