

## *Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason Parshas Balak July 4, 2015*

### *"The 92-Year-Old Elementary School Student!"*

She grew up in Kenya under colonial rule, when women didn't get an education. Now in her 90s, Priscilla Sitienei is attending elementary school -- and inspiring a generation. She started five years ago as a kindergartner at a boarding school near Eldoret, a large city in western Kenya. Now in fourth grade, the nonagenarian, who attends school with six of her great-great-grandchildren, said, "I had grandchildren and great-grandchildren who shunned school. That made me mad. I decided I have to show them that education is important." Priscilla's exact age is unclear, but she says she was born around 1923, when a famine plagued her hometown. Growing up, relatives told her she barely survived that famine as a toddler, which gave her a rough estimate of her birth year. If confirmed by the Guinness World Records, she would be the oldest pupil in elementary school.

Priscilla worked as a traditional midwife for decades, having helped deliver some of her own classmates, who are aged between 10 and 14. She says there's still a lot to learn. "My favorite subject is math. Now that I'm in school, I know the right dosage to give the women who I help deliver their babies." Priscilla got married at a young age, and focused on raising her 10 children. "In my time, educating a woman was considered a waste of time and money." With great enthusiasm she describes her love for school and her fellow pupils. "They call me 'Gogo,' " she says, using the word for grandmother in her local Kalenjin tribe. 'Gogo' has a special dorm room tucked away in a corner, where she doles out wisdom to her protégés. Outside her door is a sign that says *Education has no age limit*. Priscilla confronts children who are not in school and asks them why. "They tell me they are too old. I tell them, 'Well I am at school and so should you.' I see children who are lost, children who are without fathers, just going round and round, hopeless. I want to inspire them to go to school."

Rabbi Akiva started learning Torah when he was well into his adult years. He was a successful businessman, running the operation of his future father-in-law's herds. He believed anyone could come and learn about Judaism regardless of their age or background. Rabbi Akiva, at age forty, said: "If a rock, though extremely hard, can be hollowed out by water, how much more so should it be possible for Torah, which is compared to water, to change my heart, which is soft! I will begin to study it, and try to become a Torah scholar." *Education has no age limit*. Why not start now?

### *Parshas Balak Numbers 22:2 - 25:9*

This week's portion shifts from the Jewish people's travels in the desert to the story of Bilam, the anti-Semitic prophet who attempted to curse the Children of Israel. Hired by Balak, the king of Moav, Bilam embarks upon a journey to the Israelite encampment. An angel brandishing a sword blocks Bilam's path, causing his donkey to repeatedly swerve off the road. Unable to see the angel, Bilam responds by striking the donkey three times. Miraculously, G-d causes the donkey to speak to Bilam -- shades of Mr. Ed, the talking horse in the 1960's TV show! Bilam's eyes are uncovered, and the humiliated prophet sees the angel standing in the path. The angel reminds Bilam that he may only speak the words that G-d places in his mouth. Upon arrival near the Jewish camp, Bilam repeatedly attempts to curse the people; each time G-d prevents him from doing so, but instead he ends up uttering several sets of praises, much to Balak's dismay. The Torah portion concludes with the Jewish men's debauchery with the promiscuous daughters of Moav and Midian, and the public immoral act of Zimri (a prince of the tribe of Simeon) with a Midianite princess. Pinchas, Aaron's grandson, zealously responds by piercing them to death with a spear, halting a plague from G-d which had broken out in the camp.

### *Rabbinic Ruminations*

People just love to talk. Guess what people's favorite topic is? *Me, Me, Me*. On average, people spend 60 percent of conversations talking about themselves -- and this figure jumps to 80 percent when communicating via social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Why, in a world full of ideas to discover, develop, and discuss, do people spend the majority of their time talking about themselves? Recent research suggests a simple explanation: Because it feels good. In a new [study](#) published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Harvard University researchers conducted a series of

experiments to assess how much people liked talking about themselves and why. In one study, they scanned people's brains while those people either revealed personal information about themselves or judged the personalities or opinions of others. Yet another study explored whether people wanted to share their answers with others or keep them to themselves. No matter the test, the researchers found the results pointed the same way: Humans get a biochemical buzz from self-disclosure. Talking about oneself activates the same areas of the brain that light up when eating good food, taking drugs and engaging in intimacy. Simply put, self-disclosure is gratifying. It is a neurological buzz.

Although brain chemistry may account for the inclination to talk about *Me, Me, Me*, next time you find yourself deep in conversation, be sure to listen, too. American psychiatrist Karl Menninger said, *"Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."* Odds are, if you let the other person talk a lot about themselves, they will think *you* are fascinating. Not only that; listening is a *chesed*, and strengthens relationships. As Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel would say: *"All my life I have been raised among the wise, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence."* (Ethics of the Fathers 1:17).

### *Quote of the Week*

When you get little, you want more. When you get more, you desire even more. But when you lose everything, you realize little was enough. -- Author Unknown

### **Joke of the Week**

Peter, a Coca-Cola salesman, returns home from his assignment in Israel very disappointed. He immediately goes to see his boss. He says,

"I got to Israel, and I decided to convey our message to the Israelis via a picture poster campaign. Although having no text on it, this poster was able to put across our message using just three images. The left hand picture, the first image, showed a man lying in the hot desert sand, totally exhausted and close to fainting. The middle picture, the second image, showed the man drinking Coca-Cola. And the right hand picture, the third image, showed the man totally refreshed and happy. We printed tens of thousands of the posters and got them displayed all over Israel."

"That should have worked very well for us," says the boss. "What went wrong, Peter?"

"I didn't realize that Jewish people read from right to left." *(Thanks to Pam Feigenbaum)*