

It's been called 'The Perfect Musical.' This musical's 1956 Broadway production was a tremendous hit. It set a record for the longest run of any major musical theater production in history. This musical won more awards than you can shake a stick at, including a Tony Award for best musical. It was followed by a hit London production, a popular film version, and numerous revivals. The film won eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director.

The musical I'm referring to, of course, is .... *My Fair Lady*. *My Fair Lady* is the story of Eliza Doolittle, who takes speech lessons so she could pass as a lady. The original Broadway production was a must-see, and many people went to great lengths to attend it.

During the time of *My Fair Lady's* run on Broadway, a family from South Carolina went to New York City for their vacation. They told all their friends they were going to see *My Fair Lady*. Unfortunately, the play was sold out when they tried to get their tickets and they couldn't get in. They were disappointed, but they were also embarrassed. They didn't want to have to go back home and tell their friends they missed the highlight of their trip. So -- what do you do when you've told everyone back home that you're going to the Big Apple to see *My Fair Lady*, but you don't see it?

You come up with a plan to make your friends *think* you've seen the musical!

The embarrassed family picked up some discarded tickets from the show, purchased a program, and bought the musical tapes. Back in their motel room, they learned all the songs and reviewed the program. Once back in South Carolina, they sang and whistled the tunes to all of *My Fair Lady's* hits, hoping that no one would suspect that they never got to see it.

They went to see a show -- didn't see it-- so they put on their own show.

Some people are so caught up in appearances that they just can't stand the idea that they might look bad and be embarrassed. The healthiest thing for that family to have done was to just laugh about not being able to see the show. But many people don't do the healthy thing. One antidote to 'putting on a show' can be seen from a fascinating incident in this week's Torah portion.

Balak, king of Moab, was fearful of being attacked by the Jewish people. He hired a non-Jewish man named Bilaam to curse the Jews. There is much discussion in the commentaries as to the true nature of Bilaam. Some say he was a prophet, in the view of others a charlatan. Some say he was an astrologer, others a liar. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear - he was a very evil man. For a high enough price, he was willing to curse an entire people.

The Torah describes how Bilaam saddled up his donkey and went on a journey to curse the Jews. On the way, an angel came to block the path. Initially, only the donkey - not Bilaam himself - noticed the angel. And not only did the donkey notice, but the donkey spoke and told Bilaam that there was an angel of G-d on the path. Then, when Bilaam realized the angel's presence, he acknowledged the humiliating reality that a donkey was more spiritually perceptive than he was.

A talking donkey -- shades of Mr. Ed! But this wasn't Hollywood; Bilaam's talking donkey was the real deal.

A curious thing occurs following Bilaam's interchange with the animal: Hashem kills the donkey.

At first glance, the death of the donkey appears counterproductive. Wouldn't G-d want to keep the donkey around as a reminder of this incredible incident? Think about the Kiddush Hashem might have taken place. People could point and say, 'Hey, look at that! There's the miracle donkey. That's the donkey that gave Bilaam his comeuppance.'

Why, then, did Hashem kill the donkey?

I think this question can be answered from a passage found in the novel *Imaginary Homelands*, written by the famous and controversial British Indian author, Salman Rushdie. Rushdie, speaking about the family traditions of his home, wrote the following:

*I grew up kissing books.*

*In our house, whenever anyone dropped a book ... the fallen object was required not only to be picked up but also kissed, by way of apology for the act of clumsy disrespect. I was as careless and butter-fingered as any child and, accordingly, during my childhood years, I kissed .... my fair share of books.*

*Devout households in India often contained, and still contain, persons in the habit of kissing holy books. But we kissed everything. We kissed dictionaries and atlases. We kissed ... novels and Superman comics. If I'd ever dropped the telephone directory I'd probably have kissed that, too. Books: food for the soul - what could be more worthy of our respect, and even love?*

Is it any surprise that Salman Rushdie grew up to become an author?

What do we learn from this beautiful story of Salman Rushdie's upbringing? I believe the lesson is: What we honor and treat with dignity, defines us. Honor and dignity. That's what it's all about. And it is because of honor and dignity that Hashem killed Bilaam's donkey.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, the late dean of the Mir Yeshiva, explained that G-d was being protective of Bilaam's honor and dignity. On the one hand, if the donkey lived, it would be a constant reminder of a great miracle. But on the other hand, how embarrassing it would be for Bilaam to have a constant reminder of his downfall. And even if Bilaam would have died first, the existence of the donkey would be a living reminder of a person's humiliation. To preserve Bilaam's honor, therefore, the donkey needed to be killed.

I find it astounding that Hashem would go to such great lengths to preserve the honor of a wicked character -- especially a person as evil as Bilaam, who wanted to destroy the Jewish people. Yet the Almighty wants to teach us a valuable lesson: If we need to be concerned about the dignity of Bilaam, then how much more so should we be sensitive to the dignity of our friends and neighbors?

And, Rabbi Shmuelevitz adds a point that is the main idea I'd like to share with you today: *While we must be sensitive to the honor due to others, we must also not forget to honor the higher nature within ourselves.*

A lesson that we've all learned a few too many times, is that our honor and dignity always seems to get tested at times when we really wish they wouldn't. This is precisely the reason why maintaining a sense of honor can be so challenging. Everything is going along as well as could be hoped for and

then -- whammo! -- adversity strikes. Things don't go the way we planned.

But what a marvelous accomplishment and sweet victory it is when in such times, we handle ourselves in a way we will never regret.

Years ago, Hall of Fame golfer Gary Player was playing in a tournament. He had to play the final two rounds in a single day, and after a morning round in which he shot 67, Player was in excellent position to win the tournament.

Upon entering the tent to sign his scorecard someone distracted him, and he left the tent without signing his scorecard. Realizing what he had done, Player went back into the tent and signed his card. By the time he got to the first tee to begin the final round, he thought about what happened; exiting the scoring area and then re-entering to sign his scorecard may have been a violation of the rules. He saw a tournament official standing nearby, and the golfer told him what had occurred.

"Gary," the official said, "your instincts are correct. That is a rules violation. I hate to tell you this, but you're disqualified."

At the time, Player was leading the tournament by five strokes over Arnold Palmer. He said he could have very easily played that round and won the tournament without anyone being the wiser. To do so would have been as simple as keeping his mouth shut. But, Gary Player said:

*What a hollow victory that would have been. ... I want to win as much as anyone who has ever played the game. But to do so at the cost of my own honor and the honor of the game -- well, the very idea of it is anathema to me. .... I'm sure that there are those who think that what I did at that tournament years ago was ridiculous .... But here's the thing: If I had not turned myself in, I would have had to live the rest of my life with the knowledge that I had cheated And the money and prestige of one tournament certainly aren't worth that. Much better is the feeling I have today that even though I left a trophy and check behind -- money that would be long gone by now -- I still have my dignity and honor.*

That's certainly not a popular attitude these days.

A USA Today poll found that only 56% of American teach honesty to their children. And a Louis Harris poll turned up the distressing fact that 65% of high school students would cheat on an important exam. I'm reminded of the story of the rancher that asked a veterinarian for some free advice. "I have a horse," he said, "that walks normally sometimes and limps sometimes. What shall I do."

The vet replied, "The next time he walks normally, sell him."

Life -- even more than the game of golf -- provides us with a never-ending stream of challenges to our honor and dignity. And when we pass those tests and challenges, we've been gifted an invaluable commodity -- the ability to look at ourselves in the mirror and know we are honorable people.

To attempt to define honor and dignity is a difficult task.

In the well known *Eishes Chayil* passage found in Proverbs (31:25), King Solomon said:

*Oz v'hadar l'vusha, v'tischak l'yom acharon -- She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.*

Why does the *Eishes Chayil* (virtuous woman) smile at the days to come? She realizes the life-changing benefit of having lived her life based upon the principle of doing right thing -- even though doing the wrong thing was often a much easier and seemingly more beneficial choice. Her commitment to a life of always doing the right thing transformed not only herself, but her husband and her family.

What does honor and dignity mean?

- Honor and dignity means that you make the right choices regardless of the difficulty.
- Honor and dignity means that you then have a positive attitude with regard to whatever outcome those choices bring you.
- Honor and dignity means you rise above life's turmoils and difficulties, and turn those circumstances into something positive.
- Honor and dignity reflects the self-respect you have for yourself.

Tomorrow begins the period on our calendar known as *The Three Weeks*. Starting with the Fast of the 17th of Tammuz and culminating in Tisha B'Av, we're aware of the primacy during this time of focusing on improving our interactions with others. But just as the mitzvah of *V'ahatva l'rayacha kamocha -- Love your friend as yourself* -- requires that we *first* love ourselves -- treating others with honor and dignity means that first we be cognizant of our own honor and dignity.

Let me conclude with the following brief story.

A businessman well known for his ruthlessness once announced to writer Mark Twain, "Before I die I plan to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the 10 Commandments aloud at the top!"

"I have a better idea," replied Twain. "You could stay in Boston and keep them."

Unlike the South Carolina family we spoke of earlier, the goal in life isn't to 'put on a show'. Rather, like Salman Rushdie's relationship to books, that which we honor and treat with dignity defines us. When you succeed in acting with honor and dignity, you have achieved a stupendous success.

May this lesson inspire us to act in an exalted, honorable, dignified, and truly human way in our relationship with the Almighty, and with others.