

PARASHAT BALAK

The Zeal of Moshe, Nadav and Avihu, and Pinchas

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

Parshat Balak commences the second half of Sefer Bamidbar, in geographical terms. From now on, Bnei Yisrael are encamped on the plains of Mo'av; only in Sefer Yehoshua will we read of them crossing the Yarden and entering the Land.

The first incident that takes place here is one of the most encouraging narratives in Sefer Bamidbar. The king of Mo'av teams up with a sorcerer, and together they connive to cause the downfall of Am Yisrael through the use of a terrible curse. But what miraculously ends up happening is that from the mouth of that same antagonistic heathen prophet we hear praises of Am Yisrael that are virtually unparalleled in all of the Torah. Against his will, Bilam praises Israel for their blessing of fertility ("Who can count the dust of Yaakov and count even a quarter of Israel?" – 23:10); he praises their special connection with God, Who watches over them constantly ("God their Lord is with them, and the trumpet blast of the King is among them") [1]; he praises the organization of the Israelite camp in the lawless desert ("How good are your tents, Yaakov; your dwelling places, Yisrael" – 24:5) [2]. On top of all of this, Bil'am goes on to praise their valor in war and their victories over their enemies, etc., until, at the end of the third blessing, the man who intended to curse the nation finds himself declaring, "Those who bless you are blessed, while those who curse you are cursed" (24:9).

Yet in the midst of our elation at the words of this gentile sorcerer standing atop the mountain, the text suddenly focuses on what Bnei Yisrael are actually doing inside the camp – and it is a very different picture from the one just depicted by Bil'am; they are poles apart.[3] In contrast to the goodness of the tents and the blessing of fertility, we now read: "The nation began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Mo'av" (25:1); in contrast to the presence of the Shekhina amongst the Israelite camp, we suddenly discover that "Israel joined themselves to Ba'al Pe'or" (25:3); in contrast to the view of Bilam - who was "with a closed EYE" – of Israel "dwelling by their tribes," we now hear of a completely different view: "Behold, a man of Bnei Yisrael came and brought

to his brethren a Midianite woman, BEFORE THE EYES of Moshe and BEFORE THE EYES of all the congregation of Bnei Yisrael" (25:6); in contrast to the "good tents" that so impressed Bilam, we are now faced with the "chamber" into which the prince of a tribe of Israel leads the Midianite woman.

Indeed, we are already used to ups and downs alternating in quick succession. Suffice it to recall the Revelation at Sinai, where Am Yisrael declared with a single voice, "We shall do and we shall hear" – and the terrible sin of the golden calf that followed immediately afterwards.

In fact, these two stories are similar in their general structures.

a. In both cases, the text first describes the presence of the Shekhina within the Israelite camp. At Sinai, the revelation of the Shekhina is one of the most fundamental elements of the entire experience ("And the appearance of the glory of God was like a consuming fire at the top of the mountain, before the eyes of Bnei Yisrael" – Shemot 24:17). In our parasha, too, in the story that provides the background to the sin of Ba'al Pe'or – the blessings of Bilam – the fact of the presence of the Shekhina within the camp seems to present itself as a central factor leading to Bilam's inability to curse:

"God their Lord is with them, and the trumpet blast of the King is among them. God took them out of Egypt, they have the strength of an ox. For there is no divination in Yaakov, nor enchantment in Israel. Now let it be told to Yaakov and Israel what God has done." (Bamidbar 23:21-23)

A simple reading of these verses connects them to the broader narrative context, and views Bilam's words as a justification (uttered for Balak's benefit) to explain his inability to curse Am Yisrael. Bilam explains why divination doesn't work on "Yaakov" and why enchantment has no effect on "Israel." His explanation: "God their Lord is with them," or, as the end of the verse formulates it, "Now let it be told to Yaakov and to Israel what God has done." This nation has no need for diviners and enchanters, because their Lord in their midst will tell them "what He has done."

b. As a complete antithesis to the calm and joyful description of the Divine Presence resting amongst Israel, the nation commits – in both stories – the sin of idolatry, also involving sexual immorality. Both sins, closely connected to pagan culture,[4] are mentioned in these two stories:

1. Sexual immorality – in the sin of the golden calf: "And they got up to make sport" (Shemot 32:6); in the sin of Ba'al Pe'or: "And the nation began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Mo'av" (Bamidbar 25:1).

2. Idolatry, expressed in the offering of sacrifices and eating of them – in the sin of the golden calf: "And they offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings, and the nation sat down to eat and drink" (Shemot 32:6); in the sin of Ba'al Pe'or: "And they called to the people to (participate in) the sacrifices of their gods, and the nation ate and they bowed down to their gods" (Bamidbar 25:2).

c. It is no surprise that God's reaction is similar in both stories, and the expression "burning anger" characterizes both:

"And now, let Me be; LET MY ANGER BURN against them." (Shemot 32:10)

"And GOD'S ANGER BURNED against Israel." (Bamidbar 25:2)

God's burning anger finds expression in both cases in the form of a "plague" (magefa):

"And God struck the nation (va-yigaf) [with a plague]..." (Shemot 32:35)

"And those that died IN THE PLAGUE..." (Bamidbar 25:9)

d. The connection between the two stories also stands out on the linguistic level. Suffice it to mention Moshe's instruction to the judges of Israel: "LET EACH MAN SLAY his men who attached themselves to Ba'al Pe'or" (Bamidbar 25:5), which reminds us very clearly of Moshe's call to the tribe of Levi after the sin of the golden calf: "LET EACH MAN SLAY his brother, and each man his neighbor, and each man him who is close to him" (Shemot 32:27). The human activity responding to the punishment in both cases is defined as "atonement": "Perhaps I SHALL MAKE ATONEMENT for your sin" (Shemot 32:30); "AND HE ATONED for Bnei Yisrael" (Bamidbar 25:13).

e. A similar reward is given to the "men of the sword" in both cases. Following the Levites' punishment of those who worshipped the golden calf, they are awarded an appointment related to the Mishkan and the Divine service ("Consecrate yourselves today to God, each man against his son and against his brother, that God may give a blessing upon you this day"). [5] Likewise, Pinchas is given an appointment related to the service of the Mishkan ("He and his descendants after him shall have a covenant of priesthood forever, because he was zealous for His God and he atoned for Bnei Yisrael").

The presentation of the sin of the golden calf as background for the sin of Ba'al Pe'or and the zealous act of Pinchas contributes – on several different levels – to hinted meanings in the sin of Ba'al Pe'or.

Firstly, from the historical perspective, creating a connection between the two stories creates a tragic literary cycle in Bnei Yisrael's journey from Sinai to the Plains of Mo'av. At Sinai, the high hopes for the nation (as expressed in the fact of the Revelation) shattered in the face of the nation's actual condition. In the plains of Mo'av, after nearly forty years of wandering, the high hopes (expressed this time by Bilam) once again crash in the face of the nation's actions.

But I believe that the significance of the connection also contributes to an understanding of the Torah's attitude towards the characters in the story of Ba'al Pe'or. This direction is emphasized by Chazal in their description of the dialogue that takes place between Pinchas and Moshe, before Pinchas takes up his spear:

"It is written, 'Pinchas the son of Elazar saw...' – what did he see? Rav taught: He saw the act and remembered the [relevant] law. He said to [Moshe]: 'Brother of my father's father: did you not teach me WHEN YOU DESCENDED FROM SINAI that one who cohabits with a gentile woman is to be struck by zealots?'" (Sanhedrin 82a)

Why does Rav insist that Moshe taught this law concerning zealots specifically when he came down from Mount Sinai?

It seems reasonable to assume that Rav is hinting at Moshe's actions when he descended and saw the golden calf. There, with no Divine command, Moshe gathered the tribe of Levi (who answered the call, "He who is for God – let him join me"), and killed those who had joined themselves to the calf. There, in Moshe's zeal for God, he commanded the people of his tribe to take "each man his sword," and to kill all those who had "made sport" with women.

Now, "Pinchas saw the act and he remembered the law." In other words, he had internalized what his teacher, Moshe, had taught him when he came down from Sinai, and in the face of Israel's sin he was overcome with zeal for God. Pinchas therefore took a "spear in his hand" and killed Zimri ben Salu, who had gone to commit harlotry with Kozbi bat Tzur.

This connection is referred to explicitly also by Rashi (verse 6), and comes across as a criticism of Moshe:

"'They were crying' – The law escaped [Moshe]; all fell to weeping. Faced with the calf, Moshe stood against six hundred thousand, as it is written 'And he ground it until it was fine,' but here he was helpless."

The connection between the two episodes raises a criticism of Moshe's lack of action: at the episode of the golden calf, he acted vigorously against the sinners, but here he does nothing of his own initiative; only after God's command (verse 4) does he gather the judges of the nation and decide that "those who joined themselves to Ba'al Pe'or" will be killed. In this story, it is Pinchas who fulfills Moshe's role; he "enters his shoes" and, in a show of zeal, without any explicit command, kills "the prince of a tribe of Israel."

NADAV AND AVIHU

Just as the presentation of the sin of the golden calf as background to the story of Ba'al Pe'or hints at a criticism of Moshe and at praise of Pinchas, there is also another story which, the Torah may be hinting, should be seen as background to our story. Here again there is special praise of Pinchas, as well as a lesson as to the limitations of zeal.

This background story arises from the Zohar on parashat Aharei Mot, concerning the death of Nadav and Avihu:

"(Nadav and Avihu) did not die like other mortals, even though they were not married, for they died only in body, but not in soul. From where do we know this? It is written, 'He took one of the daughters of Putiel as a wife, and she bore him Pinchas. These are the heads of the households of the Leviim by their families...' – Pinchas alone is enumerated, although it is written 'THE HEADS of the households of the Leviim.' From this we learn that Nadav and Avihu died a physical death but not a spiritual death... And therefore it is written, 'Pinchas THE SON of Elazar THE SON of Aharon.'"

According to the Zohar, the souls of Nadav and Avihu were reincarnated in Pinchas, and he was a tikkun (mending) for them.[6]

What is the meaning of this surprising connection between the sin of Nadav and Avihu and the zeal of Pinchas? The Zohar itself explains: "These [Nadav and Avihu] brought a strange FIRE, here there was a strange WOMAN" (part III, 57b). In other words, there is some similarity (linguistic and perhaps even more) between the sins described in these two stories. Does this connection arise from the verses themselves, and does it contribute to the significance of the story of Ba'al Pe'or and the zeal of Pinchas?

It would seem that the basic model that we outlined previously does indeed exist also in the text's description of the eighth day of the consecration of the Mishkan.

On the "eighth day" (when Nadav and Avihu died), the revelation of the Shekhina is one of the central themes of the day and of the sacrifices brought on that day. Concerning the offerings of the day, Moshe commands: "This is the thing that God has commanded that you do, that God's glory may be revealed to you" (Vayikra 9:6). His intention is clear, since this is the first day that the Shekhina "enters to dwell" in the new abode that Bnei Yisrael have built, and it is of great importance that the entire nation see that God does indeed desire for His Shekhina to dwell amongst the nation. After the sacrifices of the eighth day, we read:

"And the glory of God appeared to all of the nation. And a fire emanated from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fats upon the altar, and all the nation saw, and they shouted, and they fell upon their faces." (Vayikra 9:23-24)

But immediately after the description of this revelation and the description of the nation's joy, we read of the sin of Nadav and Avihu. Here again, the attribute of Divine justice breaks into reality and kills those who have sinned.

Moreover, the Zohar seems to be relying here on certain motifs that are common to the two events (over and above the basic model outlined above), and which create a connection between them:

a. The entire nation is standing about the Ohel Mo'ed, while those who have sinned (and are apparently standing within the precinct of the Ohel Mo'ed) are killed. On the "eighth day" this is clear: Bnei Yisrael are standing at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed, where they see a revelation of the Shekhina ("And all the congregation came close and stood before God" – Vayikra 9:5). But when Zimri takes the Midianite woman, he also does so before all the congregation, at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed: "And behold, a man came and brought to his brethren a Midianite woman, before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of all the congregation of Bnei Yisrael, and they were weeping at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed" – Bamidbar 25:6).[7] The public nature of the two events plays an important role in both stories.[8]

b. The verb associated with the actual sin, in both cases, is "le-hakriv" (to bring close, or to sacrifice). Concerning Nadav and Avihu we are told, "AND THEY BROUGHT before God a strange fire" (Vayikra 10:1). Similarly, and quite surprisingly, Zimri's sin is described as follows: "AND HE BROUGHT to his brethren a Midianite" (Bamidbar 25:6). (As mentioned, the Zohar also compares the second half of each of these verses: 'a strange fire' and 'a Midianite' – i.e., a strange woman.)

c. While these two motifs create a connection between the sinners (Nadav and Avihu on one hand, and Zimri ben Salu on the other), the more obvious connection that

arises intuitively in our consciousness concerns the kohanim in the two stories: i.e., between Nadav and Avihu and Pinchas. This, in fact, is the connection that the Zohar is addressing when it teaches that Pinchas was a reincarnation of the souls of Nadav and Avihu. In this context, too, the parallel is both thematic and linguistic.

Both stories deal with kohanim who deviate from the authority vested in them, and who acted on their own initiative. In both instances, the Torah emphasizes their lineage from Aharon; i.e., the character appears on the stage labeled as a "kohen." Nadav and Avihu are presented by the Torah with the words, "And the SONS OF AHARON, Nadav and Avihu, took" (Vayikra 10:1), while Pinchas is introduced with a detailed lineage that reaches back to Aharon: "And Pinchas the son of Elazar THE SON OF AHARON the kohen, saw..." (Bamidbar 25:7).

d. As mentioned, there is also a linguistic common denominator to the two stories. The act of Nadav and Avihu is described as taking something and performing an act with it: "The sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, TOOK each of them his censer..." (Vayikra 10:1). Similarly, the Torah describes Pinchas's act: "HE TOOK a spear in his hand" (Bamidbar 25:7).

As the Zohar describes it, Pinchas is a "tikkun" for the sin of Nadav and Avihu. Indeed, the connection between the two stories is actually based on the masubject that is common to both: a kohen's zeal for God. A few years ago, I proposed (see VBM archives on parashat Shemini) that the sin of Nadav and Avihu was fundamentally connected to their will to hide God's revelation from the nation as a whole. They sought to achieve this through offering incense, whose function is to create the cloud that hides the revelation of the Shekhina. In other words, the motivation of Aharon's sons was a religious one, arising from zeal for God: is it really proper that every man, woman and child should merit an unmediated encounter with God?! Their basic assumption was that even if it was proper that there be a revelation of the Shekhina before the kohanim (the "nobility of Bnei Yisrael"), this was not appropriate before a mass gathering of the entire nation.

For their pride and their attempt to create a spiritual elite to which only they and those like them would belong, they paid with their lives. God sought other kohanim, like Aharon their father, who was prepared to run with a censer containing incense into the midst of a plague that was decimating whoever came near, in order to save God's nation in its time of danger (Bamidbar 17:12).

Here, I believe, we arrive at the fundamental difference between the zeal of Nadav and Avihu and that of Pinchas. Nadav and Avihu sought to preserve, through an act of zeal, their special status and honor. In other words, they had a personal interest at stake. It is difficult to maintain that their zeal was truly for God's sake; we suspect that

their act was done for their own sake – even if cloaked in an apparent desire to preserve the honor of God. Zealots of this type have existed in every generation: people who preach morals and honor for God to others, while revealing in their actions a profound concern for their own personal honor.

In complete contrast, Pinchas in his act endangers all that is precious to him. Since the sinner in this case is a prince of a tribe of Israel, and since Moshe – who has already demonstrated in the past (at the sin of the golden calf) that when the situation calls for an act of zeal he acts accordingly – is doing nothing, it would be easy to build a very serious case against his hastiness, his youthful extremism that does not stop to listen and learn from the more mature and thoughtful world around him. Despite all this, Pinchas acts. He does not calculate that, despite the danger, he may still derive benefit from his act. On the contrary – Pinchas is well aware that he is likely to lose his honor in the eyes of those around him; perhaps he will even lose his life (if he is judged as a murderer). Nevertheless, Zimri's desecration of God's Name does not allow him to sit by idly.

The disparity between the zeal of Nadav and Avihu and that of Pinchas is a fine one. Sometimes it seems that a person cannot honestly say of his own actions whether they are – honestly and truly – for the sake of God, in opposition to his own interests, or whether he is acting for God's sake but also hoping to gain something along the way.

In this context, the midrash that seeks to explain Moshe's lack of action in the face of Zimri's sin assumes new significance:

"He brought to his brethren a Midianite woman, before the eyes of Moshe' – He [Zimri] attacked [Moshe] verbally. He said to him, 'Moshe – is she forbidden or permitted?'

He answered, 'She is forbidden to you.'

Zimri said: 'You are the loyal teacher of Torah; God takes pride in you and declares, "Not so My servant Moshe." But you say that this woman is forbidden – even though your wife whom you took is likewise forbidden to you! This one is a Midianite – and so is the other; this woman is the daughter of a foreign king, while your wife is the daughter of a foreign priest!'"[9]

The Midrash turns the sin of Zimri into a personal attack on Moshe. Thus, Moshe becomes an interested party, and if he acts there is a danger that he will not be doing so purely for the sake of God's holiness, but also for the sake of his own honor. It is not Moshe who will act in this situation, but rather Pinchas, who succeeds – through his actions – in halting God's burning anger.

NOTES:

[1] The expression "the blast (teru'a) of the King is among them" has dual significance. On the one hand, this describes God's presence within the Israelite camp, with the great shout emanating from the nation in honor of their King (as Ibn Ezra explains). At the same time, this expression can be read as deriving from the word "re'ut" – friendliness. In other words, "The friendliness of God (= the King) is found among Israel" (as Sa'adia Ga'on and Rashi explain).

[2] This blessing again has dual significance. "As tents planted by God" – according to the context we see that the reference is to a tree, which is called "ohel" (a tent), if only because of the parallel: "as cedars by the water" (indeed, most of the Rishonim indeed interpret the verse in this way). However, since this expression appears immediately after "How good are your tents, Yaakov," it is possible that the "tents planted by God" hint at the tents of Israel, in which they dwell.

[3] Years ago this stark contrast was pointed out to me by my dear friend, Dudi Deutsch, z"l, who, in his pure aspiration for holiness, always saw the good in every Jew. His insight was published in Alon Shevut 135-136 (5752), pp. 141-143: "Quite surprisingly, when we read the parasha and reach its conclusion, we have two impressions which not only cannot be brought together to form a single harmonious image, but in fact create the impression of opposing and contradictory images." Later on he posits that these two descriptions of the nation actually reflect the two views of the gentiles towards them – the view of Bil'am ("who perceives Israel as an ideal, a concept") and that of Balak (through whose eyes Am Yisrael is reflected "in their practical existence... living their day-to-day life among the nations").

[4] Our discussion here addresses primarily the Ba'al worship, in which Israel cleaved to Ba'al Pe'or.

[5] Rashi: "You, who are killing them for this matter, shall be consecrated as Kohanim to God" (commenting on Shemot 32:29). Compare his commentary on Shemot 28:41.

[6] This idea is developed further in parashat Pinchas (part III, 217a), also addressing the question of how Pinchas could have been a reincarnation of the souls of Nadav and Avihu since he was already born at the time when they died ("but Pinchas was in the world").

[7] The exact location of Nadav and Avihu's sin is a matter of controversy. For the purposes of the comparison, I make mention of the opinion of Rashbam, who maintains that Nadav and Avihu offered their "strange fire" within the Ohel Mo'ed,

and there God's fire burned them. It is likewise not clear where Zimri was located (which "chamber" – kubba - is the Torah referring to?). For our purposes, I adopt one of the popular explanations among modern scholars - that the text refers to a roofed structure that was close to the Mishkan and connected to it.

[8] As several of the Rishonim emphasize in their commentaries on the verse: "I will be sanctified in those who come near Me, and I will be glorified before the entire nation" (Vayikra 10:3).

[9] Shemot Rabba, parasha 33, 5. Compare Midrash Tanchuma on parashat Balak, teaching that because of this accusation by Zimri "the law escaped him."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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