

## PARASHAT BALAK

### Bilam and the Sin of Ba'al Pe'or

By Rav Elchanan Samet

#### A. STRUCTURE OF THE STORY

The story of the sin of Ba'al Pe'or and its results (Bemidbar chapter 25) straddles the end of parashat Balak and the beginning of parashat Pinchas. This division is not arbitrary, but rather serves to divide the narrative into two equal halves, each consisting of nine verses. This division matches the literary distinction between the two halves of the story. The first half (verses 1-9) describes EVENTS TAKING PLACE in the Israelite camp (except for verse 4, which stands out in this half as a quotation of God's words to Moshe). In the second half, we see the opposite: most of it is God's speech, reacting to the events of the first half. Only in between God's first statement, concerning Pinchas's action (10-13), and His second utterance, concerning the Midianites (16-18), do we find two exceptional verses (14-15) notifying us of the names and respective status of the Israelite man and the Midianite woman who are put to death by Pinchas.

What, then, is the nature of the parallel between the two halves of the story? They correspond to one another in chiasmic fashion, as is demonstrated in the following schematic description:

I (1-3) "The nation began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Mo'av... and they bowed down to their gods.

ISRAEL JOINED THEMSELVES TO BA'AL PE'OR, and God's anger burned against Israel.

(4-5) God said to Moshe: Take all the heads of the nation, and hang them before God, against the sun, that God's burning anger may be appeased from Israel.

II (6) Behold, a man of the children of Israel 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, who were weeping at the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed.

III (7-9) Pinchas, SON OF ELAZAR, SON OF AHARON THE KOHEN saw, and he arose... and he took...

He went after the man of Israel, into the chamber, and he impaled both of them... and the plague was stopped FROM UPON BNEI YISRAEL.

IIIa (10-13) ... Pinchas SON OF ELAZAR SON OF AHARON THE KOHEN has appeased My anger FROM UPON BNEI YISRAEL...

Therefore you shall say: Behold, I bestow upon him My covenant of peace.

A covenant of eternal priesthood shall be with him and with his descendants after him, in return for his zealousness for God, and that he atoned for Bnei Yisrael.

Ila (14-16) The name of the Israelite man who was struck... was Zimri son of Salu, a prince of a household of Shimon.

The name of the woman who was struck, the Midianite, was Kozbi daughter of Tzur - he was father of a people, of a household of Midian.

Ia (16-18) ... Vex the Midianites and strike them, for they vex you with their wives which they prepared for you CONCERNING THE MATTER OF PE'OR, and concerning the matter of Kozbi, daughter of a prince of Midian, their sister, who was struck down on the day of the plague BECAUSE OF THE MATTER OF PE'OR.

## B. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE HALVES

What is the relationship between the first and second half of the story? The answer to this question will enable us to define with precision the subject of the story and its unique character.

The subject of the first half is the difficulty experienced by Moshe in eliminating the sin in which the nation and its leaders were engaged, and thereby stopping the raging plague.

The second half of the story contains, for the most part, two utterances by God. The first (verses 11 - 13) praises Pinchas for his deed and awards him an eternal reward for it. The second utterance (verses 17-18) condemns the Midianites and commands that they be slain, because the debacle of Israel's sin concerning Pe'or was caused by their scheming; they even sent Kozbi - their "sister," one of their own - as part of the plan.

What is the common denominator in these two Divine utterances? Both present a just retribution for the different factors related to the plague with which God struck the nation. The one who stopped the plague - Pinchas, who "appeased My anger from upon Bnei Yisrael... so that I did not utterly destroy Bnei Yisrael in My jealousy" - is awarded an eternal and most outstanding reward. The Midianites, who planned the deed that brought about that plague, will be punished by Israel at God's command; they will be struck down when the time comes. The responsibility of the Midianites for the plague is mentioned in the words that are repeated twice in God's speech: "for the matter of Pe'or;" "on the day of the plague because of the matter of Pe'or."

The order of God's words, meting out Divine recompense to these two parties - Pinchas and the Midianites - is the opposite of the order of their deeds in the first half. At the beginning of the story, the practical results of the Midianites' scheming become apparent - the harlotry of the nation with the daughters of Moav and their joining themselves to Ba'al Pe'or. Only at the end of the first half comes Zimri's act, and Pinchas's reaction to it.

The reason for this reversal of order in the second half is because the wives of the Midianites affect not only the beginning of the story - the prostitution with the daughters of Moav - but also what follows: Zimri's sin with Kozbi, daughter of Tzur. This we learn from God's words concerning the revenge on the Midianites, which includes a reminder of their responsibility for Zimri's act - (18) "...and for the matter of Kozbi, the daughter of the prince of Midian, their sister."

Thus we can understand the location of verses 14-16 at the center of the second half: these verses explain the names and respective status of Zimri and Kozbi. This information lends added significance to Pinchas's act, and additional justification for his reward. But these verses also serve as the introduction to the next section - verses 16-18. In order for us to understand the severity of the Midianite conniving, we must first know that the Midianite woman who sinned with Zimri was not some nameless woman who happened to wander into the Israelite camp; rather, she was "daughter of the prince of Midian, their sister." Hence we must conclude that Kozbi was deliberately SENT to the Israelites.

We may summarize by saying that the subject of our story is the plague that struck Israel for worshipping Ba'al Pe'or, the retribution for those that caused it, and the reward for the person who brought about its cessation.

### C. APPARENT EVENTS AND HIDDEN FACTS

What I said in the previous section does not exhaust the special relationship between the two halves of our narrative. As noted, the crux of the first half is a description of the events taking place in the Israelite camp. The second half, in contrast, exposes the significance and ramifications, AND ESPECIALLY - FACTS, that were absent from the prior description.

The section regarding Pinchas's reward reveals no new facts about his actions which were described earlier, but it does explain their significance. Pinchas's action is defined in the second half as positive zealotry for God (the root k-n-a appears four times in God's speech), and we are told explicitly that it was his act that appeased God's anger at His people and caused the plague to cease.

The second section of the second half (verses 14-16) exposes new facts: the identity of the man and woman who were struck by Pinchas, and their noble status.

Our narrative describes the situation in quite ordinary terms in the first half; only in the second half does it then expose the details of the situation and their significance.

This characteristic of our narrative is epitomized in its final section. Here a big surprise awaits us, something we could not have imagined when reading the first half: behind the harlotry of Israel with

the daughters of Moav, behind their joining themselves to Ba'al Pe'or, and even behind Zimri's act with Kozbi, stands a Midianite scheme! The event described at the beginning of the story as a sin on the part of Israel, without special background, turns to be a case of Israel falling into a trap set by the Midianite enemy! Who could have guessed this from a reading of verses 1-9?

We may summarize as follows: the first half of the story describes the APPEARANCE of the events that took place at Shittim, while the second half - containing mostly God's speech - exposes that which was HIDDEN behind those events, their inner core, with their definitive results concerning the future.

#### D. NEW REVELATIONS IN THE STORY OF THE WAR AGAINST MIDIAN (CHAPTER 31)

The thematic continuation of our narrative is to be found in chapter 31 of parashat Mattot - in the description of the war against Midian. In this war we find the fulfillment of the command given at the conclusion of our narrative (17-18): "Vex the Midianites and strike them, for they vexed you with their wives...." When the time comes to actually fulfill this command, Moshe is commanded (31:2), "Wreak the vengeance of Bnei Yisrael upon the Midianites."

Two personalities mentioned for the first time in our narrative are mentioned again in the story of the war against Midian, and their mention there represents a strong link between the two stories. The first of these personalities is Pinchas:

(31:6) "And Moshe sent them... and Pinchas son of Elazar, son of Aharon the kohen, to the war, with the holy vessels and the trumpets for sounding, in his hand."

Pinchas is not dispatched to this war as a military figure, but rather as the KOHEN. Thus, the beginning of his reward is realized - the "eternal covenant of priesthood" that was awarded to him in our parasha.

The second personality is less obvious, both in our narrative and in the episode of the war against Midian:

(31:8) "And they killed the kings of Midian, in addition to the other war casualties: Evi and Rekem AND TZUR and Chur and Reva, the five kings of Midian."

Tzur, we remember, was the father of Kozbi, who was slain together with Zimri by Pinchas on the day of the plague. Now her father is punished, together with the other Midianite rulers, for the conniving mission that they had previously sent to Israel.

Another big surprise awaits us in the continuation of verse 8 in the story of the Midianite war:

"And they killed Bil'am son of Be'or by the sword."

The last we heard of Bil'am was at the end of the story of his blessings (24:25): "And Bil'am arose and he went, and returned to his place." How and why did he find his way to joining the kings of Midian located close to the plains of Moav?

Another puzzling question: why did Israel slay someone who had showered such lofty blessings upon them? Did they even have the right to kill a prophet who prophesied in the name of God? These questions will find their solutions later on in the story.

The Israelite soldiers capture the women of Midian, the children, and all the Midianite property, and then return to the camp. When Moshe sees that they have captured the Midianite women, he becomes angry and says:

(15-16) ... "And you have left all the women alive!?"

But these (women) caused Bnei Yisrael - BY BILAM'S WORD - to revolt against God in the matter of Pe'or, and there was a plague upon God's congregation!"

These words complete the picture described in our narrative, adding two important facts:

1. At the beginning of the story we are told that the nation committed harlotry with the daughters of MOAV (with only one MIDIANITE woman mentioned in this context - Kozbi, daughter of Tzur). From Moshe's words we learn that the daughters of MIDIAN similarly served to lead Bnei Yisrael astray in that episode; they likewise tempted the men and led to worship Ba'al Pe'or.

2. The scheme of the Midianites (to tempt the Israelites after them and their gods) was not devised on their own initiative, but rather was thought up "by the word of Bil'am," who dwelled among the Midianites and guided their actions. Bil'am thus did not despair of his ultimate goal. Following his colossal failure in the attempt to curse Israel, he did admittedly part from Balak king of Moav on bad terms. But ultimately he came to Balak's allies, the kings of Midian, who dwelled close by, in order to advise them and lead them in their battle against Israel.

In these words of Moshe we discover the reason for Israel slaying Bil'am, as explained by Ramban (verse 18): "For he was close by - Bil'am was also part of this idea."

These astounding revelations in the story of the war against Midian in chapter 31 are a continuation of the same phenomenon that was already displayed in our parasha. The events taking place in our narrative (its first half) are described as they appear at the time, but later on we discover new facts that were previously hidden, and which give the events new and surprising significance.

#### E. "FLASHBACKS" RELATED TO OUR NARRATIVE

When Moshe becomes angry with the military commanders, telling them (31:16), "But these (women) caused Bnei Yisrael - BY BILAM'S WORD - to revolt against God in the matter of Pe'or, and there was a plague upon God's congregation," he is recalling a past event - the day of the plague - with great emotional intensity ("and Moshe became angry"). In the words of Prof. Meir Weiss z"l, "The past is injected into the present, and they intermingle." The reason for this flashback by Moshe is easily understood from the context in which his words appear. What is noteworthy is that within that same flashback his words reveal important details about the past that are conveyed here FOR THE FIRST TIME.

Nechama Leibowitz z"l (Studies in Sefer Bamidbar, pp. 352-4) asks:

"Why does the Torah not reveal to us in parashat Balak the evil schemes of Bil'am, prior to the description of Israel's sin, when they became entangled in his corruption? And why does the Torah not mention Bil'am's role and his incitement when it talks about the scheming of Midian?"

We have already noted the special literary characteristic of our story, where the first part describes the events that took place around Ba'al Pe'or AS THEY APPEARED AT THE TIME, while the hidden facts are supplied AS NEEDED, in the second half - and hence the flashback in this half. The 'need' here is to give new significance to the facts recounted previously, in order to indicate their future influence. We learn the significance of Pinchas's act: his fearlessly slaying a prince of Israel and the daughter of a Midianite king, thereby stopping the plague, brings his reward and that of his descendants for all eternity. We also learn the significance of Israel's shameful sin and the plague that struck them: these were caused by the Midianites' scheming and engendered the command that the Midianites be "vexed" and struck.

Within this framework there is no need to mention the "word of Bil'am" and his role in the Midianite wiles, for there is no practical ramification to this fact: there is no command to punish him for it, nor to remember it. Therefore the fact remains hidden within the recesses of the events; it is not exposed.

Only when Bilam's presence in Midian becomes apparent and he is killed by the Israelites for his part in what happened at Ba'al Pe'or, does Moshe mention him as the person who was behind the Midianite plan to entrap Israel.

N. Leibowitz provides a different answer to her question:

"It seems that the Torah wanted to teach us a great and important lesson here. Although the initiative was Bilam's, and it was he who advised that the daughters of Moav be sent to the Israelite camp in order to destroy their most precious asset - the purity of the sexual aspect of their lives - nevertheless, the guilty ones are Israel: 'And THE NATION began to commit harlotry....' The Torah recounts only the sin of Israel and their punishment. For the responsibility for an action lies with the one who performs it, and responsibility is personal. One who is incited is not excused because he was incited. 'The words of the Master and the words of a disciple - to who does one listen?' (Kiddushin 42a).

But the inciter is not exempt from punishment, and therefore in the parasha where we learn of Bilam's punishment - (31:8) 'Bil'am son of Be'or they slew by the sword' -

we are also told of Bilam's sin (ibid. 16), 'But these (women) caused Bn'Yisrael - BY BILAM'S WORD - to revolt....'"

## F. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE STORIES OF BILAM AND BA'AL PE'OR

If we were to read just the parasha of Balak, without any knowledge of its continuation, could we possibly understand that its nine concluding verses are connected to the greater story of Balak and Bil'am? Certain hints do in fact indicate to someone who pays careful attention that the event concerning Ba'al Pe'or is connected to the lengthy preceding story.

1. Location of the event: The divinity representing the object of Israel's sin at the end of the parasha is Ba'al. Worshippers of Ba'al would customarily name it after their place. "Ba'al Pe'or" is therefore "the Ba'al of Pe'or;" the name of the place is Pe'or. And behold - the third lookout point to which Balak takes Bil'am is "the top of Pe'or" (23:28): "And Balak took Bil'am to the top of Pe'or, overlooking the face of Yeshimon."
2. The connection between Moav and Midian: It is hinted in our narrative that Israel's failure concerning Ba'al Pe'or is related both to the daughters of Moav, with whom the nation began to commit harlotry, and to the daughters of Midian, one of whom participated in the act performed by a man of Israel before the eyes of Moshe and all the congregation. Such cooperation between Moav and Midian against Israel is described also in the previous story:

(22:4) "And Moav said to the elders of Midian: Shall this congregation then lock up all that is around us...

(7) and the elders of Moav and the elders of Midian went, with divinations in their hands, and they came to Bil'am and they told him of Balak's words."

3. The aim achieved: What was the aim of Balak's appeal to Bil'am?

(22:6) "Perhaps I shall prevail and WE SHALL STRIKE THEM, and I shall banish them from the land."

Various interpretations are offered for the expression "we shall strike" (nakeh). One is Rashi's comment on this verse, based on Tanchuma 4: "It is a secondary meaning of the word, as in 'to

deduct (menakeh) from his money' – i.e. to deduct from them somewhat." But even according to other commentaries, Balak's aim was finally partially achieved in the fall of twenty-four thousand of Israel in the plague, which was caused by the daughters of Moav and the daughters of Midian.

4. In the description of Pinchas's deed in killing the Israelite man and the Midianite woman, the Torah states:

(8) "And he came after the man of Israel to THE CHAMBER (ha-kubbah) and he impaled both of them, the Israelite man and the woman, through HER BELLY (kovatah)."

The two words highlighted here are unique in the Tanakh, and various interpretations are offered for them, each in keeping with their context and with the various linguistic roots from which they may be derived. From the context it is clear that the "kubbah" is the place where Zimri and Kozbi were, while "kovah" refers to part of the female anatomy. Why does the Torah use two such rare terms (which do sound somewhat similar), rather than more commonly used words that would convey its meaning more clearly?

The answer to this question would seem to connect our narrative to the previous one. The root "k-b-h," meaning "to curse," appears ten times in the story of Balak and Bil'am (and only three other times in all of Tanakh) as the central root expressing the subject of the story: the failed attempt to curse Israel. Interestingly, some of its appearances are in a form similar to the two words in our narrative, "kubbah" and "kovah":

(22:11) "Now, go and CURSE (kavah) them for me"

(17) "Go, then, CURSE (kavah) this nation for me"

(23:8) "How can I curse whom God has not CURSED (kaboh)?"

All of these links between the story of Bilam's blessings and our narrative hint at a fundamental connection between the two narratives included in parashat Balak. The continuation into the parasha of Pinchas, and then into parashat Mattot, will reveal the roots of this connection: the Midianite wives, guided by Bilam's advice, were meant to entrap Bnei Yisrael and to lead them to revolt against God.

The important question is: what is the lesson that the Torah wishes to teach us through the juxtaposition of these two stories, and through the many links that it creates between them?

Through various means, the nations of the world attempt to wage war against Israel - "a nation that dwells alone." Some come with a sword in their hand, looking to fight a military battle, as we read in the parasha last week (20:18-20) - "Lest I come out towards you with a sword... And Edom came out towards them with many people and with a strong hand;" (21:23) "And Sichon gathered all his nation... and they fought against Israel." Others try to attack us using their tongues, with divination in their hands, as Balak and Bil'am attempted to do (22:6), "Go now, CURSE ME this nation... perhaps I shall prevail and we shall strike them, and I shall banish them from the land."

Neither is particularly dangerous. Concerning the first type, Bil'am prophesizes:

(23:24) "The nation shall arise like a lion, and lift itself like a young lion

He shall not lie until he has eaten his prey, and drunk the blood of the slain."

Indeed, we witnessed Israel's victory over Sichon and Og in the previous parasha: "And Israel performed valor."

Concerning the second type, Bil'am - himself one of these - declares:

(23:8) "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?"

(24:9) Those who bless you are blessed, and those who curse you are cursed."

But the nations of the world also have a third way, and this is truly dangerous: to approach Israel with some temptation. They tempt Israel with women and with banquets, thereby leading them to commit harlotry first in the sexual sphere and then in the religious one. This way has led to many casualties in Israel.

The physical battlefield and the metaphysical war can be overcome, but the moral-religious battle is a difficult one. What the elders of Moav and of Midian were unable to achieve with their divination, their daughters were able to achieve with their charms. Where Balak and Bilam failed with the many

sacrifices that they offered to God upon seven altars, the daughters of Moav succeeded in drawing Bnei Yisrael to the offerings of their gods. Bil'am, who failed in his attempt to curse Israel from the top of Pe'or, eventually succeeded in his attempts to topple them into the depths of Ba'al Pe'or. When he realized that the route of cursing would not work - "How shall I curse who God has not cursed (kaboh)?" - he turned to the "kubbah," where Israel would destroy themselves.

Temptation and incitement are dangerous for Israel because they create a situation whereby the defeat comes about from within Israel, from within their moral weakness, from their choice of the evil path. Indeed, this is what provided Balak with a partial victory: a plague broke about among Israel, and twenty-four thousand people died. But Bilam's principal victory lay in exposing Israel's point of weakness, and showing the way for future enemies.

#### G. THE EVENT AT PE'OR AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE IMMINENT CHANGE

Israel's sin concerning Ba'al Pe'or has no parallel throughout the period of the desert wanderings. Israel's sins in the desert usually arose from a lack of physical comfort, as a result of the inconvenient desert conditions. Even this younger generation, about to enter the land, fell into this trap in the previous parasha.

This younger generation now reaches habitation and becomes the neighbor of the nations living in the land. Here, prior even to conquering the land and settling it, the nation's attraction towards its neighbors and their material and religious culture is revealed. For the first time Israel sins not because of difficulty or deprivation, but rather out of orgy and revelry.

The sin of Ba'al Pe'or serves as a warning of the dangers that await Israel when they dwell in their land: the attraction towards the neighboring pagan nations, to the culture of farmers who bow down to Ba'al, to participation in their festivals and joining themselves to their daughters.

Moshe was unable to deal with this unfamiliar difficulty. This deed was unlike the episode of the Golden Calf. There Moshe acted definitively, and was able to quirepair the religious deviancy that had been exposed in Israel, for the root of this deviancy lay in a mistake made by the nation and its leadership in a situation of temporary distress. But here we witness a deviancy of paganism based upon impulsive rebellion; it comes from a situation of satiety and from harlotry with the daughters of the nations. Moshe was unaccustomed to this. This event (like that of Mei Meriva) demonstrated the

need for a change of leadership. The new challenges that faced Israel required a new leadership able to address them.

Pinchas - grandson of Aharon, Moshe's brother - represents the new leadership that will take Israel into their land and accompany the first generations of its settlement. In his zealousness for God, Pinchas sets down the proper path for leaders and prophets in the coming generations when faced with paganism. This battle must be determined, sometimes cruel, and it must be directed first and foremost against those leaders of the nation who go astray and lead others astray after themselves.

Pinchas is the guiding light of those who were "zealous for God," such as Yehu and Eliyahu. In later generations - such as that of the early Chashmonaim - his figure likewise served as a shining example of religious zeal.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.