

Parsha Ponders

Balak | July 18, 2019 | 16 Tammuz 5779

The repulsive idol and the lack of boundaries¹

ויחל העם לינות אל בנות מואב וגו' וצמד ישראל לבעל פעור וגו'

The [Jewish] nation began² to commit lude acts with the women of Moav...and the Jews clung to [the idol] Ba'al Peor³

At the end of this week's *parsha*, the Jewish people hit a new low. They began to have illicit sexual relationships with women from the foreign nation of Moav, and they committed severe acts of idol worship. The Torah uses an unusual expression to describe their attitude towards the idol known as Ba'al Peor. It says וצמד, which is the verb form of the word which describes a tightly bound cover on a vessel⁴. This means that the Jews became tightly bound, or clung, to the idol Ba'al Peor. With some historical context, this is very hard to understand. The form of worship of this idol was one of the most repulsive things imaginable. The way to serve this idol was to eat and drink things which would cause diarrhea⁵, and then to defecate on it⁶. How could the Jews be not only interested, but totally attached to such an idol?

Further, the Sages relate a story⁷ about a non-Jewish woman who was very ill. She swore that if she ever recovered from her illness, she'll worship every idol in the world. She eventually recovered, and wanted to be true to her word. She travelled far and wide, and she worshipped every idol that she could find. Eventually, she came to the Temple of Ba'al Peor. She asked the priests to explain to her what their method of worship was. They explained it to her, and she was disgusted. She said that it would be better for her to take ill again, than to worship this idol. We see that even someone who would worship every idol on Earth had their limits. How could the Jews have clung to Ba'al Peor?

Towards the end of his life, Moshe warned the people against adding or subtracting from the Torah⁸. Immediately, he reminds them of the fate of those who worshipped the Ba'al Peor. Hashem made sure that there was no remnant of anyone who worshipped the idol. What do the two things have to do with one another? Why did Moshe first warn them against adding or subtracting from the Torah, and then warn them about Ba'al Peor? Do they share any connection⁹?

It would appear that the worship of Ba'al Peor wasn't to relieve oneself, **despite** it being disgraceful to the idol. Rather, the exact opposite is true: the main form of worship for this idol **was** to disgrace it¹⁰. What's the intention behind this? It wasn't random, without any forethought. The essence of Ba'al Peor was the dismantling of all boundaries. Even idol worshippers have their boundaries. They each have their idol which they honor and serve. In opposition to this, the worshippers of Ba'al Peor had no boundaries. Even their own idol they disgraced, to the utmost extreme. In their minds, their idol had no value whatsoever, to the point that they had no obligation to honor it. With this attitude, they created

¹ Based on Sichos Mussar § 84

² Cf. Targum "Yonasan" and Da'as Zekeinim ad. loc.

³ Numbers 25:1, 3

⁴ Sanhedrin 64a

⁵ Rashi ad. loc.

⁶ Sanhedrin loc. cit.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:2,3

⁹ See Seforno ad. loc.

¹⁰ Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz infers this from the story of Savta ben Alas in Sanhedrin loc. cit.

an idol whose sole form of worship was to disgrace it, and the more they would disgrace it, the greater the service.

Now it's more understandable what was so alluring about this idol. The whole concept of Ba'al Peor was complete abandonment. Everything goes when you worship Ba'al Peor. There are zero boundaries. This lifestyle is incredibly attractive. We see this attitude even in our days, way after idol worship has gone out of style. It's becoming more and more prevalent, as all morals and values, basic things that were always taken for granted, are slowly peeled away¹¹. There's no barrier today that can stand in the way of people's desires.

The evil Bilaam, whose idea it was to seduce the Jews with the daughters of Moav¹², breached the fence of illicit sexual relations. Until then, all nations had a certain moral understanding against promiscuity¹³. Bilaam was the first to suggest complete abandonment, telling the Moabite women to seduce whoever they could find. Since the Jews stumbled in this, and allowed for this breach, it led to the complete abandonment of all boundaries. It led to complete attachment to the idol Ba'al Peor, and all it stood for. What is the way for a person to protect themselves from hitting rock bottom? When a person makes the slightest of breaches in their morals, it creates an opening for the evil inclination. The person is in severe danger of expanding the breach. What can they do?

The proper strategy comes from the Torah's prohibition against detracting from the *mitzvos*. The Torah surrounded us with 613 "fences". If a person removes any of the *mitzvos*, they're creating a breach in one of their fences. A fence with a breach, which grants anyone entry, isn't much of a fence. Just like if a field has a hole in its fence, the entire field isn't safe, so too a person who makes a breach in their personal boundaries, they're completely unprotected. They're in danger of losing all of their hard-earned values.

The same can be said for the Torah's prohibition against adding to the *mitzvos*. We are taught¹⁴ that whoever adds is in fact subtracting. We see this from Adam and Eve. Hashem forbade Adam from eating from the Tree of Knowledge¹⁵. Eve, however, said that Hashem even prohibited them from touching the Tree¹⁶. This wasn't true, but was really an additional prohibition they had created¹⁷. This gave room for the snake to push Eve against the tree. When he did, and she didn't die, he told her that so too if she eats from the tree, she wouldn't die¹⁸. This convincing argument led to the first sin, and introduced death to mankind. All because they added to Hashem's command.

We now understand the connection between these two prohibitions and the incident with Ba'al Peor. Whoever adds or subtracts from the *mitzvos* is breaching the Torah's fences. This tiny breach will eventually lead to the complete abandonment of all morals and values. This was the sin of Ba'al Peor.

¹¹ Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz said this in the 70's. Imagine what he would say today

¹² Rashi to Numbers 25:1, citing Sanhedrin 106a

¹³ Bereishis Rabbah 80:6. See Eitz Yosef *ad. loc.*

¹⁴ Sanhedrin 29a

¹⁵ Genesis 2:17

¹⁶ Ibid 3:3

¹⁷ Rashi *ad. loc.*, quoting Bereishis Rabbah 19:3. It's a dispute in *Midrashim* if Adam added onto the *mitzvah* of Hashem, or if it was Eve. See Torah Sheleimah *ad. loc.* § 13 and 15

¹⁸ Bereishis Rabbah *loc. cit.*