

# Parshat Balak / Pinchas

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## The Seduction at Moav - a Midrash Case Study.

### INTRODUCTION

Our Parsha closes with a shocking episode of orgiastic sex and idolatry within the camp of Israel. We watch with a sense of embarrassment and indignation as we read the vivid imagery of the young Israelite prince unashamedly consorting with his Midianite girl friend at the centre of the camp, in full public view. In fact, it is quite clear that this scene so shocked the people that they were frozen into a state of helpless inaction:

“Israel attached themselves to Ba’al Peor and God was incensed with Israel. The Lord said to Moses, ‘Take the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord...’ So Moses said to Israel’s officials, ‘Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Ba’al Pe’or.’ Just then, one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community, and they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. When Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon Hakohen saw this, he left the assembly and took a spear in his hand. He followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite, and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped. Those who died in the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.” (25:3-9)”

How long did it take until Pinchas “left the assembly and took a spear in his hand?” Five minutes? An hour? A day? - In the meantime, how does everyone else react? They simply cry! They watch in silence. Despite Moses’ explicit instruction, nobody lifts a finger. They seem paralysed. They cannot believe their eyes.

Pinchas’s zealous act of violence shatters the silence, this strange state of frozen inaction, this paralysis. Pinchas, his courage and zeal, his personality and motivation, are all worthy of our attention.

In our shiur this week, we are going to examine the moments prior to Pinchas’s extraordinary act. We are going to delve into the cult of Peor, the idolatrous movement which enchanted and entrapped the Children of Israel. Chapter 25 describes – in a few concise verses – the process of degeneration that Bnei Yisrael underwent as they spiralled downwards

to a state of rebellion and sin. How did the children of Israel, who are noted by their “goodly tents” [1a], become involved in an alien religion of sex and idol worship?

Before we begin, a word about methodology. This week, we are going to study Midrash and the fascinating approach offered by the Midrash in relation to this topic.

### THE PROBLEM

The difficulty of this particular sinful happening lies in its peculiarity and its timing.

What do I mean by this? Let us begin by noting the nature of the sin. Here we are dealing with idolatry and sexual relations with the Midianite women. Both of these sins have been noticeably absent during the wilderness years. The usual wilderness complaints relate to food or water, or the desire to return to Egypt, the dissatisfaction with the desert conditions. This is familiar territory. But the sins that we read of now are in a totally different dimension. With the exception of the golden calf - which had its own unique set of causes - we have not experienced Am Yisrael becoming entangled with idolatry. And the promiscuity and sexual indulgence that we read of here is totally unprecedented and absolutely unexpected. Where did it all come from? What happened?

And this leads us to the next question. - Why now? What makes this story particularly alarming and indeed, more disappointing, is its timing. We are now in the 40th year of the wilderness. B’nei Yisrael are on the border of the Promised Land. They have had ample time - an entire generation - in order to prepare for this moment. The sense of anticipation, of heightened excitement, one would imagine, were intense. Why now did they stumble into sin?

In fact, an entire parsha - Parshat Balak - would seem to be animated by a sense of love between God and Israel. God is so passionately involved with Am Yisrael that he engages in pedantic protection. A neighbouring kingdom hires a wizard to curse the people. God stands by his beloved nation. He will not allow even a single curse to be uttered against Am Yisrael! [1b] If this is the state of the God-Israel relationship, then we cannot help ourselves but feel somewhat alarmed when we read in the very next chapter of Israel’s betrayal of God. What prompted this blunder? What caused this sudden lurch away from the good path?

To answer these questions, pick up a chumash and look at the parsha. See if you can find any clues. We shall offer a series of suggestions as presented by the Midrash Rabba on Bamidbar.

### THE PLACE

“And Israel resided in Shittim, and the People began to whore: There are some springs which create in those who drink from it, strength. Other springs produce weakness. One spring, beautiful people; and another, ugly people. One -

modesty; and another - abject promiscuity. The spring of Shittim was a water source that induced promiscuity, indeed this was the spring which was the water source for S'dom (see Bereshit 19:5). Because this water source is cursed, God will at some future date, dry it up, as it states 'A spring from the House of God will emerge and irrigate the valley of Shittim' (Joel 4,18). Ever since the time of Abraham, no (Jew) had fallen into promiscuity; now that they reached Shittim and drank its waters, they degenerated into sexual impropriety." (Bamidbar Rabba 20:22)

And on a similar theme:

"The People began to whore: Throw a stick into the air and it will land the way it grew. The one who began in promiscuity finished the job at the end. Their mothers began with sexual impropriety: "And the older one said to the younger ... let us make our father drink wine and let us lie with him ..." (Genesis 19:31-34) ... She who began in promiscuity, her daughters completed it after her; as it states: "To whore with the daughters of Moav.' (25:1)" (Bamidbar Rabba 20:23)

These two midrashim both take us back to the same chapter in Bereshit - the destruction of Sedom. The first midrash proposes that the key factor here is the geographical location, and more precisely, the water source. The Israelites who are now living on the border of Israel in the Jordan valley, find themselves in the same general local as the ancient destroyed city of Sedom. As we know in today's world, a water source can carry disease, or alternatively, healthy minerals. The Midrash suggests that the well, or spring of Shittim carried an influence that was spiritually defective. In our story, then, Am Yisrael ingest the poison which polluted Sedom and created their evil. One should not be surprised then that Am Yisrael stray from their special code of sexual morality and act in a Sedom-like fashion [1]. This was indeed, out of character. It was the effect of a "polluted" water source.

The second story probably also develops the Sedom connection, possibly influenced as well by the geographical proximity. But here a new factor comes into play. The verse talks of the daughters of Moav as being the objects of the Israelites desire. What is the history of Moav as described in the Torah? The answer is clear. Moav was conceived from an act of incest, instigated by the mother of Moav. The Midrash suggests that the tendency to sexual impropriety is deeply engraved into the genes of Moav - especially the sexual impropriety which involves women seducing men.

Here the Midrash is using a familiar theme whereby it "shrinks" history, drawing intense parallels between earlier events and later happenings [2], seeing a direct correlation and linkage between the events, despite the hundreds of years that have passed by in the meantime. Past and future share the self-same properties and characteristics.

Indeed, according to these readings, matters are well beyond the Israelites control. Either the powerful influence of the local water is

providing a negative influence, or the relentless hereditary sexual impropriety of Moab is to blame. Israel would seem powerless to resist.

(One final side-comment for further thought and study. It is interesting that verse 25:1 talks of the Moabite women, whereas 25:6,14,15,17 and ch.31 all deal with the Midianites. Who are the objects of the Israelites' desires? This confusion is all the more intriguing as the same "mix-up" would seem to occur at the beginning of the parsha. First both Midianities AND Moabites visit Bilaam (22:4,7) but then , later, only the Moabites are present (22:14,21)! The relationship between the two groups commands our curiosity and beckons further investigation.)

#### SEDITIOUS SEDUCTION

But let us move on to a more familiar Midrashic approach, and examine it in detail.

"They (the Moabites/Midianites) made booths for themselves and placed inside them harlots, in whose hands were all manner of desirable objects. An old woman would sit outside and keep watch for the girl who was inside the shop. When an Israelite passed by to purchase an article in the bazaar, the old woman would say to him: 'Young man! Would you not like some linen clothing that comes from Beit Shean?' She would show it to him and say: 'Go inside and you will see some lovely articles.' The old woman would ask for a higher price and the young girl for a lower. After this, the girl would say to him: 'You are now one of the family! Sit down, and choose whatever you desire yourself!' A flask of wine stood beside her, and as yet Gentile wine had not been forbidden. A young woman would come out adorned and perfumed and would entice him saying: 'Why is it that though we love you, you hate us? Take this article for nothing! Are we not all the children of one man? The children of Terah, the father of Abraham? If you do not wish to eat of our sacrifices and of our cooking, behold, we have calves and poultry! Slaughter them in accordance with your own precepts and eat! Thereupon she would make him drink the wine and the Satan would burn within him and he would be lead astray after her...." (Bamidbar Rabba 20:23)

Now, what is our reaction when we read a Midrash such as this one? It all seems a little fictional doesn't it? Yes, this is a good read, and certainly an exciting story, but from where does the Midrash get this story? All the details: the tent, the wine, the old lady and the young lady - are not in the Torah text. Is this fact or fiction?

#### Approach 1 – Midrash as Entertainment.

There is one possibility that this is an invented story. The scholars who were darshanim had to teach but they also had to entertain. Much as modern Rabbis that one might here, we frequently hear a terse simple story embellished and elaborated upon in order to endear it to the ear of the audience. Maybe, this was just a way of spicing-up the story so

that people will listen.

The Midrash itself reports that these scholars would resort to unusual methods in order to stimulate their audiences:

“Rebbi (R.Yehuda Hannassi) was sitting and delivering the d’rasha. He noticed that the audience was falling asleep. In order to wake them up, he said: In Egypt a single woman gave birth to 600,000 children in a single pregnancy! There was one student in the audience by the name of Yishmael b. R. Yossi. He asked: Who was this woman? Rebbi answered: That was Yocheved who gave birth to Moses; a man equivalent to the entire nation of Israel; all 600,000 of them!” (Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:15/3)

So we see that darshanim did resort to popular entertainment at times! That is not to say that Midrash is ALWAYS entertainment, nor that there is not an element of truth within even the entertaining Midrashim. However, the extravagant details might at times, be aimed at attracting the attention of the audience.

### Approach 2 - Midrash as Commentary.

But is that all we have here? A comedy show? or a “Tanach in action” session? Even the extreme d’rash of Rebbi about the woman who gave birth to 600,000 has some logic to it. Midrash isn’t simply fairy tales! So, what is behind this Midrash?

Let us read again, the opening pesukim of Ch.25. I will write it here emphasising each and every phrase:

“And Yisrael resided at Shittim.  
The people began to whore with the Moabite women (B’not Moav)  
They called to the people  
to the meals of their gods,  
and the people ate,  
and they bowed down to their gods.  
Israel became tightly attached to Ba’al Pe’or.” (25:1-3)

Why so many phrases here? Why does it tell us “*vayachel ha’am liznot*” (the people began to whore) instead of “*vayiznu*” (they whored) - in a single word? Why does it inform us that “they called to the people”, and that “the people ate?”

No! It is clear, that the Torah, in its uniquely concise style is telling us that this was not a sudden event. No! This was a gradual process of seduction. There is a “beginning” and an end. The end is a deep attachment (*Vayitzammed ha’am*) to the idolatry of Pe’or. The beginning was far more “innocent.” It involved simple conversation (they called) and a meal together. The stress on “B’not Moav” - the daughters of Moav - gives a clue that it is the youth of the women which is a central feature of the seduction process (It could have said simply : *Vayiznu Yisrael im Moav Vayichar of Hashem.*)

The Midrash here is acting as an accurate and deliberate commentator. One might suggest that here the Midrash is learning p’shat! - savouring each word and examining each phrase as a stage within a slippery slope of seduction. Even the imagery of the “booth” would seem to emerge from the very text of the Parsha where Pinchas “followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them.” The booth or chamber is the scene of the “action.”

Here then, we can see how the Midrash acts as a detailed commentator, providing the commentary to each phrase, noting the nuances and unusual choices of language. Read the pesukim carefully, and then the Midrash and you will be able to see how close a reading it is!

### Approach 3. - Contemporary Messages

We have mentioned two possible theories of Midrash:

1. Entertainment
2. Deliberate commentary

But there is clearly a third angle on this Midrash. Midrash functions as a means of commenting on the life and times of each particular age and of engaging in polemic and critique, challenging the values of the contemporary scene. Just as the Rabbi’s drasha in shul today may have a contemporary “twist”; in fact he might twist the text to give it a practical message to the community; similarly Chazal taught the pesukim as relating to their own age.

How does that relate to our particular Midrash?

One can see the way that the Midrash takes the theme of assimilation and the gradual process that can lead from innocent actions - shopping in a gentile market - via a simple conversation, drinking wine, a joint meal, to intermarriage.

The language of the Midrash is contemporary: ‘Young man! Would you not like some linen clothing that comes from Beit Shean?’ And let us remember that in Talmudic times, Beit She’an was a Roman, pagan city.

The drinking of the wine in our story has an interesting phrase tagged on to it: “A flask of wine stood beside her, and as yet Gentile wine had not been forbidden.” The Darshan, the Rabbi-preacher here, is stressing the role of the *gezera* of non-Jewish wine. We might add that we do not know the dating of this particular *gezera d’rabbanan* [3], but it is possible that it was under attack at this time, and a source of tension and difficulty. After all, we know from a multitude of Talmudic sources that there were mixed cities (Caesarea, Tzipori) and that Jews were constantly challenged by the non-Jewish cultural elite, especially after the rise of Christianity. Let us note the combined association of wine, idolatry, and sexual relations within the Midrash, and let us glance at the Gemara in Avoda Zara 36b:

“The made an edict against **wine** because of their **daughters**, and their daughters because of the other thing (Rashi:

## Idolatry" [4]

And if we eavesdrop on a conversation from the second century as to the status of the Roman marketplace:

"Rabbi Yehuda said: How sophisticated the Romans are! They have built bridges, bath-houses and marketplaces ... Rav Shimon bar Yochai retorted: Their achievements are only self serving: The marketplaces so they can place their prostitutes there..." (Shabbat 33b)

The darshan (the midrashic scholar) is using familiar imagery. He utilises the social backdrop of Roman Palestine, his own social reality, to deliver a sermon about the dangers of mixing with non-Jews, the importance of the *Gezera* against non-Jewish wine and the slippery slope of assimilation and intermarriage. The darshan uses the language and scenes familiar to the audience who live in Roman Eretz Yisrael. He draws a parallel between the Biblical story and the present reality.

From a methodological perspective, let us note how different this approach to the Midrash is to the approach that we used earlier. Here, we are suggesting that we use the Torah text to learn about the contemporary reality. We are not studying the Torah text itself. We are simply using it in order to gain an understanding of our here and now! In contrast, our earlier (Commentary) approach was using a story but the darshan was using it to better understand the text itself. His aim was to study the Torah text! Is Midrash "reading out" or "reading in"? In this case, they both seem to work!

### PARALLELS TO THE GOLDEN CALF

Let us conclude with a Midrash which draws connections between this episode and the sin of the Golden Calf. The Midrash plays on the word here "Vayitzammed" and connects it to the imagery of the jewellery (a bracelet is a "tzammid") in the story of the Golden Calf:

"Vayitzammed: Like bracelets upon their hands.  
Rabbi Levi said: This was a more severe incident than the Golden Calf. With the Calf it states: "Remove your golden nose-rings" (Ex 32:2) and here: "Vayitzammed" - like bracelets (Tzemmidim). With the calf, 3000 were killed; here: 24,000." (Bamidbar Rabba 20:23)

But the clearest parallels are not mentioned. Both stories are the only places in the wilderness that Am Yisrael get involved with idolatry. (Let us recall also that according to certain commentators, there was also a carnal element in the Golden Calf experience - see Rashi in Shemot 32:6)

But additionally, here in Bamidbar, Moses instructs the people:

"Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Ba'al Pe'or"

And with the Golden Calf:

"Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said: Whoever is for the Lord, come here! And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh. go back and forth... throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbour and kin." (Shemot 32:26-27)

We see a similar reaction to the idolatry by Moses! He instructs the people to kill, immediately, those who have been involved in the forbidden acts.

But who answers the call? Who responds to eradicate the evil deeds? In our story, only Pinchas responds. But here is another connection with the Golden Calf. Pinchas is a Levite, and follows the example of his ancestors a generation earlier, once again putting the perpetrators to the sword. The violent end brought upon the sinners, exacted by Levites, unifies both stories.

If we follow this logic, we will see that the reward granted by God, for this action is also somewhat similar:

With the Levi'im at the Golden Calf, we are told:

"At that time God separated the tribe of Levi to carry the Ark of the Lord's covenant, to stand in attendance upon the Lord, and to bless his name." (Devarim/Deut 10:8)

Here with Pinchas, God says:

"Therefore, I grant him my pact of Peace; it shall be for him and his descendents after him a pact of priesthood for all time" (Bamidbar/Numbers 25:12-13)

And so, we end off with a question. To what degree is there a similarity between the sin of Ba'al Pe'or and the Golden Calf? If this event did have some of the elements of the Golden Calf, if it is described with similar terminology and imagery, then why is it that the Baal Peor episode receives a very different reaction on God's part? Why is this sin different? Is it related to the act of Pinchas? Or possibly it relates to the fact that the Israelites are not at Sinai at this moment? Or maybe - and this relates to the earlier part of our shiur - the Golden Calf was an "internal" affair. It all happened within the confines of the Israelite camp. The sin of Ba'al Pe'or, however was a deliberate seduction (- see Bamidbar 31:13-16). In this case, the Israelites were influenced by others against their will. They share a lesser degree of blame.

Shabbat Shalom.

Footnotes

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[1a] This quote is from 24:5. It is seen by the Rabbinic tradition as a statement regarding the sexual morality of the Israelites. See Rashi on 24:6.

[1b] See the phraseology in Devarim 23:6 where God's love for the Israelites is especially emphasised as the critical factor in transforming Bilaam's curse into a blessing.

[1] We should point out that according to p'shat, the only real sin recorded in the Torah vis-à-vis Sedom is of a sexual nature. See Bereshit ch.19.

[2] The best example of this is the principle of Ma'ase Avot Siman Lebanim. History repeats itself irrationally, with the events that befell the father revisited upon his descendents.

[3] The Gemara - Avoda Zara 36a - talks about the Gezera being instituted during the times of Hillel and Shamai's students - mid 1st Century

[4] If you investigate the Gemara there, you will see how the conversation continues to discuss intermarriage or just sexual relations, and also discusses whether this is a problem just with the women from the 7 Canaanite nations or with all Gentile women. The Gemara concludes that sexual relations with any non-Jew are problematic for the above reasons, and not surprisingly, the discussion eventually turns to Pinchas and our story.