

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Balak

Ideologies and Accessories: The Sin of Baal-Peor

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲרֹגוּ אִישׁ אֶנְשֵׁי הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר

Moshe said to the judges of Yisrael, "Let each man kill his men who were attached to Baal-Peor" (25:5)

Commenting on the word "הנצמדים – *who were attached*," the Gemara¹ quotes a braisa which states that they were attached like a bracelet (צמיד) on a woman's wrist. In contrast, says the braisa, in addressing those among the Jewish People who did not sin with Baal-Peor, Moshe describes them as "הַדְּבָקִים בְּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – (*those who*) *cling to Hashem, your God.*"²

What is the meaning of the contrast between these two designations of "נצמדים" and "דבקים"?

The Meshech Chochmah quotes two additional conflicting rulings derived from the pasuk at the beginning of sefer Vayikra³ relating to the question of eligibility to bring korbanos.

- ▶ On the one hand, from the words "אָדָם כִּי יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָן לֵה' – *A man from among you who shall offer,*"⁴ we derive that not all of Yisrael are eligible.⁵ This exclusionary inference is taken as a reference to a mumar – apostate.
- ▶ On the other hand, from the words "מִן הַבְּהֵמָה – *from the animals,*"⁶ the Gemara elsewhere⁷ derives that even people who are analogous to animals in terms of their behavior, i.e. sinners, may bring korbanos.

What is the meaning behind these two derashos, and why exactly is a sinner in the area of avodah zarah different from any other type of sinner?

1 Sanhedrin 64a.

2 Devarim 4:4.

3 1:2.

4 Vayikra ibid.

5 "מִכֶּם" implies "from among you – but not all of you."

6 Ibid.

7 Eiruvim 69b.

TWO TYPES OF SIN

The Meshech Chochmah explains that these two areas of sin themselves derive from two different areas of a person's makeup:

Sins relating to matters generated by physical desire, such as eating forbidden foods or engaging in forbidden relationships, derive from the lower part of a person's nefesh; a faculty which man, in fact, shares with the animals. These activities hold no appeal to a person's higher spiritual faculties. Thus, we find, for example that the Sotah's minchah-offering consists of barley flour, commenting on which the Mishnah⁸ says: "Her act was analogous to that of an animal, therefore, let her korban be from animal food."

In contrast, idol-worship and corrupt philosophies are sins that relate to the person's higher soul. It is for this reason an idolatrous thought is rated as a full-fledged sin.⁹ Since thought is in the domain of the soul, a sinful thought relating to matters of the soul is a "complete sin," while a sin relating to physical desire has not been completed until the person physically commits it. Thus, with regards to the sin of cursing Hashem's Name, the pasuk states "עֲוֹנָה בָּהּ – (the soul's) sin is within it,"¹⁰ for a sin of that nature becomes embedded within the soul itself.

Therefore, with regards to one who sins in physical matters, we would not say that the faculties which define him as an "אדם" have thereby been corrupted. Rather, those faculties are currently unsuccessful in preventing him from giving into his animal impulses. Therefore, the phrase "מִן הַבְּהֵמָה – from one who acts like an animal," applies to him. However, one who engages in avodah-zarah – a sin which derives from the higher faculties which define him as an "אדם" – has thereby lost that designation; he is no longer "a man like you" and is thus excluded from korbanos.

THE SIN OF BAAL-PEOR

This brings us to the episode of Baal-Peor. On the face of it, this sin belongs squarely in the area of nefesh, since it is a form of avodah zarah. However, the matter is not that simple. The Gemara¹¹ explains that in order to entice the Jewish People to sin with Baal-Peor, each Moabite girl would give the Israelite wine to drink and, when his passions were enflamed, she would produce an idol of Baal-Peor and demand that he worship it if he wanted to engage in a relationship with her. This means that the sin of Baal-Peor actually originated in the area of physical desire, not corrupt ideas.

In light of this, the Meshech Chochmah explains the precision of the formula with which Pinchas prayed on behalf of the people who were afflicted with a plague in response to Baal-Peor: "עַל אֵלֶּה יִפְּלוּ כִּדְּ אֵלֶּיךָ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל – Shall twenty-four thousand from among Yisrael fall over this?"¹² Whereas a Jew who sins with his higher cognitive faculties can thereby cause himself to be detached from the people of Yisrael, in this case, Pinchas argues that the ultimate cause of their avodah zarah was not which should bring about such detachment, since coming from their animal side, it did not represent a corruption of the "soul-element" which defines them as "Yisrael".

8 Sotah 14a.

9 See Kiddushin 40a.

10 Bamidbar 15:31.

11 Sanhedrin 106a.

12 See Sanhedrin 82b, commenting on the pasuk in Tehillim (106:30) relating to this episode, "וַיַּעֲמֵד פִּינְחָס וַיִּפְּלֵל," which it explains as a reference to prayer.

Returning to the Gemara quoted in the beginning of our discussion, this is why the attachment of the Jewish People to Baal-Peor is described in the pasuk as “נצמדים,” which the Gemara explains is like a bracelet. In the same way as a woman wears jewelry in order to beautify herself physically before her husband, so, too, Bnei Yisrael’s worship of Baal-Peor was motivated by concerns related to physical desire. In contrast to this, Moshe describes those who did not sin with Baal-Peor as “הַדְּבָקִים בְּה’ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם” – *(those who) cling to Hashem, your God.*” Since their higher faculties were so connected to Hashem, they were capable of countermanding and overcoming their physical impulses brought about by the enticements of the daughters of Moav.

With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the Gemara’s statement¹³ that Moshe was buried in the land of Moav, facing Baal-Peor,¹⁴ in order to help achieve atonement for the Jewish People’s sin there. Moshe embodied the ultimate level of subjugation of his physical desires by his higher faculties and hence his burial in that location helped to mitigate the sin in this area.

13 Sotah 14a.

14 See Devarim 34:6.