



Parashat Balak

The end of *Parashat Balak* deals with the sin of *B'nei Yisrael* with the women of *Moav*. The Torah tells us that *Pinchas* took a spear in his hand and impaled *Zimri ben Salu*, the *nassi* of *shevet Shimon*, together with the *Midianite* woman with whom he was committing his sin. It is noteworthy that *Zimri* is not identified by name in *Parashat Balak*, but rather as an anonymous "איש ישראל." He is named only in *Parashat Pinchas*. Why does the Torah leave *Zimri* anonymous during its telling of the actual incident, identifying him only in the next *parasha*?

Chazal say (*Midrash Tanchuma*) that *B'nei Yisrael* sinned in *Shittim* (the name of the place they committed the sin with the women of *Moav*; see *Bamidbar* 25:1), were punished in *Shittim* ("ויהיו המתים" במגפה ארבעה ועשרים אלף, And 24,000 died in the plague" (25:9)), and were healed with *shittim* – the *Mishkan*, which was made from "עצי שטים עומדים", acacia-wood, standing up" (*Shemot* 26:15). What is the meaning behind this *ma'amar Chazal*?

In order to answer these two questions, we must begin as follows: In *lashon kodesh* there are many instances of one *shoresh* being used to indicate a word as well as its opposite. For example, *mifkad* (מפקד) means a census, to count how many people are with you. *Nifkad* (נפקד) means an absentee, or how many people are missing. In our *parasha*, we find *shittah* (שיטה), in the sense of the *derech* a person goes, as well as *shtut* (שטות), the very opposite of *shittah*, because veering from the proper *derech* is *shtut*. This is why *Chazal* say "אין אדם חוטא אלא אם כן נכנסה בו רוח שטות", A person doesn't sin unless a spirit of folly has entered him."

Balak told *Bilaam* that *Am Yisrael* is an abnormal nation, functioning within a different system from the rest of the nations, and therefore he could not harm them in the normal fashion. The strength of this nation is in its mouth, through the *ruchaniyut* of the Torah in its mouth, so you must curse them, since a curse effects a spiritual injury. A spiritual nation can only be harmed by spiritual damage. For this reason, explains R' Hirsch, *Balak* first tries to attack them economically, bringing *Bilaam* to the *kiryat chutzot*, the markets, to curse *B'nei Yisrael* there. When this doesn't work, *Balak* brings *Bilaam* to *sdeh tzofim*, which represents leadership (*Hashem* tells *Yechezkel*, "צופה נחתך לבית ישראל", I have made you a scout for the House of Israel" (33:7)). After *Bilaam* tries to curse *B'nei Yisrael's* leaders unsuccessfully, he tries to curse them with *avodah zarah* in *Pe'or*, again unsuccessfully. Finally, *Bilaam* shows *Balak* the way to injure *B'nei Yisrael* – by seducing them to commit *z'nut*, because "אלקיהם של אלו שונא זימה הוא", The G-d of these people hates sexual immorality." This is ultimately how *Bilaam* managed to harm *B'nei Yisrael*.

This is the meaning of *Michah* 6:5: "עמי זכור נא מה יעץ בלק מלך מואב ומה ענה אותו בלעם בן בעור", My nation, remember now what *Balak*, king of *Moav*, devised, and what *Bilaam ben Be'or* answered him." We must remember that *Balak's* attempts to bring us down failed, while *Bilaam's* plan ultimately worked. As long as the nation worshipped *avodah zarah* and ate *ma'achalei akum*, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* didn't punish them. Only when they committed acts of *z'nut* did He punish them.

Chazal point out that the sin at *Shittim* was more egregious than that of the *eigel*, since regarding the *eigel* it says, "ויתפרקו כל העם", The nation broke off" (*Shemot* 32:3), indicating *hefkerut*, while by *Ba'al Pe'or* and the sin involving the women of *Moav*, the Torah says, "ויצמד ישראל לבעל פעור", Israel joined itself to *Ba'al Pe'or*" (*Bamidbar* 25:3). For this reason, at *Ba'al Pe'or* eight times more people were killed than by the *cheit ha'eigel* (24,000 vs. 3000). In fact, so joined were *B'nei Yisrael* to *Ba'al Pe'or* and the women of *Moav* that even the *nassi* of *shevet Shimon* was completely nullified to *Midianite* princess, completely losing his unique identity. Only afterwards does the Torah identify him by name, in order to emphasize the degree to which *B'nei Yisrael* were attached to *Ba'al Pe'or*.

Every time we sin it is *shtut*, veering off the *shittah*. There are such instances of *shtut* for which it is impossible to return to the *shittah*; this *shtut* perverts all straightness. This *shtut* is *z'nut*, the *z'nut* of *Shittim*. Only the *atzei shittim* of the *Mishkan* could return *B'nei Yisrael* from *shtut* to the *shittah*. *Atzei shittim* don't produce fruit; their *tafkid* is simply to show us how to grow straight. Therefore *Chazal* say in *Midrash Tanchuma* that *shittim* (שטים) is *roshei teivot* of *מחילה*, *ישועה*, *טובה*, *שלום*. In the world to come, *Yoel haNavi* tells us, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* will bring forth a fountain from the *Beit HaMikdash*, which will water the valley of *Shittim* (*Yoel* 4:18). In the world to come, may it come speedily, the truth, the proper *shittah*, will be revealed. When this happens, we will merit the fulfillment of, "מצרים...because they shed innocent blood in their land" (*Yoel* 4:19). And then, "יהודה לעולם תשב וירושלים לדור ודור", Judah will be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation" (*Yoel* 4:20).

Shabbat Shalom!
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