

Parashat Balak, 5771, 2011:

Weeping in Front of the Ohel Moed: An Analysis

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of the Moabites. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Baal Peor, and the anger of the L-rd flared against Israel. The L-rd said to Moses, “Take all the leaders of the people and hang them before the L-rd, facing the sun, and then the flaring anger of the L-rd will be removed from Israel. “Moses said to the judges of Israel, ‘Each of you shall kill the men who became attached to Baal Peor.’” Then an Israelite man came and brought the Midianite woman to his brethren, before the eyes of Moses and before the eyes of the entire congregation of the children of Israel, while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (*Sefer Bamidbar 25:1-6*, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

These poignant *pasukim* (verses) begin the final chapter of our *parasha*. They tell a story of:

- 1) Unbridled licentiousness
- 2) Idol worship
- 3) The consumption of forbidden food
- 4) G-d’s anger and response to these sins
- 5) The profligate actions of an Israelite man and a Midianite woman (later identified as Zimri and Cozbi respectively)
- 6) The reaction of Moshe and the entire congregation of the children of Israel to these heinous behaviors

A careful reading of our passage leaves the reader quite confused as to why Moshe and the entire congregation of the children of Israel “were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.” After all, Moshe had just been given a clear command from G-d as to what needed to be done as a result of our ancestors’ dissolute actions. This, in turn, was passed

on to the leaders of the people to perform. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory), however, provide us with a variety of explanations for this weeping response. These interpretations range from the literary-naturalistic to the midrashic-halachic. Each of them is fascinating and leads to a deeper appreciation of our phrase and passage.

The 13th century French exegete, Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (known as the “Chizkuni” after the title of his Torah commentary of the same name) reads verses five and six as representing the classic cause and effect model: “Moses said to the judges of Israel, ‘Each of you shall kill the men who became attached to Baal Peor’... while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.” Thus, in his view: “They were crying because Moshe told them to kill their brethren and it was difficult for them to kill their relatives.” (Translation my own) In my estimation, the beauty of Rav Manoah’s explanation is found in its direct reading of the *pasukim*, and in its fundamental human sensitivity. Yes, many of the men of *B’nai Yisrael* were blatant sinners (24,000 to be precise), and were given the death penalty by the Almighty. They were, however, family - and their divinely decreed impending execution by their relatives was certainly reason enough to wail and cry.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra’s (1092-1167) interpretation charts a different course. He suggests that the phrase “while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” refers to *tefilah* (prayer). In other words, everyone present was so overwhelmed by the public display of licentiousness that they had no choice except to cry out and beseech Hashem for guidance and mercy. This approach is strongly supported by the Aramaic and Midrash-based translation of Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel (approximately 450

BCE) known as the *Targum Yonatan*. He translates and interprets our phrase as “*v’inun bachyan v’karyan Shema v’kayemin b’itra mashkan zimna*” (“and they were crying and reciting *Shema Yisrael* while they were standing in front of the Tent of Appointed Times”). It should be noted that the identification of “crying” with prayer has clear biblical precedent. Two *pasukim* from the 20th chapter of *Sefer Shoftim* clearly underscore this idea:

And the children of Israel went up, and wept before the L-rd until the evening, and they asked of the L-rd saying, “Shall I again draw near to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother?” And the L-rd said, “Go up against him...” And all the children of Israel went up, and all the people, and they came to Beth-el and wept, and sat there before the L-rd, and fasted on that day until the evening. And they offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings before the L-rd. (verses 23 and 26, underlining my own)

In sum, the Ibn Ezra’s reading of “crying” as prayer appears to be particularly compelling when viewed in the dual light of these *pasukim* and the *Targum Yonatan*’s translation/interpretation.

Rashi’s (1040-1105) explanation of our phrase, “while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting,” is the most midrashically-halachically grounded of the various ones I have found. It also appears to have the least direct connection to the actual verse under discussion, since it requires a “textual addition” in order to be an accurate rendition of the Torah’s narrative:

Moshe forgot the law [that deemed it permissible to kill Zimri in his blatant act of decadence] and, as a result, everyone present burst out in tears. During the incident of the Golden Calf, Moshe stood in G-d-inspired opposition against the 6000,000 men of Israel ... here, however, his hands weakened! ... (Translation and brackets my own)

Rashi’s statement is based on a midrashic passage that is found in *Midrash Aggadah* (Rabbi Solomon Buber, editor) *Sefer Bamidbar* 25:2. Herein we find much of the “story behind the story:”

Zimri approached Balak's daughter Cozbi after deciding that she was the one he desired. She said to him: "I will not listen to you! My father commanded me to listen to no one other than your teacher and leader Moshe! He is a king and so is my father! Therefore, it is fitting and proper for a princess [Cozbi] to be with a king [Moshe]!" ... the princess was incredibly beautiful. Zimri therefore declared: "I am greater than Moshe! I am from the second-born tribe of Israel, whereas he is only from the third-born tribe! He then grabbed her by the locks of her hair and dragged her before Moshe. He [Zimri] said to Moshe: "Is this one permitted or forbidden [to me]?" Moshe responded: "She is forbidden because she is a Midianite woman." Zimri then said: "How can you possibly tell me this since the one [i.e. Tziporah] with whom you enjoy an intimate relationship is none other than a Midianite woman!" Moshe instantly lost all of his strength, [i.e. forgot the law] and he, Elazar, and the Elders began to weep aloud. As the verse states: "while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting..." (Translation and brackets my own)

Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 82a contains a somewhat parallel rendering of this narrative. In this account as well, Zimri went to Cozbi, grabbed her by the locks of her hair, and presented her to Moshe. For our purposes, this version's value is found in the explicit statement that Moshe forgot the halacha that he had previously taught Pinchas, and therefore began to cry:

He grabbed her by the locks of her hair and dragged her before Moshe. He [Zimri] said to him [Moshe]: "Son of Amram! Is this [one] forbidden or permissible? And if you say she is forbidden – who gave you permission to marry Yitro's daughter [Tziporah]?" He [Moshe] summarily forgot the law and everyone with him began to cry. As the verse states: "while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." It also states: "And Pinchas the son of Elazar saw." What did he see? Rav said: "He saw the actions [unfolding before him] and remembered the halacha [that Moshe had taught him]." (Translation and brackets my own)

Whether one adopts the naturalistic explanation of the Chizkuni, the psycho-spiritual insight of the Ibn Ezra, or the midrashic-halachic approach of the *Midrash Aggadah*, *Talmud*, and Rashi, one idea is very clear: our holy Torah can only be understood against the backdrop of the mosaic of interpretations that were painstakingly and lovingly crafted by *Chazal*. For these giants of the spirit, the Torah is a rich canvas upon which to paint multi-dimensional explanatory images – all created in the pursuit of *emet* (truth) and the desire to serve our Creator.

With the help of the Almighty, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to comprehend the Torah and its myriad explanations in a manner that allows each of us to hear the omnipresent Voice emanating from Mount Sinai. May this new understanding and heightened sensitivity enable each of us to draw closer to Him and authentically serve Him with our entire being. As King David so beautifully stated: “The L-rd is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18) May this time come soon and in our days.
V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.