

Our Ethical Decisions
Parashat Balak
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Boker Tov

This week, we read the end of Parashat Balak. By the end of the Parasha, the Israelites have been settled for some time now among the Moabites. They took Moabite wives, and, worst of all, worshiped Ba'al Peor the Moabite god.

Seeing this, God became enraged, *vayichar aph hashem*. God tells Moshe to punish the Israelites. Saying,

קח את כל ראשי העם והקע אותם ליהוה נגד השמש וישב תרון אף יהוה מישראל:

“Take all of the chieftains of the nation (*Roshei Ha'am*) and have them publicly impaled before the Lord so that the Lord's wrath may turn away from Israel.”

For God, it is ethically wrong for the Israelites to worship a different god. Thus, God tells Moshe to warn Israel by making examples of its leaders—to kill them, publicly.

Moshe, however, does not quite follow God's instruction.

Our Parsha says,

ויאמר משה אל שפטי ישראל הרגו איש אנשיו הנצמדים לבעל פעור:

“Moshe spoke to all the officials (*Shoftim*) in Israel: Kill *every man*, not just the leaders, who has attached himself to Baal Peor.”

For God, it is ethically wrong for the Israelites to worship other gods. Yet, instead of making *examples* of Israelite leaders by killing them, Moshe *appoints officials* to kill those who acted unethically in worshipping other gods.

Moreover, the Talmud in Masehchet Sanhedrin tells us that Moshe appointed the Israelite officials who should have been put to death as judges to decide the fate of the accused.

Moshe hears God give him a command and decides to interpret that command for himself. Seemingly, against God's will, Moshe sent human beings to interpret God's ethical stance.

I imagine a case coming before one of these judges. An Israelite with no criminal record comes before the judge. He explains to the judge, “Your honor, I have no record, I come from a wholesome, pious family. Yes, I have taken a Moabite wife, but all of my other wives are pious! And, anyway, my Moabite wife lights candles on Erev Shabbat, knows all of the laws of kashrut, and wants to raise our kids Jewish! So, on the side I worship Baal Peor a bit! What difference does it make?”

This judge reviews the facts carefully and dismisses the case. The Israelite goes free.

Now, according to the plain meaning of God's command, this should have been cut and dried capital offence.

Moshe's appointment of a judge allows human beings to interpret God's ethical will. Ethics has moved from God's arena to that of humans.

In this ethical system, human beings interpret God's ethical views, possibly resulting, it seems, in far more severe punishments, or, lesser punishments than God intended. How do we justify taking God's ethics into our own hands when God has clear ethical imperatives?

To answer this question, it may be helpful to imagine a different ethical system—one which relies far less on human interpretation of divine will.

Last year, in my final year in college, I wrote a senior thesis on Christian theology. In the Jewish ethical system, God remains in the background. God gave us an ethical system in the Torah, we can interpret the Torah, now, as we wish—it is in the hands of humans. In the Christian ethical system, God remains in the foreground. God continually makes God's ethical will clear. Human beings have far less license to interpret ethical will in the Christian system.

The twentieth century Swiss Christian theologian, Karl Barth even claims that “the dogmatics of the Christian Church, and basically the doctrine of God, is ethics.”

Here, Barth explains that the entire system of Christian beliefs is God's ethics. To understand God, for Barth, is to understand God's will and thus to understand ethics.

For other Christian theologians, the act of understanding God through experience is the act of understanding ethics. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that to know God is to know ethical behaviors. In fact, he utilized the concepts of a personal God to understand ethics in everyday life. In doing so, Bonhoeffer set God squarely in the forefront of his ethical decision-making process.

To place God so squarely at the forefront of ethical decisions flies in the face of Moshe's actions in our parasha. Instead of acting upon God's call to make examples of Israelite leaders, Moshe appoints those leaders as judges to interpret God's ethical will.

As of now, we have seen that the Jewish ethical process places God in the background. In the Christian process, God is at the forefront, more directly involved. Personally, I understand the Christian position. Having God so directly involved in ethical decision making seems to me to be more satisfying. Each ethical action I would take is clearly divinely-sanctioned. Some Christians go so far as to claim that ethical actions themselves are the actions of God! I would not be able to do any wrong!

Yet, this system has its faults and can be corrupted. (It is important to note that both Barth and Bonhoeffer were virulently anti-Nazi; Bonhoeffer was even killed by the Nazis for his views). But, an ethical system that holds God to be so central has few checks. It can lead to a theocracy. Indeed, in this system, if I have an experience of the divine in which God reveals to me that it is ethically just to murder, what is stopping me from murdering. After all, God Himself told me it is ok!

Yet, a system that does not have God at all in the ethical process also falls short. A system that gives human beings absolute ethical power can be easily, and most often is, corrupted. If a single party of humans takes absolute control, unchecked by any divine presence, they will corrupt an ethical system for their own gain.

Or, in a more democratic setting, humans having absolute ethical power leads to relativism. A world in which each person believes that their own ethical views are the absolute truth is harmful to a functioning society. Indeed, such a system could fail to bring human beings together around a single set of ideas or a single purpose.

So, where can we place our own Jewish ethical system?

Moshe shows us the way.

Clearly, Moshe does not place God in the forefront of the Jewish ethical decision-making process. We do not fit into the Christian ethical system.

It is also clear that the Jewish ethical system is not purely human. Humans are limited on their source of ethics. Moshe's judges can only act to *interpret* God's law.

The Mishna recounts the process of the giving of the Torah. "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly." In this view, God gave the Torah to humanity and its interpretation is in the hands of humans.

According to the Mishna, the source of all Jewish thought stems from God. Yet, it is in the hands of human beings.

The Mishna seems to posit an ethical system which places the ethical power mainly in the hands of human beings with God far away in the background.

However, this view is unsatisfying for me. Sure, it avoids the pitfalls of a purely theologically-based system of ethics and those of a purely human based system. Yet, it makes no sense to me that in the thousands of years since the Torah was received at Sinai, God has played only a background role in our interpretation of ethics.

I believe that we have the obligation, as Jews, to make sure that God is reflected in our ethical decisions. As Moshe did, each of us, through experience, reasoning, philosophy, and intuition, can make judgments and interpretations of the Torah that reflect God in our everyday lives. This is hard work—it is not easy to make decisive ethical judgments with a basis in Torah. Our ethical system requires us to think carefully about our each and every decision. We must understand ourselves, others, and our circumstances. In doing so, we can make right decisions. In doing so, we bring God into the world.

Shabbat Shalom