

Strange Worship

Fair warning: The subject of this d'var Torah is most indelicate, and I apologize for this. But I think it's a subject worth analyzing.

In this week's Torah portion, *Balak*, the Israelites are in Moab, just across the river Jordan from the Promised Land. King Balak of the Moabites wants the wicked prophet Balaam to curse them, but God refuses to let him do so. Still, Balaam manages to convince [Numbers 31:16] the Israelites to misbehave:

While Israel settled in Shittim, the men profaned themselves by whoring with the daughters of Moab. The women invited the men to the sacrifices for their god, [Baal Peor]. The men partook of them and worshiped that god. Thus, Israel attached itself to Baal Peor, and God was incensed with Israel. [Numbers 25:1–3]

God then sends a plague that kills 24,000. It stops only when Pinchas kills a couple that was having intercourse in public. Evidently, what the Israelites did was much worse than the sin of the Golden Calf, when only 3,000 people were killed [Exodus 32:28] -- eight times worse, to be specific! So there must have been more than idolatry involved. What did the culprits actually do to worship that Moabite idol, Baal Peor? Put your seat-belt on. If you can believe it, the idol was worshipped by publicly defecating on it! Revolting!

The strange thing is that excrement is considered repulsive across all cultures ancient and modern. Bathroom matters are universally kept private. A religion centering on bowel movements makes no sense. We do have evidence that other ancient gentiles were disgusted by it. The Talmud says:

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed: "If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world."

She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world.

When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, "How is this one worshipped?"

They told her, "One eats greens and drinks strong drink [which cause diarrhea], and then defecates before the idol." The woman responded, "I'd rather become ill again than worship an idol in such a [disgusting] manner." [Sanhedrin 64a]

The Sages asked: If a Jew does it on the idol, *intending* it as a gesture of contempt, is he guilty of idolatry? The Mishnah answers: Yes! :

He who defecates before Baal Peor [is guilty of idolatry, because] this is the way he is worshipped. [Sanhedrin 60b]

The Gemara gives an example:

Our Rabbis taught: [A Jew by the name of Sabta ben Alas] ... entered [a shrine to Baal] Peor, defecated on the idol, and wiped himself on the idol's nose [in order to demean the idol]. [He was unsuccessful.] The priests of Peor praised him, saying, "No one has ever served the idol so well".

[Nevertheless,] the law is that he who defecates before Baal Peor thereby serves it, even if his intention was to demean it. [Sanhedrin 64a]

However, since his intention was good and he didn't believe he was really worshipping, he is not punished by death, but by having to bring a sin offering. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Foreign Worship and Customs of the Nations 3:5]

The Torah says that the men *first* partook of the sacrifices *then* worshipped the idol. Why this sequence? Because tradition tells us that the manna they had been eating so far was a perfect food that did not leave any residue, and so they never had to relieve themselves. In this case, they had to eat *something else* so they could have a... residue to be used to worship Baal Peor properly!

"Baal" means "Master". The name of the deity, Peor, *peh-ayin-resh*, (פער) means "to open." Thus, "Baal Peor" means "Master of the Rectal Opening."

And where did all this happen? The Torah tells us: It was in a place called "Shittim". You can't make that up. Even in Hebrew, the Midrash says:

[The place] was called Shittim because there they engaged in *shtut* -- foolishness. [Num. Rabbah 20:22]

I know the behavior of human beings -- past, present and future -- knows no bounds. I am not even talking about Israel's revelry and their relapse into idolatry, even after God had forgiven them for the Golden Calf, even after God freed them from slavery amidst an abundance of miracles. I ask: How can *anybody* dream up such a disgusting form of worship?

Did they feel that offering something that comes from within their bodies is the ultimate form of devotion and submission, because it is as if they have

created it? Did they feel their waste was most precious because it can be used as a fertilizer that makes food grow from the earth and so sustains life? Did they feel that whatever their bodies refused to keep for itself must belong to the deity and be given back to it? Did they simply enjoy the idea of losing all inhibitions imposed by society? Did they simply want to be different?

Is it because their priests worshipped intensely and sincerely for such long hours that they ended up forgetting themselves and relieving themselves right there; which led their followers to believe this must be part of the ritual?

Is it because by behaving like animals they felt like they could evade their conscience and responsibility as humans, much as a drunkard drinks to forget his troubles? Rav Hirsch, from 19th-century Germany, writes:

The cult of Peor is an illustration of the type of Darwinism that glories in man's descent to the level of the beast, where, stripping himself of his Divinely-given nobility, he comes to regard himself as merely a highly-developed animal. [On Numbers 25:3]

And, make no mistake, Rav Hirsch, a contemporary of Darwin, supported evolution!

And even if some of this explains the Moabites' behavior -- what did *they* know? -- why were so many *Israelites* attracted to it so suddenly? Was their total lack of inhibition a childish reaction to all the restrictions imposed by the Torah?

Can one argue that, idolatry and revelry aside, nothing in the Torah prohibits such behavior? No. The Torah very much prohibits it:

When you go out as a troop against your enemies, be on your guard against anything untoward... There shall be an area for you outside the camp, where you may relieve yourself... You shall have a spade with your gear, and when you have squatted you shall dig a hole with it and cover up your excrement. Since HaShem your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy. Let [God] not find anything unseemly among you and turn away from you. [Deuteronomy 23:10–15]

Rashi adds that visible disgusting things have a negative effect on the soul.

The Mishnah says that kohanim in the Temple had to go to the mikvah after defecating, before resuming their duties:

This was the principle in the Temple: Anyone who defecates requires immersion [in a mikvah] and anyone who urinates requires sanctification of the hands and feet with water. [Yoma 3:2]

In his final address, Moses reminds the Israelites of this incident in particular:

You saw with your own eyes what God did in the matter of Baal Peor. Your God HaShem wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal Peor, while you, who held fast to your God HaShem, are all alive today. [Deut. 4:3-4]

The prophet Hosea also singled out this incident:

I found Israel [as pleasing] as grapes in the wilderness... But when they came to Baal Peor, they turned to shamefulness. Then, they became as detested as they had been loved. [Hosea 9:10]

The Torah tells us that Moses was buried near Beth Peor:

[God] buried [Moses] in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth Peor. [Deut. 34:6]

The Talmud tells us why:

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: Why was Moses buried near Beth Peor? It was to atone for the incident of Peor. [Sotah 14a]

Indeed, Moses did not do anything throughout this entire episode. He did not know how to respond. The Torah says:

[While this was happening,] Moses and the whole Israelite community were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. [Numbers 25:6]

Pinchas had to take matters in his own hands to stop the plague. We'll read about that next week. Some commentators consider this Moses' biggest failing.

This is the story of Baal Peor. In terms of human behavior, it ranks right up there as one of the most incomprehensible episodes in the entire Torah.

Shabbat shalom.