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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WHAT PLAGUE DID PINCHAS STOP? A NEW (I think) READING OF PARSHAT BALAK, WITH A MORAL Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Parashat Balak is a largely self-contained narrative. There is suspense – will Bil'am succeed in cursing the Jews? There is conflict between Balak and Bil'am. There is farce, as the wordsmith seer "who knows the mind of the Most High" is outclassed by his donkey's vision and rhetoric. There is of course spectacularly beautiful poetry. But at the end of the day none of it matters to the plot of Chumash.

Then the seventh aliyah comes out of nowhere. Suddenly the men of Jacob, whose "tents are so goodly", are compulsively attracted to foreign daughters. The "nation that dwells alone" is picnicking with idolaters. The G-d in Whose eyes "it is good to bless Israel", and Who never changes His mind, demands a Vlad-the-Impaler response. Mosheh Rabbeinu tries to call out the national guard and declare martial law, and the result is a complete breakdown of authority.

The Torah reading seems deliberately constructed to draw attention to these contrasts. Moreover, while Chazal often try to end liturgical sections on a positive note, Balak ends with a census of plague victims – 42,000 dead!

Some midrashim read the narrative sequentially. Bil'am realized that he could not directly harm the Jews. But his fundamental animus remained. So he looked for ways to undermine his own blessings, and came up with the idea of corrupting Jewish morals. In this version Bil'am's idyllic description of the Jews were accurate when he said them.

But it seems to me potentially more powerful to read the stories as simultaneous. Bil'am blesses the Jews even as they lose their morals. G-d forces Bil'am to bless them even as He demands that Mosheh execute many of them, and perhaps even as they are dying en masse of His plague.

Can we read the story that way? Sure. People will often defend their family and friends against outsiders' critiques in the strongest terms, and then turn around and privately but pungently express their full agreement with those critiques. Reading G-d's actions this way would not require any theologically problematic changing of the Divine Mind.

What should we learn from such a reading?

Let's start at the end. Mosheh Rabbeinu responds (in the human political world) to this failure essentially as he did to the Golden Calf, the last episode combing eros with idolatry; he asks some Jews to kill their sinning brethren.

This failure of leadership should be compared and contrasted with the rock-striking episode last week that is presented as the cause for Mosheh being unable to lead the Jews into Israel. The comparison is clear; the Desert Generation has the same weaknesses as the Exodus Generation, which suggests that Mosheh's leadership has not been adequately transformative. The contrast is that Mosheh failed at Mei Merivah because he had no new ideas for reacting to complaints about thirst. Here he does try a new approach, but it backfires.

Why doesn't it work? Perhaps because last time he called on his fellow Levites, and this time he asks each tribe to handle its own criminals. Perhaps because last time he asked for volunteer vigilantes – "whosoever is for Hashem, to me!" – whereas this time he tries to utilize the regular national bureaucracy. Ultimately it is a volunteer Levite vigilante who acts effectively to stop the plague brought on by the immoral behavior.

Or so it seems. Let's take a closer look at the story that bridges Balak and Pinchas.

וישב ישראל בשטים

ויחל העם לזנות אל בנות מואב:

ותקראן לעם לזבחי אלהיהן

ויאכל העם וישתחוו לאלהיהן:

ויצמד ישראל לבעל פעור

ויחר אף יקוק בישראל:

ויאמר יקוק אל משה

קח את כל ראשי העם

והוקע אותם ליקוק נגד השמש

וישב חרון אף יקוק מישראל:

ויאמר משה אל שפטי ישראל

הרגו איש אנשיו הנצמדים לבעל פעור:

והנה איש מבני ישראל בא

ויקרב אל אחיו את המדינית

לעיני משה ולעיני כל עדת בני ישראל
 והמה בכים פתח אהל מועד:
 וירא פינחס בן אלעזר בן אהרן הכהן
 ויקם מתוך העדה
 ויקח רמח בידו:
 ויבא אחר איש ישראל אל הקבה
 וידקר את שניהם את איש ישראל ואת האשה אל קבתה
 ותעצר המגפה מעל בני ישראל:
 ויהיו המתים במגפה ארבעה ועשרים אלף: פ
 וידבר יקוק אל משה לאמר:
 פינחס בן אלעזר בן אהרן הכהן
 השיב את חמתי מעל בני ישראל בקנאו את קנאתי בתוכם
 ולא כליתי את בני ישראל בקנאתי:

Israel dwelled in The Cedars

The nation began straying toward the daughter of Moav.

They called the nation to their gods' sacrifices

The nation ate, and bowed to their gods.

Israel yoked itself to the Baal of P'or

Hashem's anger was kindled at Israel.

Hashem said to Mosheh:

"Take all the heads of the nation

and hang them up to Hashem in the sunlight

and the kindled anger of Hashem, will turn back from Israel".

Moshe said to the judge of Israel:

"Each of you must execute his men who have yoked themselves to the Ba'al of P'or!"

Behold, a man of Israel came;

He brought the Midianitess near to his brothers in full view of Mosheh, and in full view of the edah of the Children of Israel

while they wept at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

Pinchas son of El'azar, son of Aharon the Priest, saw

He stood up from the midst of the edah

He took a spear in his hand

He followed the man of Israel into the pavilion

He stabbed them, the man of Israel and the woman, in her pavilion

The plague was constrained from upon the Children of Israel.

The dead in the plague were forty two thousand.

Hashem spoke to Mosheh, saying:

"Pinchas son of El'azar son of Aharon the Priest turned My rage back from against Israel by acting zealously for Me in their midst

so I did not exterminate Israel in My zealotry.

There is unquestionable a plague, and Pinchas' action stops it. The problem is that we hear nothing about a plague until Pinchas acts. We know that G-d is angry, but

we don't know that His anger has been physically expressed. We also don't know that the plague had genocidal possibilities until Hashem tells us that Pinchas prevented Him from exterminating us.

Ramban nonetheless takes the story at face value. G-d sent a plague in response to our straying, and it is the way of plagues to kill the innocent along with the guilty. Pinchas stopped the plague before it had killed even all the guilty, so that in Devarim 4:3 Hashem needs to point out to Bnei Yisroel that all those guilty of following Baal' Peor have been destroyed from their midst.

Seforno, who usually follows Ramban, apparently finds this approach unsatisfying, and offers a radically different interpretation.

"ותעצר המגפה" שכבר גזר הא-ל יתעלה,

כאמרו "וכל מנאצי לא יראוה"

"The plague was constrained" that Hashem had already decreed, when He said "all those who disgust Me will not see it (=the Land)."

According to Seforno, the plague was decreed in Bamidbar 14:23, after the episode of the Spies. The victims of the plague are not a new generation, but rather the same people who have defied and frustrated Mosheh and Hashem all along. Pinchas does not stop a genocide; rather, he delays yet longer the deaths of the Desert Generation.

Seforno's answer serves more to emphasize the gaps in the narrative than to compellingly explain them. So I want to suggest a perhaps even more radical alternative.

If our parshah's stories are simultaneous rather than consecutive, the risk of genocide comes not as a reaction to this specific sin, but rather because the sin makes it harder for G-d to make a compelling case for preventing Bila'am from cursing us. Pinchas' act of zealotry takes place just as Bilaa'm begins speaking.

We are often under the illusion that our faults matter only to our enemies. The truth is that in both society and politics, enemies are constrained by friends, and weakening our friends' moral confidence in us by acting immorally can be as dangerous as giving ammunition to our enemies. The piercing criticism of a Pinchas may be much more effective at maintaining alliances based on values than the passive and helpless response of Israel's appointed leadership.

Shabbat shalom