YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Balak**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

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Dedicated in memory of Yitele bat Nathan Hacohen *z”l*   
whose *yahrzeit* is 11 Tammuz   
By Family Rueff

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**The Sin of Baal Pe'or and Its Meaning**

Summarized by Mordechai Sambol

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Parashat Balak* concludes with an account of widespread sin: "And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav" (*Bamidbar* 25:1). The terrible situation reached its climax with the public act of Zimri son of Salu: "And, behold, one of the children came and brought to his brethren a Midyanite woman in the sight of Moshe and in the sight of all the congregation of Israel" (*Bamidbar* 25:6).

The sin in Shittim was not limited to harlotry alone, but also extended to idolatry – not all at once, but through a continuous process of deterioration.

The story opens with a general description: the people of Israel camped at Shittim, and alongside them was the temptation set by the daughters of Moav. In the next stage, the Torah recounts: "And they called the people to the sacrifice of their gods; and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods" (*Bamidbar* 25:2). *Midrashim* describe in a most picturesque way (see *Midrash ha-Gadol* *Bamidbar* 25:1) how the daughters of Moav would place fruit or dishes in one room, and when the men entered, they would offer them wine, and then invite them into the second room, and so on. In the framework of this process, the people were encouraged to worship Baal Pe'or, and thus they stumbled both in prohibited sexual relations and in idolatry. This is similar to what *Chazal* said: "They prohibited their bread and oil because of the wine, and their wine because of their daughters, and their daughters because of something else [= idolatry]" (*Shabbat* 17a).

So far, the attraction to Baal Pe'or is understandable, because it was for the sake of harlotry. But in the next verse, we read about a further degree of deterioration, which is somewhat surprising: "And Israel joined himself to Baal Pe'or; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" (*Bamidbar* 25:3). Here we are no longer dealing with idolatry for the sake of licentiousness, but rather with real connection to Baal Pe'or, which raises the question: What is the nature of the worship of Baal Pe'or? What makes it so attractive, to the point that the men of Israel "joined" themselves to it?

**The Worship of Baal Pe'or**

The question is exacerbated in light of the description of Baal Pe'or's worship and the reluctance even on the part of pagan idolaters to engage in it, as *Chazal* describe by way of two stories in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (64a).

The first story is about a pagan woman who was very sick. She took a vow that if she would recover, she would go and serve all the idols in the world. She recognized the existence of higher powers that run the world, and deduced that if she would recover, it might be that all these forces joined together to help her, or that each of them contributed to at least a part of her recovery. In any case, she was ready to go and worship every idol existing in the entire world. Indeed, a very "righteous" pagan!

After the woman recovered, she indeed "went and worshiped every god in the world" in order to fulfill her vow. However, when she reached Baal Pe'or, she was reluctant:

On reaching Pe'or, she asked its priests, "How is this worshipped?" They replied, "People eat beets, drink strong drink, and then uncover themselves before it." She replied, "I would rather fall sick again than serve an idol in such a manner." (*Sanhedrin* 64a)

When they explained to that woman how Baal Pe'or is worshipped, she thought that was more of a disgrace than service. She knew that she had to fulfill her oath, but she also knew that she would be unable to do so if fulfillment involved such a despicable service, and therefore she declared: "I would rather fall sick again than serve an idol in such a manner."

The Gemara is not satisfied with simply telling this story, but uses it to criticize Israel's involvement in the sin of Baal Pe'or: "But you, House of Israel, were not so! 'That were joined to Baal Pe'or' – like a bracelet on the hands of a woman." That is to say, in contrast to the those among the nations of the world who distance themselves from such despicable service, it was the people of Israel who were drawn to this worship and even became "joined" to it.

The Gemara continues with another story:

Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired a donkey to a pagan woman. When she came to Pe'or, she said to him, "Wait till I enter and come out again." On her issuing, he said to her, "Now you wait for me until I go in and come out again." "But," said she, "are you not a Jew?" He replied, "What does it concern you?" (*Sanhedrin* 64a)

The Gemara goes on to describe how that same Jew worshiped Baal Pe'or in such a meticulous way that the priests praised him for his service: "He then entered, uncovered himself before it, and wiped himself on the idol's nose, while the priests praised him, saying, 'No man has ever served this idol thus.'" O, the shame!

These two stories demonstrate very well the great humiliation involved in the service of Baal Pe'or – a mode of service that even many pagans were not prepared to follow, yet the people of Israel did so with extreme devotion. So our first question is sharpened: Why? What was so attractive to the people of Israel about the worship of Baal Pe'or?

In order to understand the answer, one must first understand the idea behind this service, and this is what we will try to do.

**Man and Nature**

Man is surrounded by many forces that affect his world and senses that there is something bigger running the world. Judaism maintains that all these powers are in the hands of one God, while idol worshippers believe each force is managed by an independent being and that a whole pantheon of gods runs the world – like that pagan woman who was ready to bow down to all the idols in the world. The same is true of the Greek faith, the Roman faith, and all the other ancient cultures of the world. Even these idolaters concede that there is something above man.

The worship of Baal Pe'or is completely different. According to this form of idolatry, there is nothing above man. Man is supreme. Natural life, natural behavior, the desires of man, all the needs of man – this is what the service of Baal Pe'or sanctifies. Man can do what he wants, when he wants. If he needs to eat – let him eat. And if he needs to relieve himself – let him relieve himself. Not only can he take these actions, but he can do so with power. These are great and noble deeds.

In this perspective, the worshipper is at the center. Worship of Baal Pe’or makes man supreme and magnifies all his actions. There is something appealing about this idea, about giving a person all the power and freedom, and placing him above everything. This is also a very common attitude in the Western world – that every desire and wish that a person has, he can fulfill; that man can do as he pleases.

But we believe this is not the case. True, Judaism strongly believes in the empowerment of man, and assigns great responsibility to him, as it is stated: "Yet You have made him but little lower than the angels" (*Tehillim* 8:6). In fact, this is the real reason the Israelites were so drawn to the service of Baal Pe'or: because we do accept the principle of glorifying human deeds. This idea does exist in Judaism. However, Judaism still believes in the other side of "You have made him but little lower than the angels" – we still believe that there is something above man, that the individual man is not all there is in the world. Even the pagan woman in the Gemara’s story was not ready to accept the idea that there is nothing above man. She preferred to return to her illness than to accept this principle.

Why do we not accept the idea of "Pe'or-ism"? Among other things, because for those who take the worship of Pe'or to its extreme, all that matters in life is the "here and now": what they want now, how they feel now, and what their body is telling them now. If everything is summed up in physical life, then what meaning does life have? "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (*Kohelet* 1:2)! There must be more to life than this.

**"Over Against Beit Pe'or"**

If we go to the book of *Devarim*, we find that Moshe mentions Israel's camping "over against Beit Pe'or" (*Devarim* 3:29). But he doesn't just leave it at that; rather, he puts forward an assertion that opposes "Pe'or-ism": "And now, O Israel, hearken to the statutes and to the ordinances, which I teach you, to do them" (*Devarim* 4:1). In contrast to Baal Pe'or, there is commitment to the word of God and His commandments, based on the idea that man is not above all else.

Moshe Rabbeinu is also not content with teaching the commandments to the people of Israel, but adds another fundamental rule in the next verse: "You shall not add" and "neither shall you diminish." Even when a person serves God, he sometimes wants to introduce a small change in God's commandment – to add a little to the mitzva, because the addition makes it more beautiful or powerful in his eyes, or to diminish a little from a mitzva that seems less appropriate in his eyes.

What is behind such behavior? A person who believes that God is the master and the ruler of the world understands that what God has told us to do, must be done, and what He told us not to do, must not be done – no more and no less than that. A person who starts to change things on his own is basically saying: "I am the one who decides; I am the one in charge." Such a statement reflects a "Pe'or-y" consciousness, which Moshe finds it crucial to counter. A person must serve God, not himself.

What is the true course we are supposed to follow? What do we believe is the right way to conduct ourselves in the world? The *haftara* of our *parasha* states: "What the Lord requires of you: only to do justly, and love mercy, and to walk modestly (*hatzne’a*)with your God" (*Mikha* 6:8). The prophet Mikha emphasizes modesty as the mode in which we should act in the world.

What is modesty? Contrary to conventional wisdom, modesty is first between a person and God, and only then between a person and his fellow. The same idea appears in *Kohelet* in slightly different wording: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole of man" (*Kohelet* 12:13), and at the end of Moshe's words: "But you that did cleave to the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day" (*Devarim* 4:4). A person must understand his place in the world and devote himself to the service of God. It is precisely from this modesty, which leads to choosing Torah, that man receives the blessing of life.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Balak* 5781.]