

**June 30, 2019 - Num 25:1–9 - Sin with Moabite Women, Phinehas Acts**  
**Torah Reading: Numbers 25:1–9 - Sin with Moabite Women. Phinehas Acts**  
**Psalm 105:1-6 (a repeat from previous week)**  
**Haftarah: Joel 4:18**

### The Incident at Baal Peor

**Numbers 25:1** - "And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab."

"*shittim*" = Rabbi Yehoshua says: It is an allusion to the fact that they were engaged in matters of nonsense [*shetuf*], i.e., prostitution and idol worship.

(The haftarah reading **Joel 4:18** describes "a spring shall emanate from the house of the Lord and water the valley of Shittim." Rashi says this means, "He will atone for the iniquity of Peor.")

**Numbers 25:2-3** - "And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baal Peor: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel."

"Baal Peor" - the Lord of Peor - If Pe'or is connected to the Hebrew stem *p'r* 'open', used both of mouth and bowels, it might mean 'opening' and so Ba'al Pe'or could mean 'Lord of the Opening.' This apparent meaning is probably the source of Talmudic traditions associating Ba'al Pe'or with exposure and excrement. Chemosh is called the god of Moab in other biblical texts. Later "the abomination of Moab," was introduced at Jerusalem by Solomon (**1 Kings 11:7**) but was abolished by Josiah (**2 Kings 23:13**).

Rashi comments on **Numbers 25:3** that Pe'or was so called because "they would uncover before it the end of the rectum and bring forth excrement; this is its worship."

### Balaam is Back

Balaam is implicated in this chapter's incident of "whoredoms" with Moabitish women.

- **Revelation 2:14** - "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication."

"doctrine" of Balaam = *didachē* - teaching, doctrine, instruction

- **2 Peter 2:15** - "Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing"

"way" of Balaam = *hodos* - way, road, journey, a course of conduct

- **Jude 1:11** - "Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core."

"error" of Balaam = *plane* - wandering, delusion, error

### **The Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) explains Baalam's "doctrine" or instructions:**

"Balaam said to them: The God of these Jewish people despises lewdness, and they desire linen garments, as they have no new garments; come, and I will give you advice. Make for them enclosures using wall hangings and seat prostitutes in them, with an old woman outside the enclosure and a young woman inside, and have the women sell them linen garments.

"Balak made for them enclosures using wall hangings from the snow mountain, the H̄ermon, until Beit HaYeshimot, and he sat prostitutes in them, with an old woman outside and a young woman on the inside. And at the time when Jewish people were eating and drinking and were glad and going out to stroll in the marketplace, the old woman would say to a Jew: Aren't you seeking linen garments? He would enter the enclosure and ask the price, the old woman would quote him a price equal to its value, and the young woman would quote him a price less than its value. That scenario would repeat itself two or three times.

"And thereafter she would say to him: You are like a member of our household, sit and choose for yourself the merchandise that you want. And a jug of Ammonite wine was placed near her, and neither Ammonite wine nor gentile wine had been prohibited yet for Jews. She said to him: Is it your wish to drink a cup of wine? Once he drank the wine, his evil inclination burned within him.

"He then said to her: Submit to me and engage in intercourse with me. She then removed the idol that she worshipped from her lap and said to him: Worship this. He said to her: Am I not Jewish? I am therefore forbidden from engaging in idol worship. She said to him: And what is your concern? ...Moreover, I will not leave you until you deny the Torah of Moses your teacher, as it is stated (**Hosea 9:10**): "But when they came to Ba'al-Peor they separated themselves to the shameful item; and they became detestable like that which they loved."

### **The Incremental Slippery Slope - A Cautionary Tale**

First an attractive environment lures a believer in. Then his attention is turned from the old woman to the young woman inside the tent, who quotes a lower price for linen. Repetition normalizes the experience thus far. The distance between buyer and seller is changed to being like a "member of the family." Offered a cup of wine, his "evil inclination" kicks in. First the harlot uses her allurements to offer sex, but also introduces the aspect of worshiping an idol. Then the idolatry becomes a demand. By this time, he is too far in to refuse.

The rabbis saw that the illicit sexual encounter was reflective of worshipping another

god. Or, like Paul said:

- **Colossians 3:5** - "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and *covetousness, which is idolatry*"

### Retribution

**Numbers 25:4-5** - "And the LORD said unto Moses, Take all the heads of the people, and hang them up before the LORD against the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may be turned away from Israel. And Moses said unto the judges of Israel, Slay ye every one his men that were joined unto Baalpeor."

The heads or leaders were to convene courts to judge the idolators, according to the Talmud. Those proved guilty were to be hanged (or impaled) somewhere near the Tabernacle.

(Compare the place of Golgotha just outside Jerusalem, where Christ, impaled on the cross, took similar punishment - but for our sins, not His own.)

The Moabite god was Chemash or Shamash - the sun god. "Shemesh" means the sun in Hebrew. Thus, the idolators were hung up "against" the rising sun to show Israel's opposition to its worship.

**Numbers 25:6** - "And, behold, one of the children of Israel came and brought unto his brethren a Midianitish woman in the sight of Moses, and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping before the door of the tabernacle of the congregation."

This man, who tradition says was a prince of the tribe of Simeon, either wanted to defy Moses and God directly or was unaware of what had just happened.

Recall that Simeon and Levi massacred the Shechemites for dishonoring their sister Dinah (**Genesis 34**) - a bloody surprise attack that the rabbis had mixed feelings about. While the Levites redeemed themselves at the Golden Calf, the tribe of Simeon remained tarnished.

The people weeping at the door of the Tabernacle were those repentant faithful who understood the sin of Israel, and were crying out for God to stop the plague which had begun among the camps.

### The Zeal of Phinehas

The incident with Phinehas speaks about a Midianite woman, rather than a Moabite one. Apparently both peoples were involved in luring away Israelites to idolatry.

**Numbers 25:7-9** - "And when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from among the congregation, and took a javelin in his hand; And he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly. So the plague was stayed from the children of Israel. And those that died in the plague were twenty and four thousand."

Phinehas was the grandson of Aaron, and in the priestly line.

Phinehas is identified with Elijah in later writings like Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, because of his zeal.

### **Was his Act Legal?**

Although God rewarded the zeal of Phinehas, Jewish tradition was reluctant to praise his actions too highly. Why? Because there was no trial, and his act seemed illegal - to go against the insistence of the procedure of judicial examination at trial and by the affirmation by two or three witnesses.

- **Deuteronomy 19:15** - "One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established."

In such an act, made in the heat of emotion, there is no way to determine if it was motivated by real zeal or a private, selfish grudge.

Because of this the Talmud includes more details of the event:

"Phinehas took a javelin in his hand" - He removed the metal point and placed it inside his bosom; and leaned himself on the wooden rod, out of fear of [Zimri's] tribe who were surrounding him."

Then, to ensure that the crime was visible to all and the punishment deserved, the Talmud adds these details:

[1] The culprits were forced to remain coupled together *in flagrante delicto*.

[3] The javelin impaled them both in their genitals "and everyone could see his maleness and inside her vagina; this was on account of the fault-finders who might otherwise have argued that he had gone in there for personal reasons."

[4] They did not slide off the javelin, but remained impaled on it.

[5] An angel raised the doorway so that people could see above Phinehas' shoulder.

[7] The javelin was elongated to allow it to impale both bodies.

[8] Phinehas was given divine strength to carry them out.

[9] The javelin was strong enough not to snap under the burden.

[12] "Normally, the upper body drops to the bottom on a javelin. In this case, however, a miracle was performed and Zimri was flipped on top of Cozbi as they had been at the time of their deed; and all Israel saw them and declared them deserving of capital punishment."

Nevertheless, the rabbis said, "They wanted to place him under the ban, but for the fact that the holy spirit leaped upon him and declared: "And he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood, etc." (**Numbers 25:13**)

The bottom line for the rabbis:

Zealots may attack individuals involved in sexual acts with heathen women only if the unique conditions that existed in Phinehas' case are all satisfied: the offenders must be caught in the act, and in public. Nevertheless, no court must ever instruct an individual to emulate Phineas' zealotry. The divinely ordained penalties that were designated for these sinners in lieu of judicial sentences were equated by Maimonides with the biblical punishment *karet* ("cutting off"; usually understood as a supernaturally inflicted premature death).

The "covenant of peace" God promised Phinehas (**Numbers 25:12**) was partly to quiet his heart from any guilt about his violent, rash action, according to the rabbis.

**Spiritually**, the example of Phinehas in no way legitimizes violence toward our enemies - or even toward the enemies of God. In light of Jesus' example, we turn the other cheek. But it is a perfect picture in the New Testament context of "revenging the disobedience" within ourselves, toward idolatry and self-seeking lurking in our imagination, and flushing out resistance to God in our own minds and hearts.

- **2 Corinthians 10:5-6** - "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled."

With that understanding, we need the zeal of Phinehas!

## **ADDENDUM:**

### **Phinehas in Letter/Number Mysticism**

The Zohar describes Phinehas as "garbing" himself with his lance in order to mete out justice here on earth so that mercy could be invoked in the parallel regions of Heaven.

"...He turned away My wrath..." (**Numbers 25:11**) When Phinehas saw the letter *mem* flying in the air, he took the lance [in Hebrew, "*ramach*"] to publicly display his jealousy on behalf of God and succeeded in transforming "My (i.e. God's) wrath", in Hebrew "*chamati*" [spelled *chet-mem-tav-yud*], with the emphasis on the letters *mem-tav* [spelling the Hebrew word for "death"] in that word into the other two letters of "*chamati*", *chet-yud* [spelling the Hebrew word for "life"]. This is why Phinehas was said to have "became" Elijah (see below), an "angel" who goes on living forever.

At the moment of his zeal, Phinehas saw his own name [which has a numerical value of 208] rise heavenwards, and realized that his name had the same numerical value as that of Isaac the patriarch, who personified the attribute of Justice on earth. He also saw the letter *mem* fly in the air. This letter is an allusion to death - in Hebrew, "*mavet*".

This reference goes all the way back to humans' first sin:

"The woman saw that it was good...she took from its fruit, ate, and gave [to her husband]". (**Genesis 3:6**)

We find here four words commencing with the letters *vav tav*, and in the middle of these words a word commencing with the letter *mem*. When you join this letter *mem* to the four words which commence with the letters *vav tav*, you get the word "*mavet*," meaning "death," each time.

By itself, the letter *tav* [the last letter of the above word meaning "death"] is strongly associated with death, written in blood, as we know from the statement of Rabbi Acha bar Chanina. (Shabbat 55) He tells us that God has never issued a favorable decree and reversed Himself except in a single instance: when God told the angel Gabriel, "Pass in the midst of the city, in the midst of Jerusalem, and mark a sign on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan for all the abominations that are done within it." (**Ezekiel 9:4**)

God had instructed Gabriel to write in ink the letter *tav* on the foreheads of the righteous so that the divinely appointed forces of destruction should not touch them. The foreheads of the wicked people, however, were to be marked with the same letter written in blood, so that they would fall victim to the forces of destruction.

The ministering angels challenged God on this decision, wanting to know in what way the former were better than the latter, seeing that they had failed to perform the commandment of admonishing their fellow-Jews. God answered these angels that He was well aware that even if the righteous people had admonished their compatriots, it would have been to no avail. To this the angels replied that the fact that God was aware that such admonitions would have proved futile did not absolve the righteous from at least having tried, seeing that they had no way of knowing whether their attempts to admonish the people would prove successful.

As a result of this, we read in verse 5 of the same chapter: "Then He said to these in my hearing [the prophet's] 'Follow him through the city and strike. Let your eyes neither

spare nor show mercy. Old man, young man and maiden, children and women, massacre to utter destruction. But any man on whom is the sign do not approach. And begin from My Sanctuary'. So they began with the old men who were in front of the House."

The Talmud says that Rabbi Yossef reads the word "My Sanctuary," in Hebrew "*Mikdashay*", as "*Me-kudashay*," meaning "My holy ones", referring to the people who observed all the commandments of the Torah from the letter *alef* [the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet] to the letter *tav* [the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet]. (Shabbat 55)

A few lines further on the Talmud questions why the sign chosen for these markings had been the letter *tav*, and answers that this letter is the first letter of the word "*tichyeh*", meaning "you will live", as well as the first letter of the word "*tamut*," meaning "you will die".

The *tav* letter is the final letter in God's "seal," seeing that Rabbi Chanina taught that the "seal" of God is Truth - in Hebrew, "*emet*," At any rate, we know that the combination of the letters *mem* and *tav* spell the word for "death," since there was a deadly plague [in Hebrew, "*magefa*"], which killed twenty-four thousand Israelites at that time. The letter *tav*, discussed in the Talmud, is also known to have been written in blood on the forehead of the wicked (see above).

The final letters in the words "In the beginning G-d created" [in Hebrew, "*Bereishit bara Elokim*" (**Genesis 1:1**)] combine to make the word "*emet*," "truth". At the end of God's creative activities we again find this reference to "truth" when we look at the final letters of the verse "And God saw..." [in Hebrew, "*Vayera Elokim et...*" (**Genesis 1:31**)]

The universe was created for the sake of man, i.e. *adam*, who represents the tithe of one tenth (in Hebrew, "*maaser*") of Truth, "*emet*". ["Adam" in Hebrew is spelled *alef*, *dalet*, *mem*.] The numerical value of the letter *mem* in Adam's name (40) is 10% of the numerical value of *tav* (400) in the Hebrew word for "Truth" (*emet*), and the letter *dalet* (=4) in Adam's name is one tenth of the letter *mem* (=40) in the word "*emet*." The letter *alef* in "*emet*" is, of course, irreducible.

The serpent was the first to introduce the concept of lying into the universe by claiming that God had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil before being able to create the universe. **Proverbs 16:28** describes the serpent as saying, "A quarrelsome one alienates his friend."

By removing the first letter of the word "*emet*", *alef*, all that you are left with is the word "*met*", meaning "dead," When you remove the first letter from the word "*adam*", you are left with the word "*dam*," meaning "blood."

See

[https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article\\_cdo/aid/379619/jewish/Flying-Letters-of-Life-and-Death.htm](https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/379619/jewish/Flying-Letters-of-Life-and-Death.htm)