

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

NASO

BEHAALOTECHA

SHELACH

KORACH

CHUKKAT

BALAK

PINCHAS

MATOT

MASSEI

BALAK

40

DRAWING LINES

Parashat Balak has all the makings of a crazy pantomime - a frightened king, an evil prophet and a talking donkey. And not dissimilarly from a pantomime, good prevails over evil. The prophet Balaam, who is called upon to curse the people, finds himself unable to utter anything other than blessings: **How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel... Those who bless you shall be blessed, and those who curse you shall be cursed.**¹

Rashi interprets the word 'goodly' to refer to the praiseworthy practice of the people, of organising their tents in a modest arrangement such that the openings did not face one another.² The people had a strong moral compass guiding them, and they arranged themselves physically in a way that preserved their privacy and modesty.

It is therefore bewildering that just a few verses later we read of

the moral demise of the people, with Moabites and Midianites seducing Israelites, culminating in the public display of lewd behaviour between Zimri, a Jewish leader, with a Midianite princess.³

Such immorality is especially strange given the acute proximity to the inspiring revelations that the people have experienced until this point. Their lives have been dependent on miracles, including the protection of a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud during the day. They have had all of their physical needs provided for, including the extraordinary portions of manna. And each day they have been drawing closer to their dream of entering the Promised Land. They can almost smell the hummus so to speak and **yet they sink to an all-time moral low.** How could this have happened?

A brief glance over the events of our biblical history reveals the almost unbeatable strength of our evil inclination, and the relative weakness we have shown

throughout the ages in the face of temptation. We read of Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden fruit. We learn of Cain killing Abel, and we read of the generation of the flood being destroyed for having sunk to the depths of corruption and violence.⁴

Perhaps it is for this reason that Rashi interprets the words in *Leviticus*, 'and you shall be holy,' to mean, 'separate yourselves from sexual immorality and from sin, for whenever one finds a barrier against sexual immorality, one finds holiness.'⁵ Rashi focuses not on seeking out holy endeavours, but on separating ourselves from that which is forbidden - that which would tempt us to act immorally. This is how to establish an atmosphere of holiness in our lives.

Nachmanides takes the obligation one step further. When interpreting the words 'And you shall be holy,' rather than focusing on separating ourselves from that which is forbidden, he turns the emphasis

onto that which is permitted.⁶ According to his interpretation, the commandment implies that even if one lives according to the letter of the law, one can still violate its spirit. He thus advocates a lifestyle of restraint, even from that which one is allowed to enjoy. In order to achieve true holiness, according to Nachmanides, it is not enough to separate ourselves from the immorality around us. Rather, we must learn to recognise our weaknesses and that which triggers our temptations, and to distance ourselves from situations that may cause us to stumble, even if they are technically in the realm of acts permitted by the Torah.

Perhaps this is the key to the drastic fall into immorality that the Jewish people experience. They know how to separate themselves from that which is forbidden. We see this when they arrange their tents in a modest manner. They almost get it right. But unfortunately they fail to distance themselves that one stage further, to separate also from that which was permissible. Their proximity to the Moabite and Midianite women was not forbidden per se. Yet according to Nachmanides's understanding of the command to be holy, **we need to extend our antennae beyond that which is obviously forbidden.**

We must avoid situations of temptation at all costs. We should not remove ourselves from the real world and therefore, this idea beckons each of us to be self-aware enough to avoid our personal pitfalls. Perhaps this is why the command to be holy is more general - because its application is inherently subjective.



Inside all of us are powerful inclinations against which it can be difficult to battle. We all know our strengths and our weaknesses, and the triggers most likely to lead us towards temptation. In order to succeed in navigating ourselves towards the paths of goodness and holiness, we must actively avoid situations that may place us at risk of temptation by our inner enemies. In this episode in the Torah, the inner enemy is the temptation towards immorality. Yet there are many other everyday temptations waiting to trip us. It is up to all of us to identify these triggers and to distance ourselves from them. If we succeed in separating from them, we will be blessed with a life of holiness.

Notes

- ¹ Numbers 24:5-9.
- ² Rashi on Numbers, 24:5.
- ³ Numbers 25:6. ⁴ Genesis 6:11.
- ⁵ Rashi on Leviticus 19:2.
- ⁶ Nachmanides ad loc.

Parasha Fact:

Whilst Bilam, a great prophet could not see the angel of Hashem before him, his lowly, ordinary donkey could. We learn that role models and leaders come in all shapes and sizes, and that we must never be blinded by superficial status when learning from others.

Next week in Pinchas:

In a moment of true greatness, showing himself to be a role model to all of us, Moses responds with grace and humility to the devastating news that he will not be entering the Land of Israel. Whereas many would respond with acute disappointment and maybe even anger, Moses, our ultimate leader, immediately focuses on the process for the appointment of a new leader for his precious charges. And in that very moment, when his dreams have been absolutely crushed, the manner in which he asks God about the leadership plan holds a clue to his unparalleled greatness.

שבת שלום