

The Parshah in a Nutshell

Balak

Numbers 22:2-25:9

Balak, the King of Moab, summons the prophet **Balaam** to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is **berated by his ass**, who sees the angel that G-d sends to block their way before Balaam does. Three times, from **three different vantage points**, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, **blessings** issue instead. Balaam also prophesies on the **end of the days** and the coming of **Moshiach**.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab and are enticed to worship the idol **Peor**. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, **Pinchas** kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.



(c) Sarah Kranz

PARSHAH BALAK

Numbers 22:2-25:9

"And **Balak** the son of Zippor," begins the Parshah that bears the name of the Moabite king, "saw all that Israel had done to the Emori. And Moab was seized with dread because of the children of Israel."

Balak sends the "**elders of Midian and the elders of Moab**" to the prophet and sorcerer **Balaam** the son of Beor, with the following message:

Commentary

Balak: The Talmud forbids to name ones child after a wicked person, quoting the verse (Proverbs 10:7), "The name of the wicked shall rot." Yet an entire section of Torah is named after Balak, King of Moab, to whom the Midrash accords the title "who hated [the Jewish people] most of all their enemies."

For Balak is the Parshah of the future, where evil is transformed to good and curses emerge as blessings. It is in Balak that the most beautiful verses describing the uniqueness of Israel and the specialty of their relationship with the Almighty issue from the vile mouth of Balaam, summoned by Balak to curse the Jewish people. And it is in Balak that the most explicit reference to the era of Moshiach in the Five Books of Moses is found, in the form of a prophesy by the selfsame Balaam.

"Let Moses, who loves them, rebuke them," said G-d when the people of Israel needed rebuke, for rebuke from a loving heart is many times more effective. "And let Balaam, who hates them, bless them," for the blessing of an enemy is so much more real than a lovers praises.

In the Parshah of Balak we enter a Moshiach-like world---a world of "the greater wisdom that comes from folly, and the greater light that comes from darkness" (Ecclesiastes 2:13). (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

elders of Midian and the elders of Moab: *And Moab said to the elders of Midian (22:4)*

Moab and Midian were erstwhile enemies, as it is written (Genesis 36:35) "...who smote Midian in the field of Moab"; but out of fear of Israel, they made peace between them.

And why did Moab seek the advice of Midian? When they saw that Israel was victorious beyond the norm, they thought: "The leader of this people rose to greatness in Midian; we shall ask them what is his measure." Said they: "His power is entirely in his mouth." Said Moab: "We, too, shall bring a person whose power is in his mouth against them." (Rashi)

Curse me this people, for he is mightier than me (22:6)

Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt; they cover the face of the earth, and they sit opposite me.

Come now therefore, I entreat you, and curse me this people, for he is mightier than me... For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.

Balaam tells them that he'll give his response the **next morning**, "as G-d shall speak to me." "Do not go with them"

Commentary

The Hebrew phrase, *Atzum hu mimeni* ("He is mightier than me") also translates, "He is mightier from me." For in truth, the might of the people of Israel is Moshiach, who is descendent of Balak! (Ruth the Moabite, ancestress of King David, is a descendent of Balak). (Shaloh)

Balaam: In order to place before man the "free choice" that is essential to his mission in life, G-d so ordered His world that every positive force has its negative counterpart. Were there to exist a good element which cannot be put to corrupt use, then man's potential for evil would be disadvantaged and would not present the equal challenge which makes for the choice factor in life. In the words of King Solomon (Ecclesiastes 7:14), "One corresponding to the other, G-d created."

But this "equality" between good and evil extends only to the most superficial level of reality. When a person learns to look beyond the surface of things to their inherent purpose, he will see that only the good in the world is real and substantial. Good is an existence in its own right, while evil exists merely to provide the tension which imbues the positive acts of man with meaning and significance.

Hence, there cannot be anything "original" to evil, which is but a shallow, corrupted refraction of the good in the world. If Balaam was able to transcend the norm with the intensity of his hate, this was only because, centuries earlier, Abraham had done the same out of love of his Creator. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

next morning: *And G-d came to Balaam at night (22:20)*

The Divine spirit visited him only at night, as is the case with all the prophets of the nations (Laban, too, received his prophesy in a nocturnal dream, as it says (Genesis 31:24), "And G-d said to Laban the Aramite in a dream at night") -- like a man covertly visiting his concubine. (Rashi)

And Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his ass (22:21)

From here we see how hatred causes a person to break from convention. Balaam had many servants at his disposal; yet in his eagerness to go curse Israel, he saddled his ass himself. Said the Almighty: "Evil one! Their father, Abraham, has already preempted you when, to fulfill My will, he 'rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey' (Genesis 22:3)." (Rashi)

says G-d to Balaam that night. "Do not curse the people, for they are blessed."

Balak sends a second delegation of dignitaries "more numerous and more prestigious than these" with promises of even greater rewards. Balaam responds:

"If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of G-d my G-d, to do less or more."

"Now therefore, I ask you, tarry you also here this night, that I may know what G-d will say further to me."

This time G-d permits him to go: "If these men came to call you, rise up, and go with them; but only that word which I shall say to you, so shall you do."

Balaam's Ass

And Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

G-d's anger burned that he is going, and an angel of G-d stood in the way as an adversary against him. He was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him.

*The ass saw the angel of G-d standing in the way, his **sword** drawn in his hand, and the ass turned aside out of the way,*

Commentary

Balaam's Ass: *And G-d opened the mouth of the ass (22:28)*

This was to impress upon Balaam that there is no place for pride over the fact that he has been given the gift of prophesy. If it suites G-d's purposes, even an ass will see angels and make speeches. (Keli Yakar)

sword: *An angel of G-d stood in the way... his sword drawn in his hand (22:22-23)*

Could not the angel have breathed on him and taken his life away, that he must draw his sword? ... He could; but he said to Balaam as follows: "The mouth was given to Jacob, as is written (Genesis 27:22), 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.' And of Esau it is written, 'By your sword shall you live' (ibid. v40). Yet you exchange your trade and come against Israel with a weapon that is theirs! I, then, will come against you with a weapon that is yours." (Midrash Rabbah)

And the ass saw the angel of G-d (22:23)

But Balaam did not see it, for G-d has enabled the animal to see more than man. Because man has greater understanding, he would go insane if he were able to see the forces of destruction. (Rashi)

and went into the field; and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way.

*But the angel of G-d stood in a path of the vineyards, a **wall** being on this side, and a wall on that side. When the ass saw the angel of G-d, she pressed herself to the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; and he struck her again.*

When the angel further obstructs the way, forcing the animal to complete halt, Balaam strikes her a third time.

And G-d opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam: "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

And Balaam said to the ass: "Because you have mocked me; I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you."

And the ass said to Balaam: "Am not I your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life to this day? Was I ever wont to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

Then G-d opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of G-d standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed down his head, and fell on his face.

"Why have you struck your ass these three times?" the angel admonishes Balaam. "Behold, I went out to waylay you, because your path is perverse before me... Had she not turned from me, I would now have slain you, and saved her alive."

"If it is evil in your eyes, I shall return" says a humbled Balaam.

"Go with the men," says the angel. "But only the word that I shall speak to you, that you shall speak."

A People that Dwells Alone

Commentary

wall: *And she crushed Balaam's foot against the wall (22:27)*

This was the very heap of stones which Laban and Jacob had erected as a testament that "I will not pass over this heap to you, and that you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, for harm" (Genesis 31:52). Balaam, who is Laban, was now violating this covenant by crossing the heap to come curse the descendents Jacob. Therefore the wall was punishing him, for it was the witness for the oath, and it is written (Deuteronomy 17:7): "The hand of the witnesses should be first in [punishing] him." (Midrash Tanchuma)

Balak comes to receive Balaam at Moab's **border**, repeating his promises of honor and glory; Balaam reiterates that, "The word that G-d places in my mouth, that I will speak."

The next morning, Balak takes him to the Heights of Baal, from which the edge of the Israelite camp is visible. Balaam instructs him to build **seven altars**, and sacrifice a bull and a ram on each. Balaam then goes off to meditate.

"And G-d **happened** upon Balaam... and G-d placed a word into Balaam's mouth...." And Balaam begins to speak:

*From Aram does Balak the king of Moab bring me
From the mountains of the east, saying:
Come, curse me Jacob
And come, provoke wrath upon Israel*

Commentary

border: *And [Balak] went out to meet him... on [Moab's] utmost border (22:36)*

Why did he greet him at the border? He said to him: "These boundaries, which have been established since the days of Noah with the understanding that one nation does not violate the boundaries of the other--these people are coming to uproot! Come and curse them!" And he showed how they broke through and crossed the boundaries of Sichon and Og. (Midrash Tanchuma)

seven altars,: *And [Balaam] said to [G-d]: "I have prepared the seven altars..." (23:7)*

It doesn't say, "I have prepared seven altars," but "I have prepared *the* seven altars." Balaam said to G-d: The ancestors of this people built You seven altars, and I have prepared the equivalent of them all. Abraham built four (Genesis 12:7, 12:8, 13:18 and at Mount Moriah [22:9]); Isaac built one (ibid. 26:25); and Jacob built two--on at Shechem (ibid. 33:20) and one at Beth-El (ibid. 35:7). (Rashi)

happened: *And G-d happened upon Balaam (23:4)*

Regarding G-d's appearances to Moses, the Torah uses the word *vayikra* ("and He called") which is an expression of closeness and love; whilst to the prophets of the idolatrous nations the word used is *vayikar* ("and He happened upon") -- an expression that connotes temporality and promiscuity. (Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

The hallmark of evil and unholiness is an attitude of "It just happened." Nothing is coincidental to the Jew; every event is purposeful and significant. (Chassidic Saying)

*How shall I curse, whom G-d has not cursed?
How shall I evoke wrath, against whom G-d has not raged?*

*For from the top of mountains I see him
from the hills I behold him
It is a people that dwells alone
And is not reckoned among the nations.*

*Who can count the **dust of Jacob**
And number of the seed of Israel?
Let me die the death of the righteous
And let my last end be like his!*

"What have you done to me!" cries Balak. "I brought you to curse my enemies, and, behold, you have blessed them **altogether**."

But I can say only that which G-d places in my mouth, replies the prophet.

Bidden to Bless

Balak suggests trying from a different **vantage point** "From you shall see but the utmost part of them, and shall not see them all. Curse them for me from there."

Commentary

dust of Jacob: *The dust of Jacob (23:10)*

Everyone treads upon the dust, but in the end, the dust triumphs over them all... So it is with the Jewish people. (Midrash Rabbah)

altogether: *I called you to curse my enemies, and, behold, you have blessed them altogether (24:10)*

It would have been fitting that the rebukes (in the Book of Deuteronomy) be pronounced by Balaam, and that the blessings (in the Parshah of Balak) be said by Moses... But G-d said: Let Moses, who loves them, rebuke them; and let Balaam, who hates them, bless them. (Yalkut Shimoni)

vantage point: *He sees not iniquity in Jacob (23:21)*

Three great Chassidic leaders were famous for their *ahavat yisrael* ("love of a fellow Jew"): Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Barditchev, and Rabbi Zusha of Anipoli.

Rabbi Zusha was a living example of the maxim that "Love covers up all iniquities" (Proverbs 10:12). What the ordinary observer would

They go to Sdei Tzofim ("Lookout Field"). Again seven altars are raised and seven bullocks and seven rams are offered, and Balaam ventures out to meditate. Soon he returns with more Divinely-placed words in his mouth.

And he took up his discourse, and said:

*Arise, Balak and hear
Hearken to me, you son of Zippor*

*G-d is not a man, that He should lie
Nor a son of Adam, that He should regret
Has He said, and shall He not do?
Has He spoken, and shall he not fulfill it?*

*Behold, I am bidden to bless
He has blessed; and I cannot turn it.*

*He sees not iniquity in Jacob
And He perceives not **trouble** in Israel*

Commentary

perceive as a glaring deficiency, or even an outright sin, would not "register" in his holy eyes and mind. Rabbi Zusha was simply incapable of seeing anything negative in a fellow Jew

Rabbi Levi Yitzchaks *ahavat yisrael* found expression in his incessant efforts as an advocate for the people of Israel. Unlike Rabbi Zusha, he was not blind to their misdeeds and failings; but he never failed to "judge every man to the side of merit" -- to find a justification, and even a positive aspect, in their behavior. (A typical story tells of how, upon noticing a wagon driver who was greasing his wheels while reciting his morning prayers, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak lifted his eyes to Heaven and cried: "Master of the Universe! Behold the piety of Your children! Even as they go about their daily affairs, they do not cease to pray to You!")

But the Baal Shem Tov's love ran deeper yet. To him, *ahavat yisrael* was not the refusal to see the deficiencies of a fellow, or even the endeavor to transform them into merits, but an unequivocal love regardless of their spiritual state. He loved the most iniquitous transgressor with the same boundless love with which he loved the greatest *tzaddik*; he loved them as G-d loves them as a father loves his children, regardless of who and what they are.

trouble: *He sees not iniquity in Jacob, and He perceives not amal ("trouble" or "toil") in Israel (23:21)*

This implies that "Jacob" does experience "trouble" and "toil" (*amal*), though these do not result in his guilt in the eyes of G-d. "Israel" on the other hand, enjoys an existence devoid not only of guilt but also of struggle.

"Jacob" and "Israel" are the two names by which the third Patriarch was called and, by extension, two names for the Jewish people. Each represents a different period in the life of the Patriarch and a different dimension of the life of the people.

*G-d his G-d is with him
And the trumpet blast of a king is among them...*

Commentary

Jacob was born grasping the heel of his elder twin, Esau; thus he was named "Jacob" (*Yaakov*, in the Hebrew), which means "at the heel" (Genesis 25:26). Years later, when Jacob disguised himself as Esau to receive the blessings that Isaac intended to give the elder brother, Esau proclaimed: "No wonder he is called Jacob ('cunning')! Twice he has deceived me: he has taken my birthright, and now he has taken my blessings" (*ibid.*, 27:36).

"Jacob" is the Jew still in the thick of the battle of life -- a battle in which he is often "at the heel," dealing with the lowlier aspects of his own personality and of his environment. It is also a battle which he must wage with furtiveness and stealth (the second meaning of "Jacob"), for he is in enemy territory and must disguise his true intentions in order to outmaneuver those who attempt to ensnare him.

Threatened by a hostile world, plagued by his own shortcomings and negative inclinations, "Jacob" is defined by the axiomatic condition of man -- that "man is born to toil" (Job 5:7) and that human life is an obstacle course of challenges to one's integrity.

In contrast, Israel ("divine master") is the name given to Jacob when he "struggled with the Divine and with men, and prevailed" (Genesis 32:29). "Israel" describes the Jew who has prevailed over his own humanity, cultivating the intrinsic perfection of his soul to the extent that he is immune to all challenges and temptations; who has prevailed over the divine decree that "man is born to toil," achieving a tranquil existence amidst the turbulence of life.

The Jewish people include both "Jacobs" and "Israels", and the life of every individual Jew has its "Jacob" periods and its "Israel" moments. For "there are two types of pleasure before G-d. The first is from the complete abnegation of evil and its transformation from bitterness to sweetness and from darkness to light by the *tzaddikim*. The second [pleasure] is when evil is repelled while it is still at its strongest and mightiest... through the initiative of the 'intermediate man' (*beinoni*)... as in the analogy of physical food, in which there are two types of delicacies that give pleasure: the first being the pleasure derived from sweet and pleasant foods; and the second, from sharp and sour foods, which are spiced and prepared in such a way that they become delicacies that revive the soul" (Tanya ch. 27).

G-d sees no guilt in Jacob. For despite all that Jacob must face, he has been granted the capacity to meet his every detractor. Even if he momentarily succumbs to some internal or external challenge, he never loses his intrinsic goodness and purity, which ultimately asserts itself, no matter how much it has been repressed by the travails of life. But while he might be free of sin, he is never free of toil, of the struggle to maintain his sinless state. For him, the war of life rages ever on, regardless of how many of its battles he has won. And it is the struggle itself that constitutes his mission in life and the pleasure derived from him by his Creator.

(From the teachings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

For there is no **enchantment** in Jacob
And there is no sorcery in Israel
In time it is said to Jacob and to Israel:
"What has G-d wrought?"....

"If you will not curse them" says Balak, "at least don't bless them!" Once again Balaam reminds him that he can only say what G-d puts in his mouth.

The Goodly Tents

The king and the prophet make one more attempt, selecting yet a third vantage point from which to look upon the Israelite camp: "The head of Peor, that looks out towards the desert." Again they build seven altars and sacrifice seven bullocks and seven rams.

And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel
abiding according to their tribes; and the spirit of
G-d came upon him.

And he took up his discourse, and said....:

How goodly are your **tents**, O Jacob
Your dwellings, O Israel!

As winding brooks
As gardens by the river's side
As aloes which G-d has planted
As cedars beside the waters.

Commentary

enchantment: *There is no enchantment in Jacob (23:23)*

On the occasion of his bar-mitzvah, Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch (1860-1920) was told by his father:

"Our great-grandfather, the Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812), was bequeathed a smile by his master and teacher, the Maggid of Mezeritch. With this smile, the Rebbe could have won over the world.

"But the Rebbe never made use of this gift. His entire life's work was to implant *penimiyut* ('innerness' and integrity) within his Chassidim; so he made his case with the 'internal' mediums of intellect and feeling, and shunned the use of anything associated with the 'peripheral' attributes of the soul." (Likkutei Dibburim)

tents: *How goodly are your tents, O Jacob (24:5)*

He saw that they pitch their tents so the doorways should not be opposite each other (respecting each other's privacy). (Rashi)

He shall pour the water out of his buckets
His seed shall be in many waters
His king shall be higher than Agag
And his **kingdom** shall be exalted.

G-d brought him out of Egypt
He has as it were the strength of a wild ox
He shall eat up the nations his enemies
Shall break their bones, and pierce them through
with his arrows.

He couched, he lay down like a lion
And like a great lion; who shall stir him up?
Blessed is he that blesses you,
And cursed is he that curses you.

"I called you to curse my **enemies**," cries Balak in anger, "and, behold, you have altogether blessed them these three

Commentary

kingdom: *How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; you dwellings, O Israel (24:5)*

Rabbi Yochanan said: From the blessings of that wicked man you may learn his intentions. He wished to curse them that they should have no houses of prayer or houses of study; instead he blessed them with that, saying "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob." He wished to curse them that the Divine Presence should not dwell amongst them; instead he blessed them with that, saying "Your dwellings (*mishkenotecha*, which also means 'Sanctuaries'), O Israel." He wished to curse them that their kingdom should not endure; instead, "As the winding brooks"; that they might have no olive trees and vineyards -- "as gardens by the river's side"; that their odor might not be fragrant -- "as aloes which G-d has planted"; that their kings might not be tall -- "as cedars beside the waters"; that they might not have a king the son of a king -- "He shall pour the water out of his buckets"; that their kingdom might not rule over other nations -- "His seed shall be in many waters"; that their kingdom might not be strong -- "his king shall be higher than Agag"; that their kingdom might not be awe-inspiring -- "and his kingdom shall be exalted."

Said Rabbi Abba bar Kahana: In the end, all of them reverted to a curse (with the fall of the house of David and the destruction of the Holy Temple and the Exile, excepting the houses of prayer and the houses of study. Thus it is written (Deuteronomy 23:6), "But the L-rd your G-d turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the L-rd your G-d loved you" -- the curse, in the singular, but not the curses...

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 105b)

enemies: *And the people began to go astray after the daughters of Moab (25:1)*

How do we know that one who causes a man to sin is even worse than one who kills him? ... Two nations advanced against Israel with the sword, and two with transgression. The Egyptians and the

times. Therefore now flee to your place; I thought to promote you to great honor, but G-d has kept you back from honor."

"Did I not speak also to your messengers," responds Balaam, "which you did send to me, saying: If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of G-d, to do either good or bad of my own mind, but what G-d says, that will I speak?"

The End of Days

"And now," continues Balaam, "I go to my people. Come therefore, and I will **advise** you what this people shall do to your people in **the end of days**."

Commentary

Edomites advanced against them with the sword, as is proven by the texts, "The enemy said: I will pursue, I will overtake... I will draw my sword" (Exodus 15: 9), "And Edom said unto him: You shall not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against you" (Numbers 20:18). Two advanced against them with transgression, namely the Moabites and the Ammonites. Of those who had advanced against them with the sword it is written, "You shall not abhor an Edomite... You shall not abhor an Egyptian" (Deuteronomy 23:8). Of those, however, who had advanced against them with transgression, endeavoring to make Israel sin, it says, "An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of G-d... Even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter... for ever" (ibid. v. 4). (Midrash Rabbah)

advise: *And Israel dwelled in Shittim. And the people began to go astray after the daughters of Moab (25:1)*

Some fountains rear strong men and some weaklings, some handsome men and some ugly men, some chaste men and some men who are steeped in lewdness. The fountain of Shittim promoted harlotry and it was the one that watered Sodom... Because this fountain was cursed, G-d will in the future cause it to dry up and then renew it, as it is written (Joel 4:18): "And a fountain shall come forth of the house of G-d, and shall water the valley of Shittim." Not since the days of Abraham had any Jew broken loose in whoredom; but as soon as they came to Shittim and drank its waters they succumbed to whoredom. (Midrash Rabbah)

Balaam advised Balak to ensnare the children of Israel with them. He said to him: "Their G-d hates promiscuity, and they are very partial to linen. Come, and I will advise you what to do. Erect for them tents enclosed by hangings, and place in them harlots, old women without, young women within, to sell them linen garments."

So he erected curtained tents from the snowy mountain (Hermon) as far as Beth ha-Yeshimoth, and placed harlots in them -- old women on the outside, young women within. And when an Israelite ate, drank, and was merry, and issued forth for a stroll in the market place, the old woman would say to him, 'Do you desire linen garments?' The old woman offered it at its current value, but the young one for less. This happened two or three times. After that she

Commentary

would say to him, "You are now like one of the family; sit down and choose for yourself." Gourds of Ammonite wine lay near her, and at that time Ammonite and heathen wine had not yet been forbidden. Said she to him: "Would you like to drink a glass of wine?" Having drunk, his passion was inflamed and he exclaimed to her, "Yield to me!" Thereupon she brought forth an idol from her bosom and said to him, "Worship this." (Talmud, Sanhedrin 106a)

the end of days: *There shall shoot forth a star out of Jacob... (24:17)*

The *Melech HaMoshiach* ("anointed king") is destined to arise and restore the kingdom of David to its glory of old, to its original sovereignty. He will build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. In his times, all the laws of the Torah will be reinstated as before; the sacrifices will be offered, the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year instituted as outlined in the Torah.

Whoever does not believe in him or does not anticipate his coming, denies not only the other prophets but also the Torah and Moses. For the Torah testifies about him: "G-d shall return your captivity... He will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the L-rd your G-d has scattered you... If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you, from there He will take you... G-d will bring you to the Land..." (Deuteronomy 30:3-5). These explicit words of the Torah encapsulate all that has been said (concerning Moshiach) by the prophets.

Also in the story of Balaam is it spoken of, and there it is prophesied on the two "anointed ones": the first Moshiach, which is David, who saved Israel from its enemies; and the last Moshiach, who shall be of his descendents, who will save Israel in the end [of the Exile]. There he says: "I see him, but not now"--this is David; "I behold him, but he is not near"--this is the King Moshiach; "There shall shoot forth a star out of Jacob"--this is David; "And a scepter shall rise out of Israel"--this is the King Moshiach; "And shall smite the corners of Moab"--this is David, as it is written (II Samuel 8:2) "And he smote Moab, and he measured them with a line"; "And rule over all the children of Seth"--this is the King Moshiach, as it is written (Zachariah 9:10), "And his dominion shall be from sea to sea"...

As for the books of the prophets, one need not cite references [to Moshiach], for all the books are full of this...

If there arises a king from the house of David, who studies the Torah and fulfills its precepts... who will prevail upon all of Israel to follow it and repair its breaches, and will wage the battle of G-d -- he is presumed to be Moshiach. If he did so and was successful, and he built the Holy Temple on its site and gathered the dispersed of Israel - he is certainly Moshiach. He will correct the entire world to serve G-d together, as is written (Zephaniah 3:9): "For then I shall turn to the nations a pure tongue, that all shall call upon the name of G-d to serve Him as one"...

The sages and the prophets did not crave the era of Moshiach in order to rule over the world... or to eat, drink and rejoice; but only so that they be free for Torah and its wisdom and be rid of any oppressor and disrupter...

*I see him, but not now
I behold him, but he is not near
There shall shoot forth a **star** out of Jacob
And a scepter shall rise out of Israel
And shall smite the corners of Moab
And rule over all the children of Seth...
And Israel shall do valiantly...*

"And Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place: and Balak also went his way."

Promiscuity and Zealotry

Balaam failed to destroy them with curses; but the children of Israel could still bring calamity upon themselves with their deeds, as they now did when **"the people began to go astray after the daughters of Moab."**

And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods: and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods.

*And Israel **joined** himself to **Baal Peor**; and the anger of G-d was kindled against Israel.*

Commentary

And at that time there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry. For the good will be plentiful, and all delicacies available as dust. The entire occupation of the world will be only to know G-d... Israel will be of great wisdom; they will perceive the esoteric truths and comprehend their Creator's wisdom as is the capacity of man. As it is written (Isaiah 11:9): For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of G-d, as the waters cover the sea..." (Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11-12)

star: *There shall shoot forth a star out of Jacob (24:17)*

This means that every Jew has a spark of the soul of Moshiach in his soul. (Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

The people began to go astray after the daughters of Moab: (25:1)

How do we know that one who causes a man to sin is even worse than one who kills him? ... Two nations advanced against Israel with the sword, and two with transgression. The Egyptians and the Edomites advanced against them with the sword, as is proven by the texts, "The enemy said: I will pursue, I will overtake... I will draw my sword" (Exodus 15: 9), "And Edom said unto him: You shall not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against you" (Numbers 20:18). Two advanced against them with transgression, namely the Moabites and the Ammonites. Of those who had advanced against them with the sword it is written, "You shall not abhor an Edomite..."

A plague ensues, which kills 24,000; Moses orders those responsible to be executed. Still, the debauchery and idolatry continue, reaching its peak when,

*Behold, a man of the children of Israel came, and brought to his brethren **a Midianite woman** before*

Commentary

You shall not abhor an Egyptian" (Deuteronomy 23:8) . Of those, however, who had advanced against them with transgression, endeavoring to make Israel sin, it says, "An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of G-d... Even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter... for ever" (ibid. v. 4). (Midrash Rabbah)

joined: *And Israel joined himself to Baal Pe'or (25:3)*

At first they entered unobtrusively, but in the end they came in joined like a yoke of oxen. (Midrash Rabbah)

Baal Peor: *And Israel joined himself to Baal Peor (25:3)*

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill, who vowed: If this woman recovers from her illness, she 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? Said they to her: One eats greens and drinks beer, and then one defecates before the idol. Said she: Id rather that this woman return to her illness than worship an idol in such a manner. (Talmud, Sanhedrin 64a).

Midianite woman: *Behold, a man of the children of Israel came, and brought... a Midianite woman before the eyes of Moses, and before the eyes of all the congregation of the children of Israel; and they stood weeping (25:6)*

The woman said to him: "I shall give myself to none but Moses, for so my father Balak bade me, not to yield to any one but to Moses your master, because my father is a king." Said he to her: "Behold, I am as great as he is! I shall bring you out before their eyes!" He seized her by her plait and brought her to Moses. He said to him: "O son of Amram! Is this woman permitted or forbidden?" He answered him: "She is forbidden to you." Said Zimri to him: "The woman whom you married was a Midianite!" Thereupon Moses felt powerless and the law slipped from his mind.

All Israel wailed aloud, as for it says, "And they stood weeping." Why were they weeping? Because they became powerless at that moment. This may be illustrated by a parable. It is like the case of a king's daughter who, having adorned herself for the purpose of entering the bridal chamber and sitting in a palanquin, was discovered misconducting herself with a stranger, and so her father and her relatives lost heart. It was the same with Israel. At the end of

the eyes of Moses, and before the eyes of all the congregation of the children of Israel; and they stood weeping before the doorway of the Tent of Meeting.

One man is moved to **action**.

And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it. He rose up from among the congregation, and took a spear in his hand.

And he went after the man of Israel into the chamber, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly.

And the plague was halted from the children of Israel.

Commentary

forty years they camped by the Jordan to cross over into the Land of Israel... and there they gave way to harlotry. The courage of Moses failed him as did that of the righteous ones with him.

(Midrash Rabbah)

action: *And Pinchas saw (25:7)*

He saw what was happening and remembered the law, and said to Moses, "O great-uncle! Did you not teach us this on your descent from Mount Sinai: He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots?" Moses replied. "He who reads the letter, let him be the agent."
(Talmud, Sanhedrin 82b)

The Evolution of Pleasure

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

Israel settled in Shittim. And the people began to stray after the daughters of Moab. And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods ... and Israel joined themselves to Baal Peor...

Numbers 25:1-3

What was the cult of Peor? The Talmud relates the following story:

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill, who vowed: If this woman recovers from her illness, she 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? Said they to her: One eats greens and drinks beer, and then one defecates before the idol. Said she: I'd rather that this woman return to her illness than worship an idol in such a manner (Sanhedrin 64a).

Idolatry is the deification of an object or force of the created reality. Ancient man worshipped the sun because it kept him warm, lighted his way and nurtured his crops; the moon, wind, earth, water and trees were also gods, to be thanked and beseeched for the gifts they bestowed upon man. This was like thanking a hammer for building a home or a scythe for the year's harvest, rather than the manufacturer and wielder of these tools; nevertheless, every idolatry has a certain logic, however misguided -- one is venerating a (presumed) source of life and nourishment.

But what was the point of the idolatry of Peor, which is the worship of ones' own excrement? Here the idolater is venerating waste -- that which remains after all nutritive

potential has been extracted from a substance. What would attract a people to such a practice?

The Chain

The Chassidic masters explain that the essence of Peor is the severing of pleasure from its supernal root.

What is pleasure? We use the word in relation to so many and diverse things. What do a steak, a musical composition and an idea have in common? Yet pleasure is how we describe our experience of a meal, a concert, or an intellectual revelation. For as different as the sensations derived from these activities may be, they share a common essence: the capacity to impart a sense of fulfillment to the human soul.

Indeed, all pleasures flow from the same font. According to the teachings of Kabbalah, all pleasures are one in essence, and this quintessential Pleasure is the soul of creation.

The Kabbalists describe the created reality as a Chain of Evolution (*Seder Hishtalshelut*). The uppermost link in this chain is G-d's pleasure in His creation, which spawns the divine desire to create. Thus Pleasure (*ta'anug*) and Desire (*ratzon*) are, respectively, the inner and outer elements of the highest *sefirah* (divine attribute), Keter.

This divine desire, enfolding the divine pleasure within it, then passes through many stages and metamorphoses, evolving into worlds and realities of increased tactility. Every object, force or phenomenon in creation is simply another form of the genestic divine desire; the differences between them lie only in the manner and extent of their evolution. The higher a thing's place in the chain, the greater its awareness of its source; it is therefore more spiritual -- more subservient to the divine will, less possessive of a sense of being and self. The further down it passes through the chain, the more distant it becomes from its source -- less aware and subservient, more tactual and egocentric, more physical.

When a person experiences desire and pleasure towards and from a thing in G-d's creation, he is making contact with its soul and core -- the divine desire that it be, and the divine pleasure in its being. Hence, the degree and intensity of the pleasure is governed by the thing's place in the "Chain": the more spiritual a thing is, the more profound the pleasure it yields, for it is closer to the source of all pleasure. The ultimate pleasure lies in the experience of union with G-d through the fulfillment of His will -- an experience that relates to the very first link in the chain, where pleasure resides in its most pristine, unprocessed form.

Pleasure as Displeasure

In its lowest reaches, the Chain of Evolution yields things that are inconducive -- or even contrary -- to what G-d desires.

The capacity of these things to give pleasure is an existential paradox. All pleasure is but the embodiment of the divine pleasure in creation, while these pleasures are divine *dis*pleasures -- things contrary to G-d's will. Yet they, too, are products of the divine desire, since their capacity to give pleasure fills a certain function in G-d's purpose in creation: G-d desired that we be confronted with a free choice between good and evil so that our deeds should be meaningful and significant. But G-d wants that these things should exist only in order that man should reject them as contrary to His will; so theirs is an existence whose inner essence -- whose function and *raison d'être* -- is *not* to exist.

Chassidic teaching employs the metaphor of digestion to explain this phenomenon.

Digestion is the process by which food passes through the various organs which break it down and separate its finer elements from its coarser ones. At each phase of the process, this separation grows more and more defined; ultimately, the finer elements in the food evolve into body-building cells and energy, and its coarser elements are ejected by the body. Both the nutrients and the waste are

products of the digestion process; but the former is generated to be used, while the latter is generated to be rejected and thereby enable the body's absorption of the former.

By the same token, the Chain of Evolution is like a cosmic "digestive system" in which the essence of creation is processed into the substance and energy of the universe that G-d desired. This process (like every process we know) also generates waste -- elements that must be separated and disposed of in order for the desirable product to properly develop.

(Of course, G-d could have evolved His world in such a manner that the good develops without any separation of waste, or, for that matter, He could have not evolved it at all. But G-d desired that the good in creation should be all the more sharply defined by its contrast with the rejected evil; that human life should be an exercise in refinement -- in distinguishing between the calories of divine energy and the sludge of putrid waste in our own self and character, our environment and our world. Indeed, the very concept of good, as we know it, would be devoid of all meaning were it not for the challenge of rejecting the evil that vies for validation and indulgence.)

Based on the above, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains the following incident related in the Talmud:

Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva were traveling, when they heard the sounds of the crowds of Rome from a distance of one hundred and twenty mil. They began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

Said they to him: Why are you laughing?

Said he to them: Why are you weeping?

Said they to him: These barbarians, who prostrate themselves before statues and sacrifice to idols, dwell happy and secure, while we -- the footstool of our G-d [i.e.,

The Holy Temple in Jerusalem] was consumed by fire. Shall we not weep?"

Said he to them: That is why I am laughing. If for those who transgress His will it is so, how much more so is it for those who do His will. (Talmud, Makkot 24a-b)

Rabbi Akiva is saying: if the waste produced by the divine desire in creation can yield such pleasure for the hedonist, imagine the pleasure to be derived through the fulfillment of His will, which is the source and essence of all pleasure!

In the Fortieth Year

Therein lies the deeper significance of the idolatry of Peor, and the explanation as to how and why the people of Israel succumbed to it on the eve of their entry into the Land of Israel.

On the face of it, the worship of Peor was a particularly repulsive activity. In truth, however, this was but the physical enactment of what a person does every time he prefers an unG-dly "pleasure" over a G-dly one: he is worshipping the offal of creation, venerating something whose only significance is its need to be rejected in favor of the energies that are extracted from it.

This is why Israel's vulnerability to Peor came about at the close of their forty-year sojourn in the desert, as they camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River poised to enter and settle the Land of Canaan.

For forty years, the people of Israel had enjoyed a wholly spiritual existence. They were fed, clothed and sheltered by daily miracles, leaving them free to pursue the divine wisdom of Torah without the distractions of the material state. Most telling of their state was the fact that the manna, the "bread from heaven" on which they lived, was wholly absorbed by their bodies, engendering no waste. They inhabited a spiritual idyll, in which the waste of creation was unknown.

But now they stood at the threshold of a new era: they were to settle the land, till its soil, engage in commerce and politics -- i.e., to live a physical life sustained by physical means. For the first time in their history as a nation, they were to be in direct contact with the nether levels of the Chain of Evolution -- with that part of the cosmic digestive tract which separates the waste from the body of creation. For the first time, they were called upon to differentiate between vital matter -- matter that nourishes a spiritual end -- and dead matter -- matter as an end in itself.

Not all were equal to the challenge. There was an outbreak of Peor worship in the Israelite camp, as many were enticed by the pseudo-pleasures to be found in the undesirable by-product of creation. Until one man -- Pinchas -- came, and with his selfless commitment, unclouded vision and decisive action, put a halt to the plague of Peor.

Based on the teachings of the [Lubavitcher Rebbe](#); adapted by [Yanki Tauber](#)