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3

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Parshah

BILAAM'S PLAN B

The story of Bilaam's curses is well known. Bilaam tries to use the power of speech against the Bnei Yisrael, but as soon as he opens his mouth to utter a curse, the most beautiful blessings emerge. Not to be deterred, Bilaam tries his hand a second time with 'plan B'. After having expressed the beautiful *bracha* of *mah tovu*, expressing the holiness and sanctity of the Jewish home, Bilaam realises that the essence of the Jewish nation is its purity.

With that in mind Bilaam dispatches the daughters of Midian to seduce the Jewish men into sinful behaviour (this is the backdrop to the heinous act of Zimri and Cozbi that links this week's sedra with the next). After luring in the men by appealing to their most base instincts they then close the deal by enticing them to worship Baal Peor. The remarkable thing about this is that this plan almost succeeds, were it not for Pinchas taking the law into his own hands and putting an end to this act of rebellion and open defiance against Hashem and His Torah.

However upon further reflection and when looking into the nature of Baal Peor, one wonders what was so attractive about it. The Gemara explains that Baal Peor was served in the most counter intuitive way possible, rather than bow down to it, its worshippers relieved themselves on it. In Rav Hirsch's words, Baal Peor is a god of shamelessness, who was worshipped through giving brazen prominence to the most bestial aspects of life.

In other worlds Baal Peor represents a world view of, 'if it is natural then it must be good'. It is a way of celebrating and sanctifying man's most physical functions and desires without any attempt to control them or raise them to a higher level. If it feels good then it is good. Rav Hirsch takes this a stage further and claims that the cult of Peor is an illustration of the type of Darwinism that glorifies man's descent to the level of the beast, where stripping himself of his Divinely-given nobility, he comes to regard himself as merely another, albeit higher species of animal.

This would explain why Moshe's burial place is given as being 'opposite the house of Peor'. Normally we are forbidden from using places of idol worship as landmarks, but here the Torah is defining the essence of everything that Moshe stands for. He stands against the idea of Peor, just because something is natural, it doesn't mean that it is good. Things that feel good are not always good.

The Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu is a system of boundaries that create self-control and holiness. This is what Bilaam realised when he begrudgingly uttered the immortal words of *mah tovu*. Our ability to go against our natural desires, to allow our intellect to drive us rather than our instincts is the source of our immortality, but we can never rest on our laurels and never take this ability for granted.

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DOSE OF HALACHA

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Halachah

PESUKIM ON INVITATIONS

Q I SOMETIMES RECEIVE WEDDING INVITATIONS WITH PESUKIM WRITTEN ON THEM CAN I THROW THEM AWAY OR DO I NEED TO PUT THEM IN SHEIMOS?

A The Gemara (Shabbos 115b) writes that if one writes *berachos* unnecessarily it is as if they burnt the Torah, as they will eventually cause them to be discarded and mistreated. Thus, Rambam (Teshuvos Harambam 268) and the Shulchan Aruch (OC 283:4) writes that one should not write *pesukim* on a *tallis*. The Shach (OC 283:6) explains that when the *tallis* wears out, it will likely be thrown away, together with the *pesukim* on it.

Following a *machlokes* in the Gemara (Gittin 6b), Rambam (Sefer Torah 7:14) and Shulchan Aruch

(YD 283:3) disagree on whether one may write 3 or 4 words on a document without it becoming holy. The Tashbetz (2) writes that this doesn't apply if the words are rearranged or not aligned on one straight line.

R' Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe YD 2:135) writes that he didn't print any *pesukim* on his own children's invitations and advises others not to, either. Elsewhere (YD 4:38:4) he writes that while one does avoid the problem if they split the words onto different lines, one should still avoid writing *pesukim*. R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos

Shlomo, Tefilla 20:n72) likewise disapproved of printing *pesukim* on invitations, saying that if it contains a full *passuk*, it requires *geniza* (burying).

In conclusion, one printing invitations should ideally avoid printing any *pesukim* on them. If one received such an invitation, one should double wrap it in a plastic bag before disposing of it (See Teshuvos Vehanhagos 1:55).

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2. How did the *rasha* Bilaam die and why in this way?