

INTERNAL AFFAIRS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Moshe said to the Jewish judges, "Let each man kill his people who were attached to Baal Peor."

Meshech Chochmah: The gemara^[2] contrasts the "attachment" verb here with the one that the Torah uses in a happier context. There^[3] the Torah speaks positively of those who "cling" / *devekim* to Hashem. Our verb, *nitzmadim*, is related to **tzamid**, an ornamental bracelet that is attached to the body, but only loosely. It is free to move to and fro. The verse in Devarim, however, speaks of a tight and unyielding connection to Hashem.

Chazal do not mean to give a free pass to the Baal Peor-worshippers, or a gratuitous compliment to the spiritual "good guys" of the *pasuk* in Devarim. Rather, they convey a profound thought about the way sin impacts us – more specifically, the different ways that different types of shortcoming affect our inner selves.

Parsing the second verse in Vayikra – which introduces us to voluntary offerings – the gemara^[4] derives that the words *adam...mikem* / "a man among you" exclude the offering of a renegade, while the word *behemah* / animal licenses our accepting offerings from people who act like animals, i.e. sinners. The takeaway is that if a sinner wishes to bring an offering in the *mishkan* or *mikdash*, we do not object. Rejecting his overture, pushing him away, might end any possibility of his future repentance. We do not extend the same courtesy to the renegade, the *mumar*.

Chazal understood that our *mesorah* linking sinners to the word *behemah* was not merely a pejorative swipe at less-than-righteous people. It was a statement about the nature of sin. Animals seek to gratify needs – needs of eating, drinking, reproduction – even comfort. These desires are not the product of any intellectual gift from on high. The intellect has no use for physical things and activities. (To the contrary. Chazal^[5] say that a person only sins when he is overcome by a spirit of insanity – or irrational thinking, the polar opposite of *sechel* / proper intellectuality. The *sotah* brings an offering of barley, the classic animal fodder.^[6])

The renegade's lapse comes from a very different place. The one who has pledged his allegiance to idolatry, or espouses warped religious ideology, has not given in to his animal lusts. His failure is rooted in his soul. For this reason, Chazal^[7] teach that in most regards, thoughts of, and even determination to perform some *aveirah* are not reckoned by Hashem as the equivalent of actually

committing the sin. *Avodah zarah*, however, is an exception. Thought is within the province of the *nefesh*. When that thought is firmed up, it is directly fixed to the *nefesh*; if the thought is a warped and contorted one, it impacts the soul. Sinful activities that owe to Man's animal nature are concluded only when translated into action, which is mediated and given expression by his animal apparatus. The thought of doing it has no real effect until it becomes active.

The ordinary sinner falls prey to his animal instincts and wants, not because his *sechel* is flawed, but because it is insufficiently strong or resolute to assert itself against the animal part of his nature. The Torah encourages such a person to take part in the system of *korbanos*. Not so the renegade. Having perverted his *nefesh*, he is no longer "a man among you." He is fundamentally different from his brothers and sisters, and barred from participating with them.

The Baal Peor episode, however, was exceptional. Chazal^[9] describe the entrapment of the Jewish men by the Midianite women. Lured into what seemed to be an innocuous shopping expedition, the men were quickly victimized by a bait-and-switch operation that they could not have anticipated. Propositioned by an attractive young woman, their animal passions were quickly ignited. When the woman insisted upon a quick, ritualized service to her god before yielding to him, each victim succumbed. There was no intellectual component in the service at all. The obeisance paid to Baal Peor was nothing more than a continuation of a sin of animal lust and passion.

Pinchas, say Chazal,^[9] remonstrated with his Creator. "Twenty-four thousand of Israel die for the likes of these [Zimri and Kozbi]?" He stressed "of Israel" to underscore that they remained part of Israel, despite participating in *avodah zarah*. While idolatry typically changes a person, leaving him categorically different from others, making him no longer "a man among you," these sinners were all different! Their shortcoming was restricted to their animal selves, having failed to use their *sechel* to police their passions.

We return to our opening citation of Chazal. The Peor-worshippers attached themselves to an object of idolatrous veneration. But the attachment was loose, indeed. It did not come from their inner selves. A married woman will adorn herself with bracelets to attract the romantic interest of her husband. The Peor-worship as well was nothing but an adjunct to a welling up of physical desire. Not so the connection of those who cling to Hashem, whose attachment runs deep, and is sourced in their *nefesh* and *sechel*, which control and limit the raging forces of the physical.

For this reason as well, Chazal^[10] tell us that Moshe was buried near Baal Peor, to help atone for those who sinned there. There was no greater exemplar of Man's ability to transcend the physical, to remove himself from physical needs and desires that he separated from his wife. His example is the antidote to Peor-worship.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bamidbar 25:5.
2. Sanhedrin 64A.

3. Devarim 4:4
4. Eruvin 69B
5. Sotah 3A
6. Sotah 14A
7. Kiddushin 40A
8. Sanhedrin 106A
9. Sanhedrin 82B
10. Sotah 14A