

CHUKAS (NUMBERS 19:1-25:9)**Of Television, Toilets, and Idolatry**

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Balaam (see “Will the REAL Jackass Please Speak Up?”) was very frustrated. Hired by the king of Moab, he tried everything in his power to curse the Israelites. But G-d just wouldn’t let it happen. “*You may not curse the Nation, because it is blessed.*” (Numbers, 22:12)

He had another idea. “I can’t curse the Nation of Israel because G-d is protecting and blessing them. I have to figure out a way to get G-d angry with them.”

Balaam came up with a suggestion. “Their G-d is into morality,” he explained to the king. “What He really despises are promiscuity and idol worship. If you want to get their G-d angry with them, figure out a way to break down their morals.”

The plan was set into motion. Midianite prostitutes were sent into the camp of Israel. They offered the Israelite men kosher food and wine. As things progressed the way immorality often does, the Israelites were soon prepared to compromise their holy calling.

There was, however, one condition demanded by the Midianites. They insisted that their “clients” pay homage to their idol, “*Baal Pe’or.*”

Now most thinking people, even in the heat of lustful desire, won’t suddenly decide to start worshipping idols. (Or so one might think. In fact, the Talmud says that the biggest draw of idol worship is that it is usually accompanied by lax sexual standards.) The Israelite men were not inclined to praying to a statue.

No problem! “You don’t have to pray to our idol, or even to bow to it. All you have to do is . . . (Please forgive me if I am a bit indelicate.) . . . perform your regular bathroom functions in front of the idol.”

Have you ever heard of anything so bizarre?

That’s how they worship *Baal Pe’or*?! I can understand bowing to an idol, burning incense, or offering a sacrifice to an idol. But THIS?! (Again, please forgive the indelicacy) Is a urinal or a toilet an altar upon which the god of the Midianites is worshiped?

If anything, it would seem that such an action would be an insult to the idol. (*L'havdil* -- in contrast, one is not permitted to pray or study Torah in a bathroom. Children who are not toilet trained should not be brought to the synagogue.) In fact, the Talmud says that some of the Israelites “humored” the prostitutes and relieved themselves as an act of ridicule of their god.

Yet, this vulgar act, even though it is demeaning, is considered an act of worshiping *Baal Pe'or*. Why?

It seems that the religion of *Baal Pe'or* taught that there is no such thing as human dignity. Human beings are members of the animal kingdom, and as such, have no shame or sense of privacy. Just as a dog does not care where or when it answers nature's call, we should be no different. Just as an animal has no sense of marriage or commitment, human beings need be no different.

This is how we can have organizations like PETA. These are the “humane” individuals who spray red paint on people wearing fur coats, and burn down labs where potentially life-saving experiments are carried out on animals. If humans are no different than animals, we cannot eat them, wear them, or test medications on them.

Several years back there was a hue and cry over the use of a baboon's heart that was transplanted into the chest of a little girl in an attempt to save her life. Had it succeeded, I would call for baboon farms, raised for the HUMANE purpose of transplanting their hearts into sick humans. (I get a kick out of those shampoos that say, “Not tested on animals” on the label. Better MY hair should get burnt off?!!)

(Let me be perfectly clear. The Torah forbids mistreating animals. The kosher method of animal slaughter is instantaneous and humane. One is required to feed his animals before he himself eats. But the animals were put here to serve man. Noah didn't bring seven pairs of each kosher animal just because he liked to look at cows, sheep, and giraffes!)

Once we raise the status of animals to our level, we can be free to lower ourselves to theirs. We can connect our homes to the sewer via television and Internet and be “entertained” by the celebration of promiscuity and the breakdown of all human dignity and morality. We can ignore (or even praise!) the misdeeds of elected officials.

We can have “Supreme” courts that find Constitutional support for every manner of human degradation and perversion. As Justice Scalia asks in his dissent, can “marriage” be far off? (The Talmud, in offering a bit of muted praise for the nations of the world, points out that as low as humanity can sink, we have never seen society write a *Ketubbah*, a marriage document for two men. Stay tuned, Justice Scalia!)

[NOTE: This Torah Talk was originally written in 2003. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for Justice Scalia's fears to be realized.]

It is truly shocking what society is willing to accept without protest. We have lost our conscience.
Balaam would be proud.

Man is created in the Image of G-d. We are not animals; we are (potentially) holy creatures.

The Torah's message is:

“Curb Yourself.”

Have a great Shabbos

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