**Weekly Parasha Insights by Rabbi Eli Mansour**

**ParashatPinhas: Contemporary Sun-Worship**

ParashatPinhas marks the conclusion of the tragic story of Ba’alPe’or, when Beneh Yisrael sinned with the women of Moab and Midyan, and worshipped Moab’s deity, Pe’or. G-d sent a deadly plague that killed 24,000 people among the nation, and the plague stopped only when Pinhas courageously killed Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon, who publicly sinned with a woman from Midyan. In the beginning of ParashatPinhas, G-d announces the reward granted to Pinhas for his act, and also commands Beneh Yisrael to wage a war of revenge against Midyan.

The incident of Ba’alPe’or was a scheme devised by Bilam, the gentile prophet who, as we read in last week’s Parasha, ParashatBalak, was summoned by the king Moab to curse Beneh Yisrael. After Bilam saw that he could not curse Beneh Yisrael, as G-d repeatedly changed his curses into blessings, he advised the king of Moab to lead Beneh Yisrael to sin by luring them to commit immorality and worship Pe’or.

The HatamSofer (Rav Moshe Sofer of Pressburg, 1762-1839) offers a fascinating explanation for why Bilam chose this particular method. His explanation is based on an intriguing passage in the Gemara (Berachot 7), which tells that Bilam knew the precise moment each day when G-d becomes angry. His plan was to seize that moment and curse Beneh Yisrael at that time. However, G-d never became angry during the period when Bilam attempted to curse Beneh Yisrael, and so his efforts failed.

Why does G-d become angry each day?

The Gemara explains that G-d becomes angry each day when the sun rises and the pagan kings of the world remove their crowns and worship the sun. Elaborating on the Gemara’s explanation, the HatamSofer writes that since the sun each day becomes an object of idol worship, all the food on earth is tainted with idolatry. After all, all food is grown through sunlight, and thus all food is produced, partially, through an object of pagan worship. This is why G-d is angry each day – because every person on earth is indirectly sustained through idolatry.

And this is why G-d could not get angry at Beneh Yisrael in the wilderness. They were sustained by the manna, the miraculous food which fell each morning from the heavens. Their food was not a product of any object of idolatry, and so they escaped G-d’s anger.

Upon realizing this fatal flaw in his strategy, Bilam came up with a plan: to lure Beneh Yisrael to worship Pe’or. Our Sages teach that Pe’or was an especially bizarre form of idolatry, as the statue was worshipped by its followers defecating on it. As such, Beneh Yisrael were biologically incapable of this worship. The manna, our Sages tell us, was completely absorbed by the body, producing no waste whatsoever. Therefore, as the women of Moab enticed Beneh Yisrael to worship Pe’or, they needed to feed them food and wine. Beneh Yisrael thus became like all other people – sustained by food produced, in part, by sunlight – and they were thus exposed to G-d’s anger. Sure enough, 24,000 people perished.

The HatamSofer’s insight helps explain a seemingly peculiar comment of the Gemara later in MasechetBerachot. The Gemara teaches that if a person prays Shaharit in the morning “Ke’vatakin” – meaning, he begins the Amida at the moment of sunrise – then he is assured protection from harm throughout the day. Why should a person earn such protection simply for reciting the Amida at the moment of sunrise? The answer is that he thereby proclaims G-d’s rule and kingship over the earth before the idolaters have a chance to worship the sun. The way we avoid G-d’s anger is by standing before Him in prayer and proclaiming our devotion to Him before we can be tainted by the pagan worship of the world’s idolaters.

While the notion of “sun worship” might seem like an ancient phenomenon that has no bearing on us today, the truth is that this concept is extremely relevant to contemporary Jewish life. We might draw an analogy to a devoted, hard-working wife who spends an afternoon preparing a scrumptious, nutritious dinner for her family.

After dinner, the husband turns to the housekeeper and thanks her for dinner. The wife, rightfully, reacts with fury over her husband’s giving somebody else the credit for her hard work. G-d similarly reacts angrily when we credit other forces for His handiwork. He gets angry when He sees people worshipping the sun, and neglecting to recognize Him as the Creator and sole Ruler over the earth.

And this phenomenon is no less prevalent today than it was in the times of Bilam. Most people today deny G-d’s existence and do not acknowledge Him as the Creator and King over the world. This arouses His anger, each and every day. The way we avoid His anger is by emphatically resisting this trend, and loudly proclaiming His existence. The more we speak about G-d and devote ourselves to His service, the more successful we are in opposing modern-day “sun worship.” We then continue the work of Pinhas, who stood up to oppose the worship of Pe’or, and become worthy of the great reward promised to him by the Almighty: “Behold, I am giving him My covenant of peace.”