

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Ya'akov *ben Aryeh Leib a"h*  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

## In Style

## PARSHAS PINCHAS 5777

The *parshah* opens up with words of praise for Pinchas, whose act of zealotry put an end to what had been Yisrael's disgrace: וַיְדַבֵּר ד' אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר פִּינְחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הַשֵּׁיב – “And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas the son of Elazar, son of Aharon the Kohein, has removed My wrath from B'nei Yisrael through his avenging My jealousy amongst them; and thus I have not destroyed B'nei Yisrael in My jealousy” (*Bamidbar 25:10,11*). Pinchas's immediate target, of course, was Zimri, who had consorted with a Midianite; but the whole ordeal took place in the context of the nation's degenerative involvement of the idolatrous cult of Ba'al Pe'or.

### Just Plain Weird – and Repulsive

While any form of idol worship, from a purely logical perspective, is quite strange, the parameters of this particular form are just outright bizarre. Mainly for purposes of adjudication (i.e., to prosecute a practitioner), the Mishnah outlines the basic format of its worship (*Sanhedrin 7:6*):

הַפּוֹעֵר עֲצָמוֹ לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר, זֶה הוּא עֲבוֹדָתוֹ.

“One who takes care of his needs in front of Ba'al Pe'or – this is (the standard form of) its service.”

Now, as can be discerned, the details surrounding this particular subject can be somewhat disturbing. And yet Chazal do not desist from disclosing them, for, as we shall yet see, some critical lessons are conveyed thereby.

On the topic of “disturbing,” in any event, is the fact that Klal Yisrael themselves could have somehow been enticed to engage in this macabre rite. Highlighting the wonder of it all, the Gemara (*Sanhedrin 64a*) relates the following account:

R' Yehudah said in the name of Rav: “An incident occurred in which a certain gentile woman (of idolatrous beliefs) became extremely ill. She declared: ‘If I ever recover from my sickness, I will go and worship every type of idol in the world.’

She (eventually) did recover and began to visit and worship every type of idol in the world. When she encountered the idol of Ba'al Pe'or, she asked the attending priests: ‘How does one worship this?’ They said to her: ‘One eats beets and drinks (non-aged) spirits (to increase and loosen bowel mass) and then takes care of one's needs in front of it.’ (Upon hearing these instructions,) she proclaimed: ‘Better that my sickness should return than that I should go through this ritual.’

(R' Yehudah concludes his narrative with an admonition:) But you, O House of Yisrael, did not even conduct yourselves in like fashion! (For the Torah

characterizes the deeds of your ancestors thusly [*Bamidbar* 25:5]:) ‘*Ha’nitzmadim l’Ba’al Pe’or*’ – (meaning that instead of being repulsed, you actually attached yourselves to its worship) in the manner of a ‘*tzamid pasil*’ (lid tightly fastened upon a vessel).”

### **Irrational Pull**

The obvious question – really expressed so passionately in the above account by R’ Yehudah – is: how could they? One’s stomach turns upon contemplating the procedure involved; how, then, could anyone – let alone a substantial segment of B’nei Yisrael – succumb to this bizarre and sickening ritual? Its inclusion in the Torah and the elaboration by Chazal obviously suggest that there are important lessons to be learned thereby. What are they, exactly?

The Chafetz Chayim addresses this issue with characteristic insight and straightforwardness. Yes, the whole process is truly bizarre and disgusting. But isn’t this the nature of everyday life? There is something in the world known as “style.” This can encompass modes of dress, ideas, or behavior. They may in fact make no sense or even be repulsive in nature. But as soon as something catches on as “the latest fad,” all of a sudden, the herd is seized by the craze and follows suit. Sometimes the matter may involve something relatively benign; but often, it can be much more serious and damaging. But still and all, it matters not to the collective society. As soon as “everyone else is doing it,” it becomes an accepted mode of behavior.

This, then, is a crucial lesson of the Ba’al Pe’or episode. It reminds us of the inherent “worth” and character of many of these “latest fads.” And in our times, unfortunately, we see just how pervasive and pernicious this power may be. As with Pe’or, the most unnatural and indecent forms of behavior can become accepted as a new norm.

In a similar vein, it is also a reminder of the nature of the *yetzer hara* – the evil inclination. When expounding on the subject, R’ Nassan Wachtfogel, late Mashgiach of Bais Medrash Govoha, would explain that in fact there are two types of *yetzer haras*: One is an evil inclination of the “*pnim*” (internal), and one is of the “*chutz*” (external). The *yetzer hara* of the *p’nim* is that force within a person that arouses temptation and seeks to entice him to transgress. The *yetzer hara* of the *chutz* is what we refer to as “peer pressure”; i.e., the pull of “the street” and the desire to fit in with one’s surroundings. And there is a fundamental and sobering difference between the two. Each, in its own right, is quite powerful. The *yetzer hara* of the *p’nim*, however, can be vanquished; it may be a difficult struggle, but one that ultimately can be won. But the *yetzer hara* of the *chutz* is a different story entirely. It presents a pull that simply cannot be resisted.

Thus we may understand how it is possible for so many to be entrapped by and gravitate toward such nonsensical evil. And the only counsel, of course, is to seek out surroundings where the pull of the environment is a pure and wholesome one.

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