



## BAMIDBAR

Balak/17 Taamuz

Tammuz 17 and July 4: Are You Independent?

June 30, 2018

## TAMMUZ 17 AND JULY 4 ARE YOU INDEPENDENT?

### ABSTRACT

Are you free?

The convergence of Tammuz 17 on this Shabbat and July 4th later this week challenges us to answer a basic question about the state of our lives today: Are we dependent or independent?

We associate independence with doing whatever we like. But can a country, can anyone, be truly independent?

Today is Tammuz 17, when the walls of Jerusalem were breached. What is the antidote to destruction and devastation? Perhaps true independence?

Further, this week's Torah reading teaches us something about true freedom. It does so via the story of a disgusting idol named Baal Peor. The cult of Baal Peor involved the worship of waste – literally. Why in the world would intelligent Jews be attracted to such a despicable form of idol worship?!

What can we learn from this narrative about overcoming destruction, stress and wastefulness, and bringing about the Ultimate Redemption?

This sermon demonstrates how to focus on what matters and not on the “waste” in our lives. By removing all of life's refuse we find the true essence of a free and independent life.

### 1. The Divine Image (Joke)

Rebecca was a kindergarten teacher. One day, during her art lesson, as she was walking around the class observing the children while they were drawing, she stopped at little Leah's desk. Leah was working very diligently at her work.

Rebecca said, “What are you drawing, Leah?”

Leah replied, “I'm drawing G-d, teacher.”

Rebecca paused and then said, “But, my dear Leah, no one knows what G-d looks like.”

Without looking up from her work, Leah replied, “They will in a minute.”

## 2. Are You Independent? Is *Anyone* Independent?

This joke conveys two points which I would like to discuss today: 1) the divine image and, 2) true independence.

Is true freedom the ability to ignore the teacher’s (and the world’s) assertions and draw G-d however we see fit? Or is true independence dependent on certain axioms and principles?

Today is the 17th of Tammuz, which is usually a fast day. But because it is the spirited day of Shabbat, which prohibits and supplants any mourning, the fast is postponed until tomorrow, Sunday.

Shabbat is pleasurable and joyful, holy and celebrated. But on the 17th of Tammuz several sad events occurred (five to be specific). First, on this day, 3,330 years ago, Moses broke the Tablets of the Ten Commandments after the Sin of the Golden Calf. Then, around 2,400 years ago, the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Babylonians in advance of the eventual destruction of the First Temple. On the same day (according to some opinions), around 2,000 years ago, the walls of Jerusalem were once again breached, this time by the Romans, leading to the destruction of the Second Temple.

Today on Shabbat we do not fast or mourn, but rather commit to obliterate any sadness with the light of wholesome joy.

By way of Divine Providence surely, this day – which begins the Three Weeks – falls out close to July 4th, Independence Day in the United States of America. Let the fireworks begin.

With the confluence of the Three Weeks, beginning with Tammuz 17, and July 4th, is there a better time to discuss the “image” of G-d and our inherent dependence or independence as human beings?

Independence Day is a bit of a misnomer. Are we – is anybody really – ever truly independent? Don’t we have to breathe, eat and sleep? Doesn’t America require trade agreements and diplomacy? What then is the meaning of, and secret to, independence?

And how can this independence help us turn the days of sadness and destruction of the three weeks, into days of redemption and rejoicing?

### 3. Idolatry

The Torah prohibits idolatry. This is no shocking revelation. The second of the Ten Commandments states this unequivocally.

Today, for Jews, idolatry isn't the most enticing of sins. If Jews had to choose a "favorite" sin, supplication to a stone or bewailing to a statue would not be high on the list; there are far more tempting things to do than kneel before a false deity.

But since the Torah is eternal, its prohibition against idol worship must be applicable in some way even today, when most everyone has no desire to worship idols in the first place. So what relevance can be found in the baffling idols of a bygone era and the prohibition against serving them?

### 4. History's Most Bizarre Idol

First, let us allow the Torah to introduce us – in this week's reading – to one of the most bizarre idol worships in the history of bizarre idol worshipping.

We just read about Israel's cozying up to the Moabite nation. This was the inevitable gateway into the idolatrous practice of these Moabites.

The final reading of our portion, *Parshat Balak*, describes a particularly strange, mind-boggling, wholly insane and disgusting practice:

*Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of the Moabites. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Baal Peor, and the anger of the Lord flared against Israel.<sup>1</sup>*

What is this *Baal Peor*?

The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, cites the Midrash Sifrei, explains that the word *peor* means to "uncover/bare/open." *Baal Peor* was an idol to which the people would turn their backs, bend down, bare and relieve themselves by way of supplication.

Yes, as sickening as it sounds, defecation was the form of worship that this cult involved! It's undignified to discuss this in a synagogue on Shabbat but this is what we just read in the Torah. And the Talmud<sup>2</sup> elaborates on this putrid practice and its nuances.

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 25:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 64a.

## 5. Israel's Madness

But how could it be that the Nation of Israel – an intelligent people! – attached itself to such a crude practice?

Did Israel go completely mad? The Jewish people just had a transcendent encounter with the Creator of the Universe at Mount Sinai, and now they stoop to such undignified and demeaning behavior? We were just freed from Egypt, by the great hand of the Almighty, and we literally turn our back on all that in favor of rank fetidness?

Okay, even if we didn't want the responsibility of being a light unto the nations, of being a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, of being chosen to change the world, how could we replace that high ideal with something so base and decrepit? The thought is utterly heartbreaking.

And we are talking about our esteemed ancestors!

Additionally, it states in the Book of Joshua: *Is the iniquity of Peor too little for us, from which we have not been cleansed until this day.*<sup>3</sup>

Is it remotely possible that we, Israel, have not been cleansed of this shameful behavior until this day? I don't know anyone that would ever dream of performing such a demeaning and disgusting act. In what form, then, does the idolatry of *Baal Peor* exist today in our personal lives, and how is the prohibition against its service relevant to us who would never in our wildest nightmares consider such behavior?

## 6. Kabbalistic / Psychological Explanation

The mystical texts of Kabbalah and Chassidut explain the origins and deeper psychology of *Baal Peor*.<sup>4</sup>

Every form of energy in existence consists of two general components: 1) a digestible core, which is internalized and becomes life and vigor, and 2) an indigestible byproduct, waste which is released and becomes fertilizer for some other – and lower – form of growth.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua 22:17.

<sup>4</sup> See Likkutei Torah, Vaetchanan 11c. Likkutei Sichot, vol. 18, pp. 297, and citations there.

There are many examples for this. Our human bodies internalize the healthy nutritious elements of the food we digest, and we release the waste elements.

Another example comes from construction: If you ever walked by a construction site you know that its very dirty and dusty – soot and waste everywhere. This is a byproduct and side effect of building.

Of course, the purpose is to build a beautiful structure, not to create a mess. But when you build something positive, there will always be waste and junk as a byproduct.

Now, anyone in their right mind would prefer the building over the resulting garbage and dust. If someone is offered the building, and instead chooses to take all the garbage that is leftover from the construction, you would surely think that person mad.

Yet, this was *Baal Peor*: The worship of waste and byproducts. A cult of worshipping the peel, instead of the fruit.

The Master of the Universe constructed a beautiful world, filled with fruits and flowers, both literally and figuratively. But fruits and flowers come with peels and leaves. A rose grows among thorns. Imagine someone worshipping the peel and discarding the fruit!

This world – and existence as a whole – is comprised of primary elements that are meant to be used and developed. Everything built in this material world, which conceals the divine energy within it, will inevitably release secondary elements, including “waste products,” which are called *kelipot* – shells and husks – that are only meant to serve as protectors, not as an end to themselves. On their own they are waste and meant to be discarded, as we consume the fruit within.

The material universe – the money we make, the food we eat, our physical possessions – are but means for spiritual growth and bringing light to the world. Our bodies are meant to be vehicles for our soul’s expression, carrying and fulfilling our soul’s mission on earth.

Imagine the distortion of worshipping materialism as an end in itself. Imagine someone craving a potato peel instead of the potato, or the orange peel instead of the orange. That is like worshipping the waste and forgetting that it is only a byproduct of a great edifice.

The Master built a magnificent palace, a world which we are charged to turn into a divine

home, transforming matter into energy, filling the world with spirituality, light and energy. Suddenly, a *Baal Peor* emerges and says “No, come worship the droppings and waste of this beautiful ideal!”

And the Jews, thinking that perhaps this physical world, these droppings, are the purpose, fell for *Baal Peor's* claims. Instead of cleaving to the Master Builder of the House, Israel began to desire and crave the physical droppings of the construction.

And this sad and very human craving continues to this day. We worship money and material objects, though they are only the means and the husks to reach and uncover the beautiful divine fruits within. All too often, we desire the instantly gratifying bliss of waste products – the shells and husks – instead of the eternal product itself, which requires commitment.

We choose the temporary over the eternal; temporary pleasure from mercurial matters over permanent joy from eternal values.

## 7. Analogy from the Human Body

In his classic *Likkutei Sichot*, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains this abstract idea with a biological analogy.<sup>5</sup>

The healthy human body works in a very orderly fashion: when it consumes food for its own sustenance, the choicest parts that are rich in nutrients, energy, vitamins, minerals, and the like are retained, digested and converted into the fabric of the human organism, becoming part of life and growing the enterprise of living. Everything else, the byproducts, are, by way of the intestinal systems, siphoned off and released from the human body.

The same is true, in a conceptual and abstract form, with the organism that is the cosmic chain of creation. The sustenance from the Creator is the food of creation. The choicest, most spiritual, most energizing elements are digested in the highest levels and the byproducts are released and move on to the level below.

This happens on every level until we reach the lowest level, our physical world, where all that we see and experience with our bodies of flesh and blood is the least spiritual, least energized,

<sup>5</sup> Likkutei Sichot, vol. 4 pp. 1327-1328.

least nutritious, least nourishing leftovers called physical matter.

The human being, infused with the breath of life and created in the Divine Image, craves and desires the nutritious, mineral-rich sustenance of the higher spiritual levels above. This is achieved by reaching beyond the waste of this world into the higher truth and consciousness of the Divine.

When a person worships the droppings, waste and byproduct instead, it is called worshipping *Baal Peor*. And this is an everlasting illness, *from which we have not been cleansed until this day*.

## 8. Personal Lesson

One can hypothetically argue that perhaps we *should* cleave more to the physical droppings of the spiritual ideal than to the spiritual ideal itself. After all, are we not living in a physical world and are we not meant to engage with and transform *this* world?

Says the Torah: “The only way to transform this world – to take the sediment, the waste, the byproduct that is matter and turn it into spirit – is by connecting to the source of all matter and to the very entity that makes anything happen: G-d Himself.

Let me suggest a simple, practical exercise to cause a paradigm shift in your life and implement this ideal.

Think about this: You work, right? Why? To make money and support your family. Of course, you also want to accomplish, achieve and fulfill your potential, but not at the expense of earning money and supporting your loved ones. Work stresses you out. As do your bills, house expenses, maintenance, insurance, medical bills, tuition, etc. etc.

Worshipping *Baal Peor* in our lives today is worshipping all of these bills, worries, work-related stresses and making them the central focus of your life! Does that make sense? Wouldn't that depress anyone?!

But if for a moment, you stop and think that all of these material challenges are simply a byproduct of a construction site, simply the leftovers from the nutrients in the food, then you realize and accept that the Creator of the World, the Master of the Universe, will provide you with exactly what you need. He will send down enough blessing (and more) to achieve your purpose



here on earth. All you have to do is connect your life to the Divine and trust G-d, your Creator, who provides all your needs.

Such an attitude shifts your entire paradigm and the focus of your life. You focus on the end, not the means, on the fruit not the shell. Instead of worrying about your bills, you worry about studying Torah ... instead of stressing out about work, you devote your time to do another mitzvah ... instead of driving yourself mad, you are driven to be the best possible spouse, parent, child, boss, employee, friend, congregant, Jew, human being.

Suddenly, *Baal Peor* is seen for the pile of refuse that it is, and you refuse to value and worship such garbage.

## 9. There Must Be A Pony In Here Somewhere! (Story)

Parents were blessed with twin boys. As the twins got older, they began developing extreme personalities: one was a chronic pessimist, the other an eternal optimist. The concerned parents took the twins to a psychiatrist.

First the psychiatrist attended to the pessimist. Trying to brighten his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with brand-new toys. But instead of yelping with delight, the little boy burst into tears. “What’s the matter?” the psychiatrist asked, baffled. “Don’t you want to play with any of the toys?” “Yes,” the little boy bawled, “but if I did, I’d only break them.”

Next the psychiatrist addressed the optimist. Trying to make him be more realistic, the psychiatrist took him to a barn piled to the ceiling with horse manure. But instead of wrinkling his nose in disgust, the optimist emitted a yelp of delight. Then he clambered to the top of the pile, dropped to his knees, and began gleefully digging out scoop after scoop with his bare hands. “What do you think you’re doing?” the psychiatrist asked, just as baffled by the optimist as he had been by the pessimist. “With all this manure,” the little boy replied, beaming, “there must be a pony in here somewhere!”<sup>6</sup>

The same is true of life. Remove the junk and find the source.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://gregghake.com/2010/02/the-pony-in-the-dung-heap-ronald-reagan-eleanor-roosevelt-and-you/>

## 10. Heap of Junk (Joke)

One day, little Rachel asked her mother, “Mommy, what happens to old cars when they stop working?”

“Someone sells them to your father,” replied her mother.

## 11. Firsthand Quality vs. Secondhand Droppings (Conclusion)

There is a chain to existence. The only question is are you at the end of the chain, receiving all the leftovers and byproducts and used cars, or are you connected to the beginning of the chain where everything is new, innovative, and energized?

Our job in this world is relatively simple: drop the droppings and reach for the sustenance, drop what is substandard and grasp the substance.

This now brings us around full circle, to the 17th of Tammuz, when the walls of Jerusalem were breached and our destructive exile commenced, and also to Independence Day celebrated this week here in the United States of America.

The secret to independence is to be dependent on the only thing that is independent. And the only thing that is truly independent is G-d.

Idol worship, of any kind, is worshipping a limited, often disgusting, second-hand by-product instead of connecting to the one thing that is eternal and illuminating. *Baal Peor* exemplifies this myopic way of living: literally worshipping the waste product of substance over the substance itself; literally and devastatingly dedicating energy and resources to droppings instead of the higher ideal from which they originated.

The very meaning of exile is displacement. Displacement from what? From our true priorities, from our life’s purpose and mission. Displacement from focusing on our inner fruit – our souls – and instead obsessing over the petty details and trivial minutiae.

The breaching of the walls of Jerusalem on this 17th of Tammuz, which led to the Temple’s destruction, is remembered to this day as the saddest period in the Jewish calendar, because it resulted from the baseless hatred people showed to each other. *Sinas chinam*, baseless hatred, is essentially a

result of being self-absorbed and forgetting about everybody but yourself. That is another form of *Baal Peor* – worshipping the byproduct of selfish materialism, instead of appreciating that we are part of a greater whole and that we all need each other.

When we worship the externals, we end up with the holy walls being breached and dissonance and displacement in all its forms. This is called *galut*, exile, disconnection.

The antidote to this is connection – reconnecting to our purpose, to the end goal, to the highest ideal, to the Master of the Universe, the source of our ultimate substance and sustenance.

The cure for waste, muck and destruction, is to connect to the source of all life, beauty, wholeness and holiness.

And this is also the secret of true independence, the secret the Founding Fathers (and mothers) recognized when establishing the United States of America, which we celebrate on Independence Day:

Connecting to something higher than yourself, connecting to something that is truly independent is the only way to be and remain truly independent.

As they etched into the Declaration of Independence: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

True and unalienable human rights and independence are rooted and based on the fact that the Creator – the only true Independent entity – created us all as equals and endowed us with these rights.

The only entity that is truly independent is G-d Almighty – and in G-d We Trust!

Shabbat Shalom!

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