



Sicha Summary

Chelek 18 | Balak | Sichah 3

The Context:

Thousands of Jewish men had been seduced by Midianite women, and began to worship the idol Baal Peor. A plague swept through the camp, and Moshe instructed the judges to sentence the perpetrators to death. The members of the tribe of Shimon begged their leader, Zimri, to do something in light of their impending death sentence.

Zimri took the Midianite princess, Cozbi, and had relations with her before Moshe and the Jewish people.

Zimri confronted Moshe and asked, “Is this woman forbidden or permitted? And if you say that she is forbidden, as for the daughter of Yisro [Tziporah] who you married, who permitted her to you? The *halachah* [regarding the proper course of action when encountering a Jewish man having relations with a gentile woman] eluded Moshe.

Pinchas then arose and killed Zimri and Cozbi, and the plague ceased. (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

The Question:

Rashi explains that Moshe married Tziporah before the Giving of the Torah, when the Children of Israel were not yet considered Jewish — they were considered Noahides. At the Giving of the Torah, all the Jews underwent a

conversion, as did Tziporah. Thus, Moshe was allowed to marry Tziporah both before and after the Giving of the Torah.

- 1) If this was the case, why was Zimri, a leader among the people, not aware of such an obvious distinction?
- 2) And why did Moshe not respond with this explanation, but instead, he remain silent!?

The Explanation:

A *kohen* is forbidden to marry a convert because they come from a culture that is “steeped in immorality.” (*Kiddushin* 78a, *Tosfos to Yavamos 61a* s.v. “*ein*”) According to some opinions, Moshe was considered a *kohen*. (*Zevachim* 102a)

This was the substance of Zimri’s attack on Moshe: Presumably, Zimri was forbidden to cohabit with Cozbi because she was Midianite, a promiscuous tribe. Why, then, Zimri wondered, could Moshe, a *kohen*, marry his convert wife Tziporah, who also came from a promiscuous background, after the giving of the Torah? This explains the nuance of Zimri’s complaint.

What was Moshe’s justification?

The Talmud rules that if an ordinary *kohen* betrothed a widow, and then was appointed as High Priest, who is forbidden to marry a widow, he may complete the marriage. (*Yevamos* 61a) Because the marriage began legally, it can be completed.

Moshe also began his marriage legally, because Tziporah was permitted to him before the Giving of the Torah when they all had the status of Noahides. Indeed, the Talmud infers that Moshe’s parents, Amram and Yocheved, practiced a form of legal *halachic* marriage. (*Sotah* 13a) Even before the Giving of the Torah, the Jewish people married with the legal mechanism of *kiddushin*.

It follows that Moshe was already married to Tzipporah legally. Therefore, he could remain married to her even after his elevation to *kohen* status.

Moshe, however, could not present this argument to Zimri because the law states that a sage involved in a dispute cannot invoke a scriptural interpretation passed down through tradition to defend himself. (*Ramah to Yoreh Deah*, end of 242)

The Lesson:

When a person poses a challenge not for the sake of seeking the truth, but rather, to permit himself the object of his desire, he does not merit an answer. The proper response is to act in defense of G-d's honor, as Pinchas did with his swift action.

In our generation, the Previous Rebbe set the example for how to respond to disrespectful challenges. Even though people questioned the value and validity of sacrificing one's life for minor matters of law and Jewish life, he persisted and reached out to others with radical love.