

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.

In our modern world, any lack of access to modern technology can be very frustrating. My Internet connection went out on Thursday afternoon. Bill Landau uploaded what I had completed by Thursday afternoon. My Internet has been working again since 4 p.m. on Friday, so I am fortunate to post late – but still before Shabbas.

Of all the pairings of parshot that we occasionally encounter, Chukat and Balak to me seem the most thematically challenging to consider together. Chukat opens with Parah Adumah, the procedure of regaining ritual purity after contact with a dead body. This chapter follows logically after Shelach and Korach, when many thousands of Jews died (and therefore those who cared for the deceased became ritually impure). After Parah Adumah, the discussion of the generation of the Exodus ceases, and the Torah picks up immediately 38 years later, with the events of the generation that Yeshoshua led into the land. These events include the death of Miriam and Aharon and the events that caused God to tell Moshe and Aharon that their period of leadership was over, that Yehoshua and Elazar would replace them. B'Nai Yisrael travel and reach Moab, on the Jordan River, across (east) from Jericho.

At this point, we have a strange parsha. Balak, who had been a powerful warrior and became the king of Moab, feared that B'Nai Yisrael were about to conquer his nation. Balak therefore approached Balaam, an evil prophet from Mesopotamia, to hire him to curse the Jews so Moab would be able to defeat them in battle. What is strange about Balak is that the entire parsha, until the final nine pasookim (which begin the next story, about Pinchas), involves only non-Jews. Balak, Bilaam, Bilaam's donkey, and the people they encounter do not include any Jews. While the Moabites, Midianites, and Bilaam's entourage plot against the Jews, Moshe and B'Nai Yisrael go about their activities completely unaware of the plotting going on around them. The Midrash focuses on many parallels between Avraham and Bilaam. Studying the two men together provides many insights on both of them.

Parah Adumah connects to more than 15,000 deaths in Korach (plus the death sentence to virtually all the adults of the generation of the Exodus in Shelach). Red appears several times in the ritual – an all red cow, red blood, brownish red earth, etc. The Torah calls the mixture of water and ashes of the Parah Adumah "waters of niddah" – a word that means menstruation but also goes back to its original mention of "niddah" in the Torah, the punishment that Cain receives for killing his brother (the first death in the Torah, when he becomes a wanderer without a place). By reminding us of Cain's murder of his brother, Rabbi David Fohrman observes that one reason for the ritual of Parah Adumah is to remind us of the horror of death.

After the 38 year gap, the Torah resumes with the stories of the death of Miriam, the punishment of Moshe and Aharon, death of Aharon, and word to Moshe that he will die soon. The theme of death is obvious here as well. Commentators from the Rishonim to contemporary have been trying to explain the sin that Moshe and Aharon committed. Whatever the sin, God ended their leadership, sentenced them to death without entering the land, and turned over leadership to Yehoshua and Elazar. Rabbi Fohrman's interpretation makes a lot of sense to me. In every event involving Miriam and water, she had complete faith that God would find a solution, even if she did not know how He would accomplish saving the Jews. With complete faith, she put her baby brother in a teva and pushed him into the Nile. She led the women in songs at the Sea of Reeds (one before and a second after crossing the sea.)

After B'Nai Yisrael crossed the Sea of Reeds, there were three crises over lack of water in the Midbar. For the first two, Miriam was present. She encouraged her brother to trust in God when the people encountered bitter water, and she was confident that God would find a way to bring water from a rock when God told Moshe to hit a rock to get water. Thirty-eight years later, God wanted Moshe to teach Miriam's lesson of complete faith to the new generation, at Mer Merivah. God wanted Moshe and Aharon to go to the rock that had given water for nearly 40 years (until Miriam died), tell the people to trust in Hashem, and ask the rock to give water. God wanted Moshe to perform a Kiddush Hashem, a lesson of God's power and mercy, that He would provide as long as the people had faith and asked Him to help them. Showing anger and hitting the rock did not teach this lesson at a time when a new generation needed to learn the lesson of true faith.

Our community had a vivid example of the themes of coping with death and learning complete faith in Hashem on Monday with a large gathering at Mt. Lebanon Cemetery for the funeral of Iran Kohan, beloved wife of Mehrdad Kohan, and mother of Yosef and Sharine Kohan. Iran, born a Kohen and wife of a Kohen, originally from Iran, was a beloved wife, sister, and mother in our community for many years. Generations of young children knew her as Morah Irene, the favorite teacher of most students who were fortunate enough to be in her classes. Iran loved nothing more than inviting people to her home for Shabbas and Yom Tov meals – and telling everyone how fortunate she was that Hashem had given her everything. Iran had the complete faith of Miriam – the faith that God had wanted Moshe and Aharon to show the people at Mer Merivah. There could not have been a better Devar Torah on Chukat than learning from the life and legacy of Iran Kohan.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers. Note: Beth Sholom has additional names, including coronavirus victims, on a Tehillim list.

Hannah & Alan

Drasha: Parshas Chukat: Symbolism over Substance by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1999

In one of the most difficult episodes in the Torah, this week we read how Moshe loses his entitlement to enter the Land he so desired to inherit. What happened is as follows: during the desert journey, a miraculous well traveled with the Jews. This well existed in the merit of Miriam. When she died, it ceased to flow. The Jews complained bitterly that they were thirsty. Hashem commanded Moshe to "take his staff and speak to the rock," thereupon the rock would disgorge water to nourish a parched people. Moshe did not end up speaking to the rock. The nation was upset and impatient. When Moshe chose the wrong rock they chided him. "He in turn turned to them and said, "Listen you rebellious folk. Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?" (Numbers 20:10) Immediately Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it and water flowed from it.

Hashem is angered by Moshe's actions. "Because you have not sanctified me in the eyes of the nation, you will not enter the the land of Israel. (Numbers 20:12) Rashi, the classic medieval commentator, departs from his standard text-based explanation and bases his explanation of this verse upon the Midrash. "Imagine," said Hashem, "if the Jewish nation would have seen that scenario. A rock, that does not talk nor hear and does not need sustenance, produces water by the request of the Almighty. Surely, they would have taken heart when Hashem speaks to them! The impact would have been far more reaching!

Moshe's prelude to his action is noteworthy: "Listen, you rebellious folk. Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?"

The nation just wanted water, they did not ask for miracles or rock-wells. It was Hashem who told Moshe to approach the rock. Moshe knew that the water would come. Then why was his admonition given in the inquisitive mode, rather it should have been decreed in the declarative mode! Listen you rebellious folk! I am going to extract water from a rock? It seems that Moshe, himself, (Heaven-forbid) doubted his own authority. (Though many commentaries explain the question as rhetorical.)

Surely, the rock-water connection cannot be taken at face value. All who have merely dappled in the writing of our sages are familiar with the water as Torah and the rock dry and parched. Obviously, Hashem meant to send a message that even the driest stone can produce water. Why then did Moshe not play on that lesson to the rebellious folk and tell them that even the driest amongst them could become a wellspring of Torah?

Reb Shraga Faivel Mendelovitz was the founder of Yeshiva Torah Voda'ath. Once he stayed in Miami for Shabbos at the home of a former student. The man escorted the Rebbe home from synagogue, but when he opened the door the young man was shocked and embarrassed. His wife, exhausted from a week's worth of child rearing, and the responsibility of keeping a home was sprawled on the couch. The Shabbos table was half-set, the dishes placed in a pile next to the kiddush cup and wine. In front of the head seat were two large challos sitting uncovered.

The custom is to cover the challos when making kiddush. As the blessing over bread normally precedes that of wine it is a somewhat an metaphorical embarrassment to the bread thus it is covered during the kiddush.

The student, who was embarrassed at the state of affairs, called out to his wife in a somewhat demeaning manner. "Please let us prepare the table in its entirety." Turning to his mentor, he exclaimed, "I'm sure that leaving the bread uncovered was an oversight! Everyone knows," he exclaimed shifting his self-inflicted embarrassment upon his wife, "that we must cover the challah before the kiddush.

Reb Mendelovitz was annoyed at the man's self-righteous behavior and turned to him. "Over the years, I have heard many problems that people faced. Students, couples, and adults from all walks of life have entered my office to discuss their personal situations with me. Not once did a challah ever enter my office, suffering an inferiority complex because it was left uncovered during kiddush! Do you know why?

Because we are not concerned with the challah! We are concerned with making ourselves cognizant of feelings. We worry about challahs because the goal is to worry about people. How than can you embarrass your wife over not covering the challah when the act of covering is supposed to train you in sensitivity?"

Moshe understood the valuable lesson that Hashem wanted to teach His nation. But if all that was on their minds was water to drink and not the great lessons for eternity, he questioned his mission. Listen you rebellious folk," he questioned. "Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?" Do you expect that the lessons of the great parable can be taught to those whose minds are only set on the parable itself? Perhaps that is why Moshe cast the great lessons aside and hit the rock, thus disobeying Hashem's initial command. Perhaps he felt that a nation that focuses solely on the flow of drinking water couldn't understand the wellsprings of its spirituality.

In the corporeal world that our sages call a "foyer to the World To Come," we must realize that everything is a preparation for eternity. All of life's experiences can teach us how to grow and how to strive. But like extracting water from a well, we must all dig a little deeper.

Good Shabbos!

A Thought on the Parsha (Balak): Oh, Say Can You See?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2016, 2020

Speech is central in the story of Balak and Balaam, from Balaam's blessings to the talking donkey. But as much as this parasha is about talking, it is also about seeing.

“And Balak the son of Beor saw, va’yar, all that Israel had done to the Amorites.” (Bamidbar 22:2). Balak not only saw what Israel had done to the Amorites, he saw it in a particular way. He saw a threat, and he responded accordingly. Had he been watching more carefully, he would have seen how the Israelites skirted the edge of his territory to avoid engaging his people in battle (see Devarim 2:8–13, already implicit in Bamidbar 21:11–13). This whole story, then, is the result of his failure to see correctly.

Balaam also fails to see clearly. What he sees is informed not by fear, however, but by ego and ambition. Balaam is certainly prepared to obey God. Although he wants to go with Balak’s messengers, he chooses not to, saying, “God will not let me go with you” (22:13). And on their second visit, he tells them, “I cannot do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the Lord my God” (22:18). But it is clear what he really wants to be doing. As any parent of a teenager knows, there is big difference between reluctant compliance and enthusiastic participation. How does a person move from submitting and obeying to embracing his charge? By internalizing the values and priorities of the other, by seeing as the other sees.

It is instructive in this regard to compare Balaam’s response to God’s command with that of Avraham. When God commands Avraham to leave his faraway land, God does not simply tell him to go to Canaan. God says: “go to the land asher ar’ekha, that I will show you.” God was teaching Avraham that a person cannot simply obey God. Rather, it is our duty to see what God is showing us; we must learn to see the world as God sees it, particularly when the task is arduous and the challenge is great.

In contrast, Balaam is told by God not to go, lo teileikh rather than lekh lekha. Here, mere passive compliance would have sufficed, and yet Balaam resists and continues seeing things his own way. Balaam need not embrace God’s way of seeing to drive him to change the world as Avraham had before him, but he must at least embrace it sufficiently so as to not contribute to the evil in the world. God not only tells Balaam not to go, but why he should not go: “do not curse the people for they are blessed” (22:12). Balaam has been shown the true, deeper reality, but is determined to not see, to not internalize this vision as his own. As Rashi comments, “He saw that it was evil in God’s eyes, and yet he desired to go” (22:22).

But God isn’t done with Balaam’s education, for as Balaam goes on his way, his donkey rebels against him. The point of this bizarre story is clear: the donkey can see, but Balaam cannot. Three times the verse states, “va’taireh ha’aton,” “and the donkey saw.” A simple animal could see the deeper reality that Balaam could not. Remarkably, the verse only mentions God giving the donkey the ability to speak, indicating nothing miraculous about its ability to see the angel. Animals, as we know, can sometimes sense things we humans cannot, like an impending earthquake or even the impending death of an ill patient. Their interaction with the world is guided less by thoughts and emotions and more by acute senses able to perceive a more subtle, hidden reality. Animals are free of the subjective lens through which we view our experiences, filtering and shaping things for consistency with our worldview. The simple, unfiltered seeing of the donkey is like the seeing of a child, free from the rationalizations and self-deceptions of adults. This allows them to see what we so often cannot.

God now miraculously opens the eyes of Balaam so that he can see the angel, and the truth. God shows him how his arrogance, self-importance, and greed blind him to the truth. But does Balaam learn? Hardly. “Now, if it is evil in Your eyes, I will turn back,” he responds (22:34). It is still not evil in my eyes, he is saying to God. I understand that You think that it is evil, and if You tell me not to go, I am prepared to listen. You can make me obey, but You can’t make me agree. I will see it my way, not Your way.

At this stage, God allows for compromise. If Balaam can’t be taught to see rightly, God can at least make him say the right thing. God will force-feed him his lines, putting the very words in his mouth. There is a lesson to be learned here: even when we disagree with someone, we can still say the right thing. Sometimes the most important thing is simply to stop insisting that we are right. “Yes, dear” can be the two most important words in a marriage, for words have a peculiar power. The desired words can be helpful to the one hearing them, and they can also shape our own perception and change the way in which we see.

This is what eventually happens with Balaam. Knowing what it means to see through one’s own lens, Balak tries to make Balaam see in a way that is not accurate, but that serves his own ends. He takes Balaam to places where he will see only the “edge of the people,” not their totality or their blessedness, hoping that this partial, biased vision will allow Balaam to curse them (22:41, 23:13).

Choosing to see selectively is a key strategy in reinforcing the way we see the world. Consider how rarely we try to see the true complexity and scope of a matter, to move beyond the black and white and to appreciate all the nuances. It was initially thought that all the easily available information on the Internet would lead people to develop more informed and sophisticated views. The actual result was the opposite; what happened was a phenomenon known as “confirmation bias.” People chose to see only their own truth, seizing on information that reinforced their established position and filtering out the rest. It is so much easier to see selectively, to see only the “edge of the people.”

This was Balak’s plan. But the words Balaam utters, that God puts in his mouth, begin to have their effect. In his first two poetic prophecies, we hear him declaiming in words fed to him by God how the people are truly to be seen: “For I see them from the tops of mountains, and from the hills I behold them....He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has he seen perverseness in Israel” (23:9,21). These words start to seep in to his consciousness, so that by the third prophecy, he actually begins to believe them.

This is the turning point of the story. Balaam starts to see through the eyes of God: “And Balaam saw that it was good in the eyes of God to bless Israel” (24:1). Before, Balaam could only acknowledge that it was “bad in God’s eyes” to curse the people, but he refused to adopt that perspective. Now he sees that it is “good in God’s eyes” to bless the people, and rather than resist, he follows this vision and lets himself be led accordingly.

The words describing this pivotal moment are, “vayar ... ki tov,” “and he saw ... that it was good”. These words echo the very first act of seeing in the Torah: “Va’yar E-lohim ki tov,” “And God saw that it was good.” From the beginning of creation this is our mandate – to see as God does, to know what is truly good and what is not.

Balaam can finally see. He can lift up his eyes and see the people as they truly are (24:2). He declares that he can see “the vision of God” with “eyes open,” self descriptions thus far absent (24:3). And it is only now that he is filled with “the spirit of God.” He is not simply parroting words that have been forced into his mouth. He is elevated and inspired by what he sees, and when he speaks, he speaks from his heart. With this Balaam’s education is complete.

Sadly, the change proves to be short lived, as the remainder of the parasha bears out, for learning to see properly cannot be accomplished in an instant. Even when our eyes are open, we often resist and choose to remain blind. It is a life-long struggle to be the students of Avraham, to learn to see “the land that God will show you.” The keys are given to us in Parashat Balak: to see fully, not partially; to move beyond our biases and fears; to say what we know is right even if we do not yet believe it, knowing that this can help shape our vision and make us see as we know we should. In this way, we will not only resist the forces of evil, but we will be driven by the right vision to do good and to bring blessings into the world.

Shabbat Shalom!

Chukas -- Glad to Notice

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine © 2017, 2020 Teach 613

As the Jews neared the Promised Land, the inhabitants prepared to greet them in an ambush. The plan was that as the Jews passed through a certain valley, people would shoot down from the adjoining cliffs to destroy the Jews. G-d miraculously destroyed those enemies before they could hurt the Jewish people, but G-d was, so-to-speak, troubled that the Jews were totally unaware that they had been saved. "Who will go tell My children of the salvation so that they can appreciate just how much I love them?"

G-d decided that a river of blood should appear by the Jewish encampment so that they should be aware of the great losses that He had inflicted on their enemies. In this way, the Jews were apprised of their miraculous salvation.

The words, "Who will inform My children?" carry a great practical lesson. It is not that G-d needs a "Thank You." Rather, if the recipient isn't aware of the salvation, then he doesn't realize the loving relationship that G-d has with him.

The Talmud teaches, for example, that when a person gives a gift of goodwill to another person he should make sure that the recipient is aware of the gift. If one gives a gift and the recipient doesn't notice, then true goodwill has not been created. (This is the approach used by gifts. When charity is given, it is sometimes better to give it anonymously.)

Similarly, the Sages instituted many blessings during the course of the day, so that we should notice G-d's benevolence. Each morning, for example, we recite blessings on our abilities to see, to move our limbs, to stand up, and to walk. G-d's blessings to us are many. Until we recite those blessings, G-d so-to-speak wonders, "Will they notice? For all the blessings that I bestow upon them, will they notice and realize how much I love them?"

Unfortunately, there are times that people purposely take for granted the benevolence that G-d bestows. A Rebbe, who happens to be knowledgeable in biology and science, described an incident that occurred when he was in the delivery room, as his wife gave birth to their child. Upon realizing how many things have to go right simultaneously for the child to enter the world successfully, he exclaimed, "What a miracle." To which the nurse responded, "Yeah, nature is really cool, isn't it?"

I do indeed recall how, prior to the birth of one of our daughters, the nurse did a test and got a reading that she felt indicated some dangerous levels. She promptly ordered my wife onto a stretcher and ordered that an oxygen mask be attached to her mouth. Suddenly, the birthing experience took on an aura of significant concern, and when we were blessed with a healthy birth for mom and daughter it was something that we were enormously grateful for.

Sometimes, G-d goes to great lengths to help us notice the miracles He does, to make sure that we don't take blessings for granted. As we say in Tehillim: "G-d brings salvation. It is upon us to thank Him." Meaning, G-d grants the blessing. As for us, we are so glad to notice.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

Crowd Instinct, Personality Instinct: Blog

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel*

In his memoir, *The Torch in My Ear*, the Sephardic Jewish writer Elias Canetti (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981) reflects on an insight that came to him as a young man: "I realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct, which is always in conflict with the personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of human history." (*The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, p. 387). This idea became central to Canetti's life, ultimately resulting in his classic book *Crowds and Power*.

What is the "crowd instinct?" It is the desire to blend into a crowd, to dissolve one's personality into a large mass of people. The crowd instinct can be witnessed in sports' arenas, where fans become one with each other and with the players on the field. It can be experienced in mass rallies where fiery orators fire up the crowd, or at rock concerts where fans lose themselves in their wild admiration of the singers and their music. People have a deep desire to be part of such crowds.

Yet, crowds can become dangerous. When individuals succumb to crowds, demagogues can control them, can drive them to do terrible things, can turn them into lynch mobs or murderous gangs, can push them into terrorism and war.

And so there is also a "personality instinct," a deep desire to retain our own ideas and values, to resist the mesmerizing power of crowds. Although we at times want to share in the enthusiasms and griefs of crowds, we simultaneously want to maintain our inner freedom from the crowds. We want to blend in...but not to blend in.

In the Almighty's blessing of Abraham, we can detect both the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. God apparently wanted Abraham to keep aware of these conflicting pulls, and to maintain spiritual balance.

God promised that He would multiply Abraham's seed "as the stars of the heaven." Stars, although there are so many of them, are essentially alone...light years separate one star from the next. Stars symbolize the personality instinct, the unique separateness of each one. Although part of a galaxy, each star is separate and distinct, never losing its particular identity.

But God also promised that Abraham's seed would be "as the sand which is upon the seas-shore." Sand represents an entirely different kind of multitude than stars. While each star is alone and separate, each grain of sand is surrounded by many other grains of sand. Whereas stars evoke separateness, sand evokes incredible closeness...masses of grains

touching each other so that it is almost impossible to take only one grain of sand in your hand. Sand symbolizes the crowd instinct.

Abraham was to found a new nation, and nations need to have adequate numbers in order to thrive. Nation-building entails working with crowds, striving to create consensus among various factions. Nations demand patriotism, national symbols that inspire citizens to feel united with each other. But nations can become dangerous crowds. Demagogues can manipulate the crowd's emotions and can control information that they share with the masses. Crowds can become dangerous; crowds can be turned into murdering, war-mongering and hateful entities.

How can one resist the power of crowds? For this we need the personality instinct. Each person needs to understand the crowd, but keep enough independence not to totally succumb to the power of the crowd. Each person literally has to be a hero, has to be willing to stand up and stand out...and possibly take terrible risks in order to maintain personal integrity.

This was God's blessing to Abraham: Your seed will learn how to form positive, helpful, cooperative crowds that will enhance human civilization. Your seed will be composed of individuals who will have the wisdom and the courage to remain separate, to resist those who would try to manipulate the crowd into wickedness. Your seed—like the stars—will be composed of strong, luminous and separate beings. Your seed—like the sand—will come together to form healthy, strong and moral communities and societies.

Throughout human history, there has been an ongoing tension between the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. Too often, the crowd instinct has prevailed. Masses of people have been whipped up to commit the worst atrocities, to murder innocents, to vent hatred. Too seldom have the masses acted like stars who can and do resist the power of dangerous crowds.

In our time, like throughout history, there are those who seek to manipulate crowds in dangerous, murderous and hateful ways. There are those who play on the fears and gullibility of the masses, who dissolve individuality and turn people into frenzied sheep.

But there are also those who refuse to become part of such crowds, who resist the crowd instinct and maintain the personality instinct. These are the stars who will form a new kind of crowd, a crowd that will bring human beings together in harmony and mutual respect. God's blessing to Abraham is a blessing that we all need to internalize...the sooner the better.

* Jewishideas.org.

Parshas Chukas - Balak By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer*

Perhaps one of the most enigmatic episodes in all of Torah is G-d's interaction with Bilaam as Bilaam seeks permission to curse the Jewish people. G-d initially tells Bilaam he cannot go with Balak's messengers. When new messengers come and Bilaam asks again, G-d seemingly gives in and allows Bilaam to go. However, as soon as Bilaam leaves with G-d's permission, the Torah tells us that G-d is angry with Bilaam for going and an angel is sent as an adversary to him. Perhaps most astounding of all is Bilaam's interaction with the angel. When Bilaam finally is shown that an angel has been sent with sword drawn against him, the angel tells Bilaam that he would have been killed had his donkey not stopped. After a brief exchange, this adversarial angel then tells Bilaam he may continue on his way and seems to leave Bilaam unharmed.

One cannot read these pesukim without wondering what was going on behind the scenes, and what deeper messages we are to learn from Bilaam's attitude and from G-d's dealings with him. A careful study of Rash"i's explanation shows us that indeed the story of Bilaam is a lesson for all times and for all of humanity, highlighting the most fundamental elements of G-d's dealings with mankind.

Rash"i (22:12) tells us that G-d was initially very clear with Bilaam. G-d told Bilaam that he may not go with Balak's messengers, nor may he curse the Jews nor even bless the Jews from home. When Balak's second messengers arrive, G-d continues to warn Bilaam against cursing the Jews. However, G-d now tells Bilaam "If you think you will receive

reward go with them, but against your will the words that I tell you, you will do.” (Rash”i 22:20) When Bilaam decided to go, he went with the hopes of convincing G-d to allow him to curse the Jews. He was not going on G-d’s terms. It was for this reason that G-d was upset with Bilaam for going. Bilaam recognized that his goals were antithetical to G-d’s and still desired and wanted to go. (Rash”i 22:22)

It was at this point that G-d supernaturally intervened and sent an adversarial angel. Rash”i (22:22) tells us, though, that this angel was not an adversary against Bilaam, but rather was an angel of mercy. G-d sent the angel as an adversary to Bilaam’s chosen path, due to G-d’s love and concern for Bilaam. The angel’s mission had been to stop the donkey, in order to save Bilaam’s life by preventing him from pursuing his evil plan.

Yet, when Bilaam admitted his guilt, oddly the angel tells him to go. Says Rash”i (22:35) “They lead a person on the path he wants to follow”. Though, Bilaam admitted his guilt and asked the angel if he should turn around and go home, Bilaam had not repented and did not have any change of heart. Rather, Rash”i tells us (22:34) Bilaam was merely admitting he was bound by G-d’s command. As such, G-d would not prevent Bilaam from expressing his free will. If Bilaam still wished to go, the Heavenly Court will allow him to follow the path he desires for himself. Though, the angel had been sent to spare him, the angel’s mission was limited to slowing him and cautioning him. Once Bilaam maintained his desire to go, the angel had to relent and allow him to continue on his chosen path.

The free will of human beings is as elemental to G-d’s creation as science and nature are. Just as G-d does not change the rules of nature, G-d will allow us to express our free will if that is what we truly want. Yet, at the same time, G-d worries and is concerned for us. No matter how far we push and insist on using the gift of free will against G-d, He yet loves us and hopes for our betterment. As Bilaam continued to ignore G-d’s warnings and messages, G-d supernaturally intervened, sending an angel to deter him. Yet, when even that did not help, G-d would not force Bilaam’s hand.

G-d’s love for us knows no bounds. No matter how much we fight against Him and anger Him, he continues to love us and direct us to success. Yet in the end, the decision and the responsibility are ours alone.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Dvar Torah: Chukat/Balak

By Rabbi Moshe Rube*

"Just like people's faces are different, so too each person's ideas are different" -Talmud

How do we love someone who's different than us? It seems that this is a central question of our life nowadays. We can love ourselves and love people similar to us fairly easily but what about those that are different in personality or ideology? The Torah said we need to love our neighbor as ourselves and presumably that applies even to people below the threshold of similarity. I'm not talking about how we have civil discourse or debate and change each others minds. I'm talking about how when that's over we can still have solidarity and love with our fellow human beings even if we might differ considerably.

Instead of being overly philosophical, let me present two tools which you can use to navigate this terrain. There are many others but these are two referenced from our Parsha.

1) Just live, smile and move on. Have a lechayim and laugh it off. If someone's different, just ignore the differences and love them anyway. This approach seems to be the one advocated by Sly and the Family Stone in their 1968 hit song "Everyday People". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJux7E3xaPA>

Essentially don't focus on the differences and just live your life and be kind to people. Different strokes for different folks and we all have to live together.

This is also the approach of the fabled Rabbi who said that we find the mitzvah to love your neighbor as yourself in Parshat Balak from the word Balak. The word Balak in Hebrew has the letters Vet, Lamed and Kuf which has the same sounds as the first letters of the phrase "Viahavta Lirayacha Kamocha" (Love your neighbor as yourself). His students said, "But Rabbi, "Balak" starts with Vet and "Viahavta" starts with Vav. "Balak" ends with a Kuf and "Kamocha" starts with a Kaf. Yes the letters make the same sound but the letters still are not right. The Rabbi responded, "If you're so

strict on every letter you can never fulfill the mitzvah to love your neighbor." So don't be so strict on everything. People are different. Smile and move on.

2) Encourage and Empower the Differences. When Bilam the prophet wanted to curse the Jews but was forced to bless them, he exclaimed, "Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov" How wonderful are your tents Jacob! Our Sages interpret this as a compliment towards the way the Jews set up their homes. Instead of having the openings face each other, the tents were built so the openings faced the back of the next tent. Therefore, everybody's privacy was assured and encouraged.

According to this method, we not only smile at the differences, but make sure everybody has the proper space to develop their own selves without intrusion from others. We cultivate and treasure the differences rather than just smiling and move on.

These methods can be applied at different times. In some cases you will find yourself unable or unwilling to encourage someone's difference. But that doesn't mean you can't still be friends and not be so strict on every letter.

And remember to enjoy the colorful brushstrokes that the Creator has made for us. If everyone thought the same way, life would be pretty boring.

Shabbat Shalom,

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL

Rav Kook Torah Chukat: Religious Rage

Moses made a terrible mistake. Near the end of their forty-year journey in the desert, the Israelites had arrived at Kadesh. There was no water to drink, and the people complained bitterly. God commanded Moses to take his staff before the entire people and speak to the cliff-rock, to provide water for the nation. Moses took the staff and assembled the people.

But he shouted,

"Listen now, you rebels! Shall we produce water for you from this cliff?" (Num. 20:10)

Moses then struck the cliff twice with the staff, and a huge flow of water gushed out.

The commentators scratched their heads trying to understand what exactly was Moses' mistake — an error so serious that God did not allow him to enter into the Land of Israel. Was it a case of uncontrolled anger, as Maimonides explained? Was he punished for disobeying God by hitting the rock (Rashi)? Was it because he initially fled from the people (Ibn Ezra)? Or was it for saying "Shall we produce," instead of "Shall God produce" (Rabbeinu Chananel)?

Let us consider Maimonides' explanation. Clearly, Moses was judged strictly, according to his lofty spiritual state. But was this fit of anger truly so terrible that it constituted a chilul Hashem, a public desecration of God's Name?

Did Moses deserve to die outside of the Land of Israel merely for losing his temper?

Religious Rage

According to Rav Kook, all religious rage, all intolerance for moral failings, is rooted in this display of anger. Instead of words of reconciliation, Moses shouted, "Listen now, you rebels." Instead of speaking to the heart, he hit the rock. While righteous indignation stems from sincere and pure intentions, the highest goals of holiness will only be achieved through calm spirits and mutual respect.

In our generation, the instruction of Torah and its details involves a pedantic form of debate. Father and son, teacher and student, battle over Torah study. In the end, their mutual respect returns; but the residual feelings of enmity are never completely erased.

The restoration of darkei noam, the peaceful ways of Torah, will come through the prophet Elijah, who will reconcile that different paths of the generations, “turning the hearts of fathers back to the children, and the hearts of the children back to their fathers” (Malachi 3:24).

This will be accomplished through the revelation of the esoteric side of Torah, a wonderful Torah of kindness. The same profundity and dedication which in the past was acquired through the intellectual zeal of ritcha d'oraita will be attained in the future through the spiritual fortitude of gentleness and equanimity. Then the light of the “sukkah of peace” will envelop the Jewish people, as well as the nations of the world who gather from afar to the holy city of Jerusalem, the city of peace.

A Letter of Loving Rebuke

As chief rabbi of Jaffa, Rav Kook was responsible for religious affairs in the surrounding communities. It is instructive to see how he took to task individuals and groups for infractions of Jewish law. The quote below, from a letter written in 1912, illustrates his method of respectful and loving reproach. The letter was written in response to public Sabbath desecration in the community of Ness Ziona.

“My dear brothers,

I find in the depths of my heart a powerful, sacred duty to call out to you with affection, from my sincere love for you as pioneers in the rebirth of our nation in the land of our yearnings. I am confident in your integrity and your trust in me - which I have witnessed from when I first began serving you in a rabbinical capacity — that my words, the words of a faithful and respectful friend, will be well-received.

For some time I have heard that the level of sanctity of the Sabbath has greatly deteriorated in your beloved community. This decline, according to the rumors, is troubling and alarming to all who live Jewish life in the depths of their soul, to all who feel and recognize what the Sabbath means to us, to all who are aware of its holiness in our religious tradition, as well as its national, historical value.

My dear brothers! I am unable to express in writing even a small measure of my soul's anguish whenever such reports reach my ears. Especially as it concerns your precious and holy settlement and its pioneers, who bring redemption to the Jewish people. May my words find favor in your eyes, so that you will search and discover a way to remove this terrible embarrassment from your beloved community, this profound shame for the entire Jewish people, who proudly look upon our new settlement as a resting place for their very essence, for all that we have held sacred and revered throughout the generations.” (Igrot HaRe'iyah, vol. II, 88)

(Adapted from Orot HaKodesh vol. IV, p. 500.)

Chukat: Waters of Strife: The Price of Leadership

By Yanki Tauber*

One of the most puzzling passages in the Torah is the story of the Waters of Strife, in the wake of which G d decreed that Moses would die in the desert and would not enter the Land of Israel.

A hundred generations of Torah scholars, beginning with Moses himself and continuing with the sages of the Midrash, the biblical commentaries and the chassidic masters, struggle with this enigmatic chapter. As we speak, someone is writing a “Parshah piece” that searches for some explanation of the event, or at least a lesson to be derived from it.

But first the facts (as related in Numbers 20:1–13):

After traveling for forty years in the wilderness, the people of Israel arrive in Kadesh in the Zin Desert, on the border of the Holy Land. There is no water, the people are thirsty, and as they are wont to do in similar circumstances, they complain to Moses. It is not a pretty sight. “If only we had died,” they rage, “when our brethren died before G d! Why have you brought

the congregation of G d to this desert, to die there, we and our cattle? Why have you taken us out of Egypt—to bring us to this evil place . . . ?”

Moses calls on G d, who instructs him to “take the staff, and gather the people, you and Aaron your brother. You shall speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will give its water.” When all are assembled before the rock, Moses addresses the people: “Listen, rebellious ones! Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” Moses raises his hand and strikes the rock twice with his staff. Water gushes forth, and the people and their cattle drink.

Whereupon G d says to Moses and Aaron: “Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation into the land I have given them.”

What did Moses do wrong? What was the sin that warranted such a devastating punishment?

The commentaries search the text for clues. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040–1105) points out that G d instructed Moses to speak to the rock, while Moses struck it. Thus, he failed to “sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel” (extracting water by speaking would have been a greater miracle).

Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, 1135–1204) has a different explanation: Moses’ failing was that he got angry and spoke harshly to the people (his “Listen, you troublemakers!” speech).

(The chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740–1810) has an interesting insight here: Rashi’s and Maimonides’ explanations, says the Berditchever, are two sides of the same coin. A tzaddik is not only a leader of his people, but also the master of his environment. These two roles are intertwined, the latter deriving from the former. If a leader’s relationship with his people is loving and harmonious, then the physical world, too, willingly yields its resources to the furtherance of their goals. But if his influence is achieved through harsh words of rebuke, then he will find it necessary to do battle with nature at every turn, and forcefully impose his will on the physical world.)

Nachmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194–1270) finds difficulty with both explanations. If Moses wasn’t supposed to strike the rock, he argues, why did G d tell him to take along his staff? The Torah repeats this fact, further emphasizing that “Moses took along the staff from the presence of G d, as He had commanded him.” In light of G d’s instructions to Moses on a previous occasion to extract water from a rock by striking it (see Exodus 17:6), was it not reasonable for Moses to assume that the staff was to serve a similar function in this case? (Unless G d was setting him up for this—but more on that later.) As for Maimonides’ explanation, there were other instances in which the Torah tells us (more explicitly than in this case) that Moses got angry, and for apparently less justification. If no punishment was decreed in those cases, why now?

Nachmanides offers his explanation: Moses erred in saying to the people, “Shall we then bring forth water for you from this rock?”—words that can be seen as implying that extracting water from a rock is something that Moses, rather than G d, does. The moment a leader assumes an identity of his own, and his accomplishments are attributed to him personally—the moment he comes to embody anything other than his people’s collective identity and their relationship with G d—he has failed in his role. (Nachmanides finds support for his explanation in G d’s opening words to Moses, “Because you did not believe in Me . . .”—implying that this was a failure of faith rather than a lapse of obedience or a surrender to anger.)

But there is one common denominator in these and the numerous other explanations offered by the commentaries: the implication that whatever the problem was, it wasn’t really the problem. Basically, G d is getting Moses on a technicality. In his arguments with G d, Moses senses this, in effect saying to G d: “You set me up!”

The text supports his complaint. Forty years earlier there occurred the incident of the spies, in which the generation that came out of Egypt and received the Torah at Sinai revealed themselves to be unwilling and unable to progress to the next stage of G d’s plan—to enter and take possession of the Holy Land. At that time, the Torah recounts, G d decreed that the entire generation (all males above the age of 20) would die out in the desert. With the sole exception of two men. “Except for Caleb the son of Yefuneh and Joshua the son of Nun,” the two spies who resisted the plot of their ten colleagues (Numbers 14:30).

Moses, who craved to enter the Holy Land with every fiber of his being, was not guilty of the sin of the spies, so some other pretext had to be found. Since “with the righteous, G d is exacting to a hairsbreadth,” it wasn’t impossible to find a

pretext. But G d had already determined 40 years earlier that the entire generation—Moses and Aaron included—would not enter the Land. “This is a plot that you contrived against me,” the Midrash quotes Moses saying to the Almighty.

Indeed, why? If Moses was innocent of his generation’s sin, why was it decreed that he share their fate? There is a poignant Midrash that offers the following parable:

A shepherd was given the king’s flock to feed and care for, but the flock was lost. When the shepherd sought to enter the royal palace, the king refused him entry. “When the flock that was entrusted to you is recovered, you, too, will be admitted.”

The original plan was that the 600,000 whom Moses took out of Egypt should enter the Land. But that generation remained in the desert. You are their leader, said G d to Moses. Their fate is your fate.

This message is implicit in G d’s words to Moses immediately following his striking of the rock: “. . . therefore, you will not bring this congregation into the land I have given them.” From this the Midrash deduces: “This congregation” you will not bring in; that congregation you will. “This congregation”—the generation whom Moses confronted at the rock—was not Moses’ generation. His generation were buried in the desert.

When they will enter the Land, G d is saying to Moses—and they will, when the final redemption will redeem all generations of history—you will lead them in.

* Yanki Tauber served as Editor of Chabad.org.

Parshat Chukat-Balak: Transforming Curses Into Blessings

By Rabbi M. Wisnefsky

Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his she-donkey, and went with the Moabite dignitaries.

He hoped to demonstrate how the Jews had repeatedly been eager to rebel against G-d and make G-d judge unfavorably. (Bemidbar 22:21)

When a person sins, he augments the power of evil in the world. This can happen in two ways:

When a person indulges in some material or sensual pleasure that is permitted by the Torah but partakes in it for selfish motivations, he augments the power of "neutral evil" (kelipat nogah). He makes the world a coarser, less Divinely-oriented place, but does not increase the spirit of antagonism against Divinity in it. To redeem the power he invested in this form of evil and re-root it in holiness, it is enough for the person to regret and repent of having selfishly indulged in G-d's gifts.

When a person transgresses one of the Torah's explicit prohibitions, he augments the power of the three varieties of "pure evil" (the kelipot temei'ot). In this case, the person increases the world's enmity toward Divinity, increasing the world's conscious and unconscious hostility to G-d's intents and purposes. To redeem the power he diverted into this form of evil, the person must motivate his return to G-d with ardent, overpowering love.

Balaam's exceeding hatred and antagonism toward G-d may be seen as an allegory for the evil produced by deliberate transgressions of the Torah's prohibitions. Abraham's exceeding love of G-d and enthusiasm in performing His will is then an allegory for the antidote to this poison: repentance and reorientation (teshuvah) toward G-d motivated by love.

Here, at the beginning of Balaam's journey to curse the Israelites, G-d tells him that he is doomed to fail, for the people have inherited from Abraham the power to transform the results of hatred for G-d into holiness.

Similarly, whenever we find ourselves having to repair the damage we might have caused by having deliberately disregarded G-d's will, the surest way to make amends for such misdeeds is to bolster our love for Him. This love will in turn transform past misdeeds into the motivation for doing good deeds. Just as G-d transformed Balaam's curses into blessings, we too can always transform "curses" into blessings.

* An Insight from the Rebbe

Gut Shabbos,
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Chukas- Balak
Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya
Chukas: An Answer for Which I Waited Over Fifty Years

I finally found an answer to something that has been bothering me for over fifty years! When I was in the eighth or ninth grade, our Hebrew teacher assigned us a term paper. The class members were supposed to summarize the opinions of a list of commentaries as to the nature of the sin of Mei Merivah. I believe there were over twenty different explanations as to what Moshe Rabbeinu did wrong at Mei Merivah. My assignment was to research the opinion of Rav Yosef Albo in his Sefer HaKrim.

Rav Yosef Albo's opinion is as follows: Moshe Rabbeinu faced a crisis: His sister Miriam just died. The Rock was no longer giving water. The people were crying, "We are going to die of thirst." What did Moshe Rabbeinu do? He went to ask a 'shaylah' to the Ribono shel Olam – "What should I do?" The Ribono shel Olam told him to speak to the Rock. Moshe Rabbeinu hit the Rock. According to some commentaries, that was the sin. The Sefer HaKrim has another opinion.

Rav Yosef Albo says that Moshe Rabbeinu had a golden opportunity here. There was no water. He should have taken the bull by the horn. He should have gone over to the Rock and said: "Rock – Give water!" Why should he have thought that would work? Because of the principle that

"A Righteous person decrees and the Holy One Blessed Be He will fulfill his decree." There is a rule "Tzadik gozer, v'HaKodosh Baruch Hu Mekayem." Eliyahu HaNavi did this. He decreed that fire come down from heaven and consume his offering. Did he ask G-d beforehand? No. He did it on his own. Yehoshua bin Nun said, "Sun in Givon stand still, and the moon over the Valley of Ayalon". He did not ask for advice or permission from the Almighty beforehand. He decreed and the Almighty fulfilled the Tzadik's decree. According to the Sefer HaKrim, that was the sin of Moshe Rabbeinu. He had the opportunity to sanctify G-d's Name by showing that the Almighty fulfills the decree of the Tzadik. He did not take advantage of this opportunity. In effect, that is a desecration of G-d's Name.

It always bothered me—that is a Chillul Hashem? Moshe Rabbeinu—if you look at his record—never did anything on his own. He did not bring the Plague of Blood on his own, he did not bring the Plague of Frogs on his own, and he did not turn his staff into a snake on his own. Everything Moshe Rabbeinu did was always based on the Command of G-d. So, what is the complaint here? Moshe could answer back, "That is not the way I operate. That is not my modus operandi. My modus operandi is that I ask the Ribono shel Olam: What should I do? The Ribono shel Olam always tells me what to do.

This question has bothered me for fifty years! Not so many things have bothered me for fifty years. This year, I found a Meshech Chochma that explains the deeper intent of this Sefer HaKrim. The Meshech Chochma asks: Why in fact did Moshe Rabbeinu never perform miracles on his own? There are Biblical figures who did miracles on their own, such as Yehoshua and Eliyahu. There are Talmudic figures who did miracles on their own, such as Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who put his heel on the hole of the snake. There are such stories throughout the Talmud! Moshe Rabbeinu never did anything on his own.

The Meshech Chochmah explains that this was because Moshe Rabbeinu was different than every other prophet. When every other prophet received their prophecy from the Almighty, they literally fell into a trance. They lost bodily control. They were no longer in charge. So, when the Navi said something, everyone knew that it is not the Navi talking, it is G-d talking. The person could be lying on the floor having convulsions. He was not in charge—he was a conduit.

On the other hand, Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy was "Aspaklaria haMeira". He spoke "mouth to mouth" with the Almighty as a person talks to his friend. Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu was afraid that if he would dare to "call the shots on his own," he might be deified. He was afraid that people would make him into a god. By the other prophets, it was obvious they were not in control. Moshe Rabbeinu was in control, so he never ever did anything on his own, lest the people say, "He is G-d!" (We know that such things have happened in history.) Therefore, he did not act independently.

There is only one time in Moshe Rabbeinu's career that he "took the law into his own hands" and acted on his own. That was in last week's Parsha. Korach challenged Moshe Rabbeinu, "the entire congregation is holy, why do you take it upon yourselves to rule over the congregation of Hashem?" There, without asking the Ribono shel Olam, without seeking guidance from Above, Moshe Rabbeinu proclaimed, "If like all other men these men die, G-d has not sent me..." He proclaimed on his own "I am going to make a miracle. These people are going to die an unnatural death. The ground is going to open up and swallow them."

Here he deviated from his methodology. Why? The Meshech Chochma says it was because at the time of Korach's rebellion, there was no fear that the people would deify Moshe. On the contrary, he was being attacked, "Who are you? You are no better than anyone else!" No one could be accused of harboring thoughts that Moshe was a god when they were proclaiming that he had no better status than the rest of the nation. Here Moshe was prepared to say, "Okay, I will show you! I am going to make a miracle on my own to prove that what you claim is incorrect."

That was Parshas Korach. However, next is Parshas Chukas and the people now realize that Moshe can take the law into his own hands and can change nature by his own decree. Suddenly, Miriam dies and there is no water, people are in the desert dying of thirst and they say to Moshe Rabbeinu, “We need water.” Moshe’s response is, “Nu, I need to ask the Ribono shel Olam what to do.” The people became disillusioned. “Oh, is that so? Last week in Parshas Korach when your honor was on the line, you did not ask any questions. You were concerned about your own kavod, so you made a miracle on the spot! Now when we are all thirsty, you suddenly need to stall and ask the Ribono shel Olam? There was a popular complaint against Moshe Rabbeinu.

That is what the Sefer Halkrim means that this was a Chillul Hashem. “Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify my Name before the Children of Israel.” Just like by Korach, when your honor was on the line, you took nature into your own hands and made an open miracle, now that we are suffering and dying of thirst, you hold back your power... This, says the Sefer Halkrim, was the complaint and was a desecration of G-d’s Name, for which Moshe was punished.

Balak: Reading the Fine Print in Bilaam’s Refusal to Go

There is a strange similarity between a pasuk in Parshas Balak and a statement in Maseches Avos. When Balak tries to entice Bilaam to come and curse Klal Yisrael, Bilaam at first refuses and says, “If Balak will give me a house full of silver and gold, I am unable to transgress the word of G-d.” This is strikingly reminiscent of a statement in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos, where somebody came to Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma and made him an offer that he seemingly could not refuse. A person approached the Tanna and invited him to come to his city to build a Yeshiva there. He made him an outstanding offer to which Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma responded, “My son, even if you offer me all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world, I refuse to live in any place other than a place of Torah.” [Avos 6:9] Now, even though this sounds strikingly similar to what Bilaam said, Bilaam is condemned. Chazal take Bilaam’s statement as being an implicit hint to the officers of Moav that he would really like all that silver and gold, and that he thinks he is worth it. No one suspects Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma of intimating that for the right price he could indeed be convinced to come. What is the difference between the statement of Bilaam and, l’havdil, the statement of Rav Yossi ben Kisma? Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky makes a very interesting observation: “If Balak will give me a house full of gold and silver... I won’t do it!” What about two houses? What about five houses? For one house? Nu! What is one house full of gold and silver worth? For that price alone, I will not consider coming. By specifying that a single house is the offer he refuses, he implies that if the price were right – then maybe there would be what to discuss.

What is the language of Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma? It is “all the silver and gold and precious stones and jewels in the world.” There is nothing more to talk about! No money in the world can change my mind. I will only live in a place of Torah. That is the difference between Bilaam’s refusal and the refusal by Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma in Pirkei Avos.

*Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org
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from: Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks <info@rabbisacks.org>

subject: Covenant and Conversation

Kohelet, Tolstoy and the Red Heifer (Chukat – Balak 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The command of the parah adumah, the Red Heifer, with which our parsha begins, is known as the hardest of the mitzvot to understand. The opening words, zot chukat ha-Torah, are taken to mean, this is the

supreme example of a chok in the Torah, that is, a law whose logic is obscure, perhaps unfathomable.

It was a ritual for the purification of those who had been in contact with, or in, certain forms of proximity to a dead body. A dead body is the primary source of impurity, and the defilement it caused to the living meant that the person so affected could not enter the precincts of the Tabernacle or Temple until cleansed, in a process that lasted seven days. A key element of the purification process involved a Priest sprinkling the person so affected, on the third and seventh day, with a specially prepared liquid known as “the water of cleansing.” First a Red Heifer had to be found, without a blemish, and which had never been used to perform work: a yoke had never been placed on it. This was ritually killed and burned outside the camp. Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool were added to the fire, and the ashes placed in a vessel containing “living” i.e. fresh water. It was this that was sprinkled on those who had become impure by contact with death. One of the more paradoxical features of the rite is that though it cleansed the impure, it rendered impure those who were involved with the preparation of the water of cleansing.

Though the ritual has not been practised since the days of the Temple, it nonetheless remains significant, in itself and for an understanding of what a chok, usually translated as “statute,” actually is. Other instances include the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen (shatnez) and sowing a field with two kinds of grain (kilayim). There have been several very different explanations of chukim.

The most famous is that a chok is a law whose logic we cannot understand. It makes sense to God, but it makes no sense to us. We cannot aspire to the kind of cosmic wisdom that would allow us to see its point and purpose. Or perhaps, as Rav Saadia Gaon put it, it is a command issued for no other reason than to reward us for obeying it.[1] The Sages recognised that whereas Gentiles might understand Jewish laws based on social justice (mishpatim) or historical memory (edot), commands such as the prohibition of eating meat and milk together seemed irrational and superstitious. The chukim were laws of which “Satan and the nations of the world made fun.”[2]

Maimonides had a quite different view. He believed that no Divine command was irrational. To suppose otherwise was to think God inferior to human beings. The chukim only appear to be inexplicable because we have forgotten the original context in which they were ordained. Each of them was a rejection of, and education against, some idolatrous practice. For the most part, however, such practises have died out, which is why we now find the commands hard to understand.[3]

A third view, adopted by Nahmanides in the thirteenth century[4] and further articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth, is that the chukim were laws designed to teach the integrity of nature. Nature has its own laws, domains and boundaries, to cross which is to dishonour the divinely created order, and to threaten nature itself. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) and animal death (meat). As for the Red Heifer, Hirsch says that the ritual is to cleanse humans from depression brought about by reminders of human mortality.

My own view is that chukim are commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex. The root from which the word chok comes is h-k-k, meaning, “to engrave.” Writing is on the surface; engraving cuts much deeper than the surface. Rituals go deep below the surface of the mind, and for an important reason. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make momentous mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain. We also have an extremely powerful set of reactions to potential danger, located in the amygdala, that lead us to flee, freeze or fight. A moral system, to be adequate to the human condition, must recognise the nature of the human condition. It must speak to our fears.

The most profound fear most of us have is of death. As La Rochefoucauld said, "Neither the sun nor death can be looked on with a steady eye." Few have explored death and the tragic shadow it casts over life more profoundly than the author of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): "The fate of man is the fate of cattle; the same fate awaits them both, the death of one is like the death of the other, their spirits are the same, and the pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for it is all shallow breath. All end in the same place; all emerge from dust and all go back to dust" (Eccl. 3:19-20).

The knowledge that he will die robs Kohelet of any sense of the meaningfulness of life. We have no idea what will happen, after our death, to what we have achieved in life. Death makes mockery of virtue: the hero may die young while the coward lives to old age. And bereavement is tragic in a different way. To lose those we love is to have the fabric of our life torn, perhaps irreparably. Death defiles in the simplest, starkest sense: mortality opens an abyss between us and God's eternity.

It is this fear, existential and elemental, to which the rite of the Heifer is addressed. The animal itself is the starkest symbol of pure, animal life, untamed, undomesticated. The red, like the scarlet of the wool, is the colour of blood, the essence of life. The cedar, tallest of trees, represents vegetative life. The hyssop symbolises purity. All these were reduced to ash in the fire, a powerful drama of mortality. The ash itself was then dissolved in water, symbolising continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. The body dies but the spirit flows on. A generation dies but another is born. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, and a trace of us is carried onward to the future.

The person in modern times who most deeply experienced and expressed what Kohelet felt was Tolstoy, who told the story in his essay, A Confession.[5] By the time he wrote it, in his early fifties, he had already published two of the greatest novels ever written, War and Peace and Anna Karenina. His literary legacy was secure. His greatness was universally recognised. He was married, with children. He had a large estate. His health was good. Yet he was overcome with a sense of the meaninglessness of life in the face of the knowledge that we will all die. He quoted Kohelet at length. He contemplated suicide. The question that haunted him was: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?"[6]

He searched for an answer in science, but all it told him was that "in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity." Science deals in causes and effects, not purpose and meaning. In the end, he concluded that only religious faith rescues life from meaninglessness. "Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life." [7] What is needed is something other than rational knowledge. "Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something ... If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live." [8]

That is why, to defeat the defilement of contact with death, there must be a ritual that bypasses rational knowledge. Hence the rite of the Red Heifer, in which death is dissolved in the waters of life, and those on whom it is sprinkled are made pure again so that they can enter the precincts of the Shechinah and re-establish contact with eternity. We no longer have the Red Heifer and its seven-day purification ritual, but we do have the shiva, the seven days of mourning during which we are comforted by others and thus reconnected with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, as the ashes of the Heifer were dissolved in the "living water." We emerge, still bereaved, but in some measure cleansed, purified, able again to face life. I believe that we can emerge from the shadow of death if we allow ourselves to be healed by the God of life. To do so, though, we need the help of others. "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison," [9] says

the Talmud. It took a Kohen to sprinkle the waters of cleansing. It takes comforters to lift our grief. But faith – faith from the world of chok, deeper than the rational mind – can help cure our deepest fears. Shabbat Shalom

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from: Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com>
reply-to: info@jewishdestiny.com
subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Weekly Parsha CHUKAT

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Jewish people find themselves in great difficulty after the death of the prophetess Miriam. Her miraculous well had sustained them with water during their long sojourn in the desert of Sinai. And now that she was no longer alive, this water, so identified with her being, also disappeared from their midst. They complain to Moshe and clamored for water. People can go on for days without solid food but not without water, especially in a desert. Moshe strikes the rock instead of speaking to it, as he was instructed to do, but water flows miraculously in abundance from the rock, and the situation is stabilized.

There will be sad consequences for Moshe from this incident, but apparently the people are not subject to punishment for their demands to Moshe that he provide them with water, which precipitated the entire matter. In fact, the people will break into song and poetry over this new well of blessed water. Yet, we find that when the people requested meat, the meat miraculously arrived, but the people were severely punished for their request. It seems that requesting and even demanding water, a necessity of life for human existence, is permissible. However, demanding meat, which is a luxury food is inappropriate. There is a great lesson for all of us in this matter. Demanding and even praying for more than we really need and are entitled to carries with it the seeds of subsequent problems and even disaster.

Chassidic legend and tradition records a discussion between Rav Yitzchak Vorker and Rav Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, the Kotzker Rebbe, regarding why the Jewish people escaped immediate punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf, while for the sin of the Spies and their rejection of entering the land of Israel, the punishment was immediate and harsh.

The Vorker Rebbe explained that when the Jewish people repented after the sin of the Golden Calf they were yet unaware that repentance could nullify decrees and punishment. Nevertheless, they repented sincerely without expectations of forgiveness, and their repentance was accepted. After the sin of the spies, they already knew that repentance could bring about forgiveness, so their repentance was insufficiently sincere. The Kotzker Rebbe thought otherwise. He said that the sin of the Golden Calf had in it the seeds of searching for and serving a higher power. They went about it incorrectly, but there was a spark of holiness in their quest for divinity. However, the sin of the spies was of a different nature. Its motivation was that they wished for an easy life of luxuries, without the challenges that a nation-state automatically inflicts on its inhabitants. Such a base motive was unacceptable to Heaven. We pray for health and prosperity to be able to serve God with more sincerity and more effectively. If we pray only out of selfish motives, then we have missed the mark with our prayers. This week's Torah reading is a powerful reminder of this truth, Shabbat Shalom

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
from: Rabbi Chanan Morrison <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>
to: rav-kook-list@googlegroups.com
subject: [Rav Kook Torah]

Balak: Sweet Dreams

Rav Kook Torah

Have you ever dreamt a disturbing dream but cannot remember it? The Sages recommended saying the following prayer while the kohanim are blessing the people:

“Master of the World! My dreams and I belong to You. If the dreams are good, then bolster them like the dreams of Joseph. And if they need to be remedied, fix them like the bitter waters that Moses sweetened.

Just as You transformed wicked Balaam’s curses into blessings, so too, make all of my dreams be for the best.” (Berachot 55b)

Transforming Bad Dreams

There are two ways in which evil tidings may be transformed into good ones. In the first way, the means remain disturbing, but the final outcome is good. One example of this is Joseph being sold into slavery and his subsequent imprisonment in Egypt. All of the various causes were adverse, incurring much hardship for Joseph. But the ultimate result - Joseph’s rise to greatness, and his ability to provide sustenance during the years of famine - was certainly for the best.

However, it is even better when the causes are also transformed into positive ones, so that the end is achieved through propitious means. An example of this type of transformation occurred with Balaam. God could have let Balaam curse the people of Israel, and only later changed his curses to blessings. But instead, God “placed a hook in Balaam’s mouth,” as the Midrash describes God’s complete control over Balaam’s powers of speech. Only blessings came out his mouth. Thus, even the means - Balaam’s prophecies - were favorable.

We pray that our dreams should be completely transformed for the good. Like Balaam’s “curses,” we want both the ends and the means to be auspicious and beneficial.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 274)
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Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Drasha Parshas Balak

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

You have to approach something from the right view. At least that’s what Balak, the king of Moab, tried to convince his prime sorcerer who futilely tried to curse the Jewish nation. Though Bilaam had a notorious reputation, with for curses that never failed and the ability to cast spells upon whomever he desired, this time it didn’t work. He tried, for a large fee, to curse the Jewish nation, who were camped opposite of Moab; but each time he opened his mouth blessings and not curses were emitted. “How can I curse when G-d is not angry,” he exclaimed (Numbers 23:8). Each time the mission failed, Balak flew into a rage. Bilaam attempted to subvert G-d’s intentions and appease Him with sacrifices — all to no avail.

Balak tried another strategy. “Come with me to a different place from there you will see them; however, you will see its edge and not all of it — and you will curse it for me from there” (Numbers 23:13). It didn’t work either.

I had a difficult time understanding the new strategy. What’s the difference if Bilaam were to see all of Israel or he would stand in a place that only offers a partial view? Is the G-d of Israel not ever-present, protecting them in part as well as in whole? Why would a curse work when Bilaam only viewed Israel from a partial perspective?

A pious and very talented Jewish scholar was placed on trial in a small Polish town outside of Lvov. The charges, brought by a local miscreant, were based on some trumped-up complaint. The young scholar was beloved to his townsfolk as he served in the capacity of the town’s shochet (ritual slaughterer), chazzan (cantor), and cheder rebbe. Thus, many people in town were worried as he appeared before a notoriously anti-Semitic judge.

As he presented the charges, the judge mockingly referred to him as Mr. Butcher. In fact all through the preliminary portion of the kangaroo court, the judge kept referring to the beloved teacher and cantor as a butcher, meat vendor or slaughterer. Finally, the young scholar asked permission to speak. “Your honor,” he began, “before I begin my defense, I’d like to clarify one point. I serve in many capacities in this shtetl. The people at the synagogue know me as the cantor. The children at the school and all of their parents know me as the teacher. It is only the animals that know me as the butcher!”

The commentaries explain that Bilaam knew that the power of his curses would only take effect by finding a small breach in the beauty of Israel — a breach that he could expand with the power of his evil eye. He looked at all of Israel and could not find any flaw to amplify and use as a curse.

Balak advised him to use another ploy. He made a suggestion that would be followed for generations by all the detractors of Jews. “Only look at them,” he said, “from a partial perspective. Go up to the edge of the mountain; you shall see their edge and not all of them — and you will curse them for me from there” (Numbers 23:13).

Balak told Bilaam to concentrate on some poor aspects of the people. It is always possible to find a few exceptions to a most ethical and moral nation. There are those who stand on the edge of the mountain and take a partial view. They talk about Jews who may be accused of crimes or improprieties. They dissect individuals and embellish what they perceive as character flaws or personal faults. They point to those flaws as if they

represent the entire person, as others point to harmful Jews as if they were the entire nation. And then they shout their curses. But Bilaam could not find the breach that he was looking for. Because Israel as a nation, as well as each individual Jew, cannot be judged by anything less than a total picture – for we are all one.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated in loving memory of our grandmother, Betty Blum of blessed memory.

By Mark & Jolene Bolender & their children Elchanan, Miriam, & Lana

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: Rabbi Yochanan Zweig <genesis@torah.org>

to: rabbizweig@torah.org

subject: Rabbi Zweig

Insights Parshas Chukas-Balak Tammuz 5780

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Faiga bas Rav Nachum z"l.

Sponsored by Mrs. Channah Finkel & Family.

"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

A Giant Debt

...Og, king of Bashan, went out against them, he and his entire people, to do battle in Edrei. Hashem said to Moshe, "Do not fear him, for into your hand I have given him..." (21:33-34)

This week's parsha ends with the tale of the remarkable encounter between Moshe Rabbeinu and Og, the giant-king of Bashan. Og had been one of the Nephilim (those that fell or "fallen angels" see Rashi on Bereishis 6:4); a race of giants from the time before the great flood. He was known as "the escapee" because he survived the destruction of the flood (see Rashi on Bereishis 14:13). The possuk tells us that Moshe was worried about meeting Og in a war.

At first glance, this seems a little odd. Bnei Yisroel had just soundly decimated Sichon king of Cheshbon, who had a reputation as one of the mightiest warriors in the world. Why was Moshe suddenly worried about fighting Og? Rashi (21:34) explains that almost 500 years prior Og had done a favor for Avraham Avinu. Moshe was afraid that the merit of this kindness to Avraham Avinu would stand for him and, perhaps, render him invulnerable.

What kindness had Og done for Avraham? In Parshas Lech Lecha (Bereishis 14:1-12), the Torah relates some of the details of the epic war that embroiled nine kingdoms. Four kings went to war against five kings and soundly defeated them and many other nations that were in their path. One of the nations that was utterly destroyed was the Rephaim, a nation of giants, and Og was the lone survivor ("fugitive"). In addition, one of the five kings who was defeated was the king of Sodom, where Avraham's nephew, Lot, resided. Og came to Avraham to inform him that his nephew had been taken captive by the four kings. This was the kindness that Og did for Avraham Avinu, that had Moshe concerned about meeting Og in battle.

However, this is difficult to comprehend. Rashi (Bereishis 14:13) very clearly states that the reason Og came to inform Avraham what had happened to Lot was for his own selfish reasons. He desired to marry Sarah, who according to the Gemara (Megillah 15a) was one of the most beautiful women to have ever lived. Og hoped that Avraham would feel impelled to enter the war and in the course of the fighting he would be killed; thereby clearing a path for Og to be with Sarah. Thus, Og had very selfish reasons for giving Avraham Avinu news about his nephew; so how is this act considered such a great merit for him?

Imagine for a moment that someone is attacked by a mugger and struck upon the head. Following this unfortunate event, the victim heads to the nearest hospital to be examined. The doctors decide to perform a CT scan of his head to be sure that there isn't any more extensive damage. Miraculously, the CT scan reveals that while there is no permanent damage from the mugger's blow, there is a tumor that is slowly growing inside the skull that must be removed. This tumor might have very likely

killed this person and perhaps not have been caught in time had he not been mugged. Does this victim now owe a debt of gratitude to the mugger?

Of course not. In the case of the mugger, the victim never wanted to suffer a severe blow to the head. That it, providentially, happened to work out is really just the hand of Hashem. However, in the case of Og, Avraham was well aware of risks he was taking by entering a war with the four kings. Yet, Avraham desired to have the information that Og was providing. The fact that Og had his own agenda doesn't lessen the kindness to Avraham; Og was providing Avraham a service that he wanted. Doing a kindness for someone as great as Avraham Avinu was reason enough to give Moshe pause. Therefore, Hashem had to reassure him.

The Torah is teaching us a remarkable lesson in hakaras hatov, and something most of us strive hard to avoid. We see from this story that we must feel indebted to someone who does us a kindness even if he has his own reason for doing it. Often, we work very hard to try to ascribe a motivation to a benefactor that would seem to paint them as self-serving, or in the very least as not totally altruistic. Naturally, we do this to lessen our feeling of obligation to this person. This is wrong. The Torah is teaching us that we must appreciate any kindness that is done for us, irrespective of the benefactor's motivation.

Ignoring the Pain

He sees no iniquity in Yaakov, nor does He see transgressions in Yisroel, Hashem his God is with him and the friendship of the king is with them (23:21).

Rashi (ad loc) explains this to mean that Hashem is not exacting in His judgement of Bnei Yisroel; in His great love for them, he disregards their transgressions even when they sin. This possuk's reassuring expression of Hashem's kindness in judgement readily explains why it was chosen to be included in our liturgy on Rosh Hashanah, notwithstanding that the evil Bilaam is the source of this observation.

Yet, this verse doesn't seem to conform to normative Jewish thinking. On the contrary, we are taught that Hashem is extremely critical of the Jewish people; the Talmud (Bava Kama 50a) states that Hashem is exacting to a hairbreadth in His judgement of the righteous, and that anyone who says that Hashem disregards sin is forfeiting his life. How can Rashi then say that Hashem simply disregards our sins?

There are two dimensions to every sin. When a person sins, his actions represent a defect in his character, a flaw that must be repaired in order for him to perfect himself. With regard to this aspect of sin, Hashem is infinitely exacting; He allows no imperfection to be ignored, after all, that is why we were created and put on this earth - to perfect ourselves. Hashem, therefore, judges His people with the greatest strictness in order for us to cleanse ourselves of all flaws.

However, there is another dimension to sin, one that Hashem does disregard: The pain and insult that we cause Him, so to speak, by rebelling against Him and ignoring His demands of us. In truth, of course, Hashem is never affected by us, our mitzvos do not add to Him and our sins do not detract from Him. But as R' Chaim Volozhin explains (Nefesh Hachaim 1:3); our actions have very real affects in the myriads of worlds that have been created. We add "light and holiness" and sustain these worlds by doing righteous acts. The whole construct of creation is an expression of Hashem's desire to have a relationship with mankind. The nature of this relationship is what is affected by our transgressions. Thus, when Chazal say that on Rosh Hashanah Hashem ignores our sins, this is referring to the pain and hurt we have inflicted on our relationship with Him. He absolutely disregards the hurt from the pain that we have inflicted on the relationship by flouting His authority and rebelling against Him. He only judges us on the flaws in our character that have led to these transgressions; this is because He desires to see us perfect ourselves.

Did You Know...

This week's parsha includes the story of Bilaam (a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer) and Balak (the king of Moab). Balak feared that the Jews would attack his people and therefore employs Bilaam to curse them. Hashem forbids Bilaam from doing so and each time he tries he ends up showering the Jews with blessings instead. Here are some additional facts about this dark sorcerer:

One of the commonly known facts is that Bilaam was on a very high prophetic level, and there is actually a discussion comparing his prophecy to that of Moshe Rabbeinu's. The reason for this was because Hashem knew that the gentile nations would, in defense of their many sins, claim that it was only because they didn't have someone who was on Moshe's prophetic level to guide them, so he provided them with Bilaam (Me'em Lo'ez Balak 1 22:5).

Balak knew of Bilaam because they were from the same town, and Bilaam even prophesied that Balak would one day be king. Additionally, he knew that Bilaam was powerful because he had hired him before in wars and they had been victorious (ibid).

At first, they tried performing various acts of sorcery on the Jews, but when those had no effect, they resorted to cursing. In actuality, Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam, and it would have been below him to consult Bilaam, but when he saw that witchcraft was ineffectual, he sent for him.

Another fairly well known fact is that the Gemara says that Bilaam knew the precise moment every day when Hashem is angry at the world. This precise moment is known to be in the first three hours of the day, and is debated as to whether it is 1/4 of a second, or even as little as 1/16 of a second. This tiny amount of time isn't enough for most curses, obviously, but he actually only needed enough time for the word "kalem - annihilate them." Interestingly, Hashem held back his anger at that time, otherwise the Jews would have been destroyed (Me'em Lo'ez Balak 1 22:6).

According to one source, Bilaam was actually Lavan (Yaakov's father-in-law). According to another source, he was Lavan's son, and yet others say that he was just metaphorically compared to Lavan (Sanhedrin 105a).

Bilaam has no share in the world to come, and was deformed; he was lame in one of his legs, and was blind in one of his eyes (ibid).

As a dirty sorcerer, he performed sorcery with his loins. By means of certain phallic occult rites, he would call up spirits of the dead and cause them to settle upon it (ibid).

Showing an affinity for marketing, Bilaam was the architect of the plan to entice the Jews to sin with the women of Midian. He designed the tent situation in order for the women to lure the men in - old women selling silk outside, and young women selling inside for less (ibid).

Interestingly, all four of the Jewish ways to execute somebody (stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation) were used on him. They actually hung him over a fire, stoned him hanging there, and then cut his head off so he fell into the fire (Sanhedrin 106a).

Strangely, according to one opinion, Bilaam was only thirty-three years old when the Jewish people executed him (ibid).

Talmudic College of Florida
Rohr Talmudic University Campus
4000 Alton Road, Miami Beach, FL 33140

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Author.aspx/1199>
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
chiefrabbi.org

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
Dvar Torah: Chukat

Some of the greatest blessings are wrapped up in a curse
An example of this can be found in Parshat Chukat. The Torah tells us how Hashem had sent a plague of fiery serpents among the people. The nation called to Hashem for mercy and in reply he said to Moshe, "Place a fiery serpent at the top of a pole, 'vhaya im hashach hanachash et ish,'"

– "and it shall come to pass if any person had been bitten by a snake," – "vihibit el nachash hanachash et vechai" – "that person should just look at the fiery serpent on the pole and he would live."

Notice that this statement starts with the word, "vhaya," and there's an alternative word in Tanach which is, "vayehi" and they mean the same thing.

According to the Gemara in Masechet Megila, a statement starts with vayehi when it introduces bad news. However if a statement starts with vhaya, according to the Midrash in Bereishit Rabba, that's a sign that good news will follow.

So surely this was a 'vayehi' moment and not a 'vhaya' scenario? Somebody had been bitten. The person's life was in danger. Others around them had died. And yet the Torah says, "vhaya?"

The Meshech Chochma explains beautifully. He points out that just before this there is another 'vhaya': "vhaya kol hanashuch vra'ah otoh v'chai." This would follow for every person who had been bitten.

The Meshech Chochma says, this includes even somebody who was already ill and now on top of this a snake had bitten them. So if somebody were suffering from a terminal illness and during the course of that illness they were bitten, they had only to look at the snake on the pole and they would be cleared of their entire illness. They had a total refuah shleimah. What started out to be a double plague for them ended up opening the door to them becoming fully healed.

And so it is often in life. We see what for us appears to be a 'vayehi moment'. We are full of dread and yet, in reality, it provides a great opportunity, good things follow. And on the contrary, sometimes we appear to be facing a 'vhaya scenario' where everything looks wonderful, but actually, there is a lot that we should be concerned about.

And that is why in our Rosh Chodesh bentching at the beginning of every month we pray to Hashem: please give us "chayim sheyimalu mishalot libenu letova" – we add the word 'letova' for good. Please God, answer all of our prayers for the good. Don't give us all that we ask for because sometimes we might be praying for the wrong thing. Please channel our prayers in the right direction so that what we ask for will always be a blessing, recognising that sometimes the best of blessings are wrapped up in a curse.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

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Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg
A True Chassid

When Balak sends messengers to convince Bilam to curse Klal Yisrael, initially Bilam refuses to come; only after repeated cajoling does Bilam finally agree. Bilam cautions Balak, however, "I cannot transgress the word of Hashem (Balak 22:18)", and later he adds, "Whatever word G-d puts in my mouth, that is what I will speak (22:38)." Bilam promises to follow Hashem's command precisely. And yet, when Bilam sets out on his journey with the officers of Moav, the posuk says that Hashem was angry at Bilam for going (22:22). Why was Hashem angry if He had given Bilam permission to go and Bilam had promised to listen to all of His instructions?

Rav Elchonon Wasserman (Kuntres Divrei Sofrim 1:23-24) explains that while Hashem did not explicitly demand that Bilam not go to Balak, Bilam understood that Hashem really did not want him to go. Nevertheless, Bilam went with the hope that he would be able to convince Hashem to agree to curse Klal Yisrael (Rashi 22:20). Hashem

was not angered by Bilam because he disobeyed Him, but rather because he did not care to follow Hashem's true desire (ratzon Hashem). The navi Yirmiyahu warns that those who sacrifice to Ba'al will be punished for acting in a way that Hashem never commanded, nor spoke of, nor even considered in His heart - "lo tzivisi, lo dibarti, v'lo alsa al libi (19:17)." The Targum there explains that these three expressions refer to three parts of Torah: Hashem's commands are the mitzvos of the Torah, His speech is the words spoken by the prophets, and "considerations of His heart" refer to his true desire (ratzon Hashem) even if it is not expressed explicitly by the Torah or the prophets.

What does this third category include? Rav Elchonon explains that Hashem's will refers to mitzvos d'rabbanan. Although these mitzvos are not expressly decreed by the Torah, they are included in the general command to listen to the chachamim of every generation - "lo sasur" (Devarim 17:11). What's more, sometimes there is a hint (asmachta) to a mitzvah d'rabbanan in the Torah itself. The Ritva (Rosh Hashana 16a) writes that whenever there is an asmachta in the Torah to a mitzvah d'rabbanan it shows even more so that Hashem wanted that mitzvah to be observed. He just left it to Chazal to institute the mitzvah.

But there are other behaviors, besides mitzvos d'rabbanan, that are included within this category of ratzon Hashem. The Ramban comments in several places that sometimes the Torah mentions a general principle but does elaborate on any specifics related to that principle. The purpose of the Torah is to give an all-encompassing directive which can serve as a guideline in multiple circumstances, a sort of spirit of the law which can inform our behavior in many different contexts. That is the idea behind the concept of "kedoshim tihiyu" (Vayikra 19:2) - to exercise self-control in all mundane activities, not to be overly indulgent in physical pleasures. Similarly, the word "shabboson" (Vayikra 23:24) teaches that one should act on Shabbos in a way that demonstrates that Shabbos is different than the rest of the week. It is not enough to simply abstain from the thirty-nine biblically prohibited types of work. One must also behave in a manner that is in the spirit of Shabbos. A third overarching principle mentioned by the Torah is the concept of "v'asisa hayashar v'hatov" (Devarim 6:18). This idea demands, in a general sense, that a person act in an exemplary fashion in all of his interpersonal dealings. He should be a model of honesty and fairness; he should go beyond the call of duty (lifnim mishuras hadin) to compromise and to make peace; he should speak pleasantly with other people.

Each one of these three concepts does not legislate any specific actions. But they do give us a general sense of what kind of behavior Hashem desires, what is included in the spirit of the Torah, and they obligate us to live up to that ratzon Hashem.

The Steipler Gaon (Birchas Peretz, Vayikra) points out that there are many mitzvos which are voluntary in nature (mitzvos kiyumiyyos), like the offering of certain korbanos, separating extra money for tzedakah, and eating matza throughout the yom tov of Pesach. The purpose of these mitzvos is to give us the opportunity to demonstrate our love for the Ribbono Shel Olam and our desire to fulfill his ratzon.

The Ramchal (Mesillas Yesharim, Ch. 18) suggests that this idea is really the essence of the middah of piety (chassidus). He writes, "The root of chassidus can be epitomized by the statement of Chazal, 'Praiseworthy is the man whose labor is in Torah, and who pleases his Creator - v'oseh nachas ruach l'yotzro,' (Berachos 17a)" One who truly loves Hakadosh Boruch Hu will not be satisfied with simply fulfilling his obligations. Rather, he will look for opportunities to demonstrate his love. He is like a son who adores his father and is always looking for a chance to show his affection. If his father were to barely express his desire for something, even in a half sentence, the son would do everything he could to fulfill his father's desire. That is the attitude of a true chassid. He so desires to please Hakadosh Boruch Hu, to give him a nachas ruach, that he will try to fulfill mitzvos in the best possible way, and to even expand on his obligations in order to demonstrate his love for Hashem.

Too often, when it comes to mitzvos, people are minimalists. They are satisfied with simply carrying out what is demanded of them. As long as they fulfill the letter of the law, they feel that they are beyond reproach. But the true ben Torah appreciates that fulfilling ratzon Hashem involves much more than simply doing what is dictated explicitly by the Torah. When we strive to perform mitzvos meticulously, and we are careful not just with the letter of the law but the spirit of the law as well, we demonstrate our boundless love for Hakadosh Boruch Hu, and we can hope to merit His loving embrace in return.

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Ohr Somayach
Insights into Halacha
Rabbi Yehuda Spitz
blogs.timesofisrael.com
Ben-Tzion Spitz

Chukat: The Blessing of Satiation

Wealth after all is a relative thing since he that has little and wants less is richer than he that has much and wants more. - Charles Caleb Colton

During the fortieth year of the wandering of the Jewish people in the desert, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, dies. The Midrash states that the well which miraculously followed the people of Israel throughout their desert journey disappeared after Miriam's death. Now the people of Israel are thirsty without water. They cry out. God tells Moses to take his staff, take Aaron, and talk to a particular rock, a rock which will provide them with water. The text tells us that Moses hits the rock (as he did forty years earlier, but we don't see him talking to the rock, as God had directed this time). God subsequently punishes both Moses and Aaron with the decree that they won't cross the Jordan river into the Promised Land, but that rather, they would both die in the desert.

However, Moses' hitting the rock is nonetheless effective and a stream of water gushes out of the rock, enough to quench the thirst of the people and their flocks.

The Meshech Chochma on Numbers 20:8-11, based on the verses of the miraculous provision of water, analyses the idea of the blessings of sustenance and perhaps challenges our conventional notions of wealth and success.

It would be reasonable to believe that the more possessions we have, the more money, property, investments, and resources we can draw on, the wealthier we are, the greater the material success we have achieved. But the Meshech Chochma states that such plenty is not the highest form of blessing. It's not the quantity, but the quality that counts. And the quality he's referring to is the blessing of being satiated, of being satisfied with little. He explains that when God truly gives the most exalted and elevated material blessings that He can, he doesn't rain down quantities of material wealth on the person. Rather, God bestows the much more refined and pleasant blessing of making sure the person is satisfied and content with little.

He quotes the Midrash which states that the people of Israel weren't truly comforted until they were told that they would be satiated with little, that a little bread and a little water would be all they would need to be satisfied.

When the people of Israel don't live up to God's expectations, then they get the secondary level of sustenance: quantity. At that level they are compared to the animals, hence the verse states that the water was "for them and their flocks."

May we achieve true levels of wealth, where our needs and desires are reduced and we become satiated and satisfied with little.

Dedication - To all the people that need to reinvent their careers and businesses.

Balak: God's time versus human time

It is only in appearance that time is a river. It is rather a vast landscape and it is the eye of the beholder that moves. - Thornton Wilder

In the Torah reading of Balak, the anti-hero, the sorcerer Bilaam, famously sets out to curse the nation of Israel. Bilaam also famously fails, but his failure created some of the most beautiful and poetic blessings to be bestowed upon Israel. Out of his flowery language, the Meshech Chochma on Numbers 23:21 teases out a profound understanding of time, both from a human as well as from a divine perspective.

In our current “scientific” linear thinking, when we think about the passing of time, we typically think in terms of Past, Present, and Future. First is what came before, then we reach our present time and finally, time leads us into the unknown future. However, there are some common patterns in the description of events which can be found in biblical verses that differ from our modern way of thinking about time. One pattern can be described as “Present, Past, and Future.” For example, the verse “God rules, God ruled, God will rule.” First, we see the present, then we look back at the past and only at the end do we look forward to the future. The Meshech Chochma explains that according to human nature, we first deal with what’s in front of us, the present. After that, we examine our memories of the past, a record of which we may find in our minds. Finally, we may look to the future, a hazy and unclear vision that our imagination might conjure. The progression is from firm sensing to memory to tenuous imaginings.

However, God’s perspective on time vis-à-vis humans is entirely different. God created Time. God is beyond Time. It is ultimately incomprehensible to try to describe Time from God’s point of view. Nonetheless, the prophets, when they deliver God’s messages, are attempting just that, and their description of God’s time is indeed different. One example is from Isaiah 44:6: “I am First (Past), I am Last (Future), and besides Me, there is no god (Present).” God’s time refers to the Past first, the Future second, and the Present third.

The Meshech Chochma describes that for God, Time is one tapestry. He sees in one glimpse, if you will, a timeline that for us mortals stretches into eternity in both directions. God mentions the Past first, which stretches backward into infinity. He then moves on to the future, which ventures forwards into infinity. Finally, He mentions the Present, that infinitesimal slice of reality suspended between the two poles of eternity. May we, mere mortals, seize the present, appreciate the past, and look forward to the future.

Dedication - To Technion’s discovery of the “branched flow” of light. Illuminating.

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

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<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/>

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Chukat

Logic and Obedience

This week’s Torah portion of Chukat tells us one of the commandments that became a conceptual symbol: the commandment of “para aduma”, the red heifer. To someone unfamiliar with it, it sounds odd, but perhaps that is one of the commandment’s important messages. Let’s learn about the red heifer...

According to the Torah’s statutes, a person who comes in contact with a human dead body, or was even under the same roof as a dead body, becomes impure. The implications of this impurity focus on the proximity of this person to the Temple. Nowadays, when we have no Temple, there is almost no practical significance to these halachot

(Jewish laws) about impurity. In actuality, we have probably all been under the same roof as a body, in a hospital or at a funeral, for example. But when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, it had significance. Such a person could not enter the area of the Temple or come in contact with the sacrifices, and certainly could not eat food that had purity, such as certain sacrifices or “truma” that was given to the kohanim (priests) from the agricultural harvest.

So, what was this person supposed to do? The Torah offered him a way to purify himself using the red heifer. The details of the commandment are less important for our purposes, but we will describe them briefly. A red heifer is located that has never been used. It is slaughtered and its meat is burned, and then the ashes are mixed with pure stream water followed by a special ceremony that lasts seven days during which drops of this water are sprinkled on the impure person. This description sounds foreign to our western ears, but this does not mean that western culture is better than ancient rituals customary thousands of years ago. The significance of these ceremonies can only be understood after profound intellectual and emotional efforts.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it should be noted that the ceremony of the red heifer was mocked even in ancient times. The well-known commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, France, 11th century) said the following about the words “This is the statute of the Torah” at the beginning of this week’s parasha:

“Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, ‘What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have?’ Therefore, the Torah uses the term ‘statute.’ I have decreed it; You have no right to challenge it.”

(Rashi, Numbers 19, 2)

This is not to say that the commandment has no reason or logic. It would be mistaken to think that G-d gives commands that are meaningless.

Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker, writes adamantly about this:

“But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners, or to warn against bad habits.”

(Guide to the Perplexed 3, 31)

This doesn’t mean we understand everything. This definitive statement is a general one, but when we look at each commandment individually, we definitely find some we don’t understand. This is where the value of obedience comes into play, or as Rashi put it: “I have decreed it; You have no right to challenge it.” As people, as Jews, we obey G-d’s statutes and are sure this is the right and best way to live.

When we look at the stories in the book of Exodus of the tabernacle being built, we find a sentence that is repeated many times. Everything that was done, was done “as the Lord had commanded Moses.” The significance of the repetition is to emphasize that when we are facing a commandment from G-d, we must obey. We can try to understand it, to research and delve into its meaning, to ask and to search for answers. But at the same time, the obligation to obey cannot be undermined. The commandment of the red heifer reminds us, today as well, of the limits of human understanding, and of the obligation and need to recognize our proper place in the face of a commandment from G-d.

Parashat Balak

Loyalty to Family and Nation

This week’s Torah portion, Balak, is almost completely about seeing the Jewish nation from the outside. It describes Balak, the Moabite king who lives on the eastern side of the Jordan, who fears the Israelites encamped opposite his land. This fear leads him to a famous sorcerer named Balaam who lives in Mesopotamia. After a double negotiation, Balaam agrees to go with Balak’s emissaries in order to curse the Jewish nation. On the way, Balaam has a unique experience with a talking donkey who admonishes him for his deeds. At the end, Balaam arrives in Moab, stands on the mountain, and looks out onto the plain where the Israelites

are camped. He tries to curse the nation from the top of the mountain, but surprisingly, the words that come out of his mouth are words of blessing and praise. The end of the parasha is much less pleasant. It tells us about the nation that was seduced by the daughters of Moab and of the plague that spread through the nation. The reader can't help but ask himself if there is a connection between the stories. We will see the answer to this question only in two weeks, in Parashat Matot, where we hear Moses say who it was who advised Moab to use the weapon of sexual temptation. It was no other than Balaam himself.

If we listen to Balaam's words, we can understand his devilish scheme. Balaam understood what the Jewish nation's unique qualities were and it was those he tried to harm.

When Balaam was at the top of that mountain looking out at the Jewish nation camped in the valley, he expressed his wonderment:

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!" (Numbers 24, 5)

What was Balaam so amazed by when he saw the tents in the Israelites' camp? The great commentator, Rashi, explains this based on the words of the midrash: "For he saw that the entrances were not facing each other". Balaam noticed the norms of modesty that were customary in the Jewish nation. He saw that each family made sure not to look into the tent of its neighbor, and he appreciated this. He understood that family values require effort, and he understood that marriage requires effort, restraint, and loyalty.

Balaam noticed something else as well. He defined the Jewish nation with the following sentence:

"...it is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations" (Ibid 23, 9)

Balaam noticed not only the loyalty exhibited in a marriage or a family, but also that which was national – cultural loyalty. He understood that the value that was the foundation of the Jewish people is loyalty to its unique traditions and values. We know that Balaam was right, because thousands of years after him, we can look back on the history of the Jewish nation. Indeed, the Jews have been amazingly loyal to their values. The Jewish nation that was dispersed all around the world remained the eternal nation due to its values and traditions.

Balaam maliciously tried to destroy the values of modesty and the national uniqueness of the Jewish people. When he saw that he wasn't able to curse them, he advised the king of Moab to send Moabite girls to seduce the Israelites into promiscuity and idol worship. Balaam discovered the nation's weak point in that moment in time and tried to destroy its values of morality and faith in this despicable manner.

And we have to admit that Balaam was right. Preserving the values of modesty and family and being careful not to assimilate has protected the Jewish nation for generations. Nowadays, it's even harder. At a time when permissiveness prevails and values that were clear-cut are now ambiguous, it becomes harder to preserve these values. But if we remember that our very national and cultural existence depends on this, we can have the fortitude to face these challenges, draw courage from the glorious heritage of our forefathers, and bequeath this heritage to future generations.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: Torah in Action /Shema Yisrael <parsha@torahinaction.com>

subject: Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Chukas-Balak

פרשת חקת-בלק תש"פ

Chukas

ויקחו אליך פרה אדומה תמימה

And they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish. (19:2)

The *mitzvah* of *Parah Adumah*, Red Cow, which is used to purify one who is *tamei meis*, spiritually defiled by coming in contact with a dead body, has become known as the paradigmatic *mitzvah* whose reason is beyond human cognition. Actually, this is true with regard to all *mitzvos*. We have no idea of the reason for any one of the 613 *mitzvos*; it is just that some are easier to relate to, because they are common-sensical. The laws of *Parah Adumah* are replete with anomalies. The most difficult to accept is the fact that the *Kohen* who carries out the purification process himself becomes contaminated, while the subject of the process is rendered *tahor*, spiritually clean. The *Talmud Kiddushin* 31a records a well-known story relating to *Parah Adumah*, which is pertinent to our *parsha*.

The *Talmud* asks how far one must go to carry out the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av*, honoring one's father, properly. *Chazal* cite a story from which they derive the extent to which one should go in fulfilling this *mitzvah*. In the city of Ashkelon, a gentile by the name of Dama ben Nesinah lived, whom the sages approached concerning a business deal. He explained that the key to his storage room lay beneath his father's pillow, upon which he was presently sleeping. The sages were prepared to spend 600,000 *shekel* for stones required for the *Eiphod*. He was willing to forgo the extraordinary profit in order not to disturb his father's rest. A year later, his herd produced a *Parah Adumah*, which would obviously warrant a high price from the sages. When they approached him again, he said, "I know that I can charge you anything that I want. All I ask, however, is the amount of money I lost due to the *kavod*, honor, I gave my father." The question is obvious: Hashem could have rewarded Dama ben Nesinah with any form of compensation. Why did Hashem choose the *Parah Adumah* as His medium?

The *Kotzker Rebbe*, ז"ל (quoted by *Horav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal*, ז"ל), explains that the answer lies in Dama's response to the Sages: "I know that you will give me all that I ask." When a gentile is prepared to forgo a huge compensation in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of honoring his father, it presents a demanding allegation against the Jewish people. [Our devotion and commitment to Hashem is under scrutiny when a gentile who does not live by Torah values and is impacted by societal mores also demonstrates strong commitment.] In order to remove this implication from *Klal Yisrael*, Hashem provided the *Parah Adumah* as Dama's financial remuneration. For the most part, the *mitzvos* which Hashem has commanded us to observe are *sichliyus*, logical. They make sense and do not challenge our way of thinking. *Chukim* are those *mitzvos* for which a facile and logical rationale is unavailable.

Dama ben Nesinah had not been commanded to honor his father. He did so simply out of logical deduction, as repayment for his father having raised him. Gratitude was his motivator, not *mitzvah*. Thus, while Dama was prepared to lose money in order to honor his father, it was not to be compared to the extent to which a Jew will go to carry out Hashem's command – even when it defies rationale, such as with the *Parah Adumah*. When the sages visited Dama and offered to pay him an enormous sum of money for his *Parah Adumah*, they manifested true Jewish commitment to a *mitzvah*. What the gentile did was for something he understood to be appropriate. What *Chazal* did was for something they did not understand, but rather, for something in which they believed.

This is a powerful lesson for us. It is not about reward. We serve Hashem because we are His chosen children. Children neither question a father (or mother), nor do they have to understand why they are being told to do something. (Obviously, this is a broad statement and requires qualification according to the specific case.) "Why?" is a question that plagues everyone at one point or another. "Why suffering?" "Why me?" "Why this *mitzvah*?" There is no end to the "whys." I saw an insight from *Horav Shlomo Freifeld*, ז"ל (*Reb Shlomo*, by Rabbi Yisrael Besser), that is inspiring. *Rav Freifeld* would visit a certain school that addressed the

spiritual educational needs of students who were encountering challenges in these areas. During one such visit, he asked the students whether they had any questions for him. These are some of the questions that troubled them: “Have the Jews not suffered enough?” “Why must we continue to suffer?” “I want so badly to be religious, to keep *Shabbos*, but my parents fight me every step of the way. Why does Hashem make it so difficult for me?”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* listened and was visibly moved by their sincere questions: “I wish I had such profound questions as you do. Truthfully, I really do not know the answers to your questions. You see, every one of us confronts challenges, *nisyanos*, trials, which makes his particular job/mission very difficult. Our responsibility is to persevere, not to figure out why we have these trials and tribulations. Success means to try to be normal, to enjoy life as much as possible even with these obstacles in our path. We just have to face each day with a smile and do our jobs, not understand why. Remember, we are here to enjoy life.”

I would like to present one more aphorism which is pertinent to this Torah thought. *Rav Freifeld* quoted his revered *Rebbe, Horav Yitzchok Hutner, zl*, “My *Rebbe, zl*, explained the two phrases in the *brachah, Asher bachar banu*, ‘That He chose us,’ and *u’nasan lanu es Toraso*, ‘and He gave us His Torah,’ as follows: The first part, that Hashem chose us, refers to the fact that we are *Yidden*; the second part is thanking Him for giving us the *mitzvos*.

“I believe that, in the early part of the century (twentieth), the *nisayon*, the struggle, was for the second part of the *brachah*. Every single man, woman and child felt like a *Yid*. They took pride in their identity as Jews. They thanked Him, *Asher bachar banu*.

“Their battle was for *kiyum ha’mitzvos*, the second part of the *brachah*. It was difficult for them to keep the *mitzvos b’poel*, practically. Today, we have it so easy. We no longer have to struggle to keep *mitzvos*. (We are able to serve Hashem wherever we want.) The battle has shifted to the first part: *asher bachar banu*. The struggle today is to be *Yidden*.

“We must remember: Without the *asher bachar banu*, there is no *v’nasan lanu*. We must be *Yidden* first.” Bearing the mantle of Judaism means that one is proud of his chosenness, of his distinction. His commitment to serve Hashem demonstrates this pride; it is the only way.

וישלח ד' בעם את הנחשים השרפים ... ויאמרו חטאנו ... והיה הנשך וראה אתו וחי
Then Hashem let the poisonous snakes loose against the people ...
They said, “We have sinned” ... that everyone who is bitten when he looks upon it he shall live. (21:6,7,8)

It was not the first time; once again, the people did not receive what they perceived they needed. Their first reaction was to complain, “This is no good; that is no good.” Immediately, they directed their discontent against Hashem. They did not doubt the authenticity of Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s leadership; they had issues with Hashem’s guidance. They would never reach the Promised Land if they were to continue along this path in the wretched wilderness. Veritably, they had nourishment from the *manna*, but what about some real food and drink? Furthermore, obtaining *manna* was effortless, almost monotonous. They wanted some excitement in their lives. Life was too easy. They had become so accustomed to Hashem’s beneficence that they took it for granted. When we take something for granted, we fail to appreciate not only our benefactor, but also the value of the gift. The people had convoluted and slanted the excellent quality of their gift, processing it as if it were insufficient for them.

How does one punish an ingrate? Simply retract the gift, allow him to see that all of the protection and good life to which he had become accustomed was not natural; it was the super-natural result of Heavenly intervention, or miracle.

Vayishalach has been translated, “Then (Hashem) let loose,” rather than “(Hashem) sent.” *Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl*, explains the difference between “sending” and “letting go.” *Shlach*, send, in the *kal* form (*vayishlach*), means to send something in motion towards a goal. *Shaleach*, in the *piel*

form (*va’yeshalach*) predominantly means to let something go, to allow it to follow its natural course, to refrain from holding it back. *Rav Hirsch* explains that here, too, Hashem did not send the serpents, but rather, let them go; He did not hold them back.

These serpents made their home in the wilderness. They were standard fare of which the wilderness travelers should be wary. Hashem withdrew His restraining power, and the serpents returned to their natural habitat. When the people came to the stark realization that their “boring” life was actually far from monotonous; when they opened their eyes to see the constant dangers which dog a person’s steps as he journeys through the wilderness of life, they realized – and were prepared to acknowledge – that their “monotony” was a miracle. Their Heavenly Father, concerning Whom they had been complaining, had sponsored this miracle.

The cure? When the snake bit an individual he had only to fix his gaze upon the image of the serpent and allow it to be embedded in his mind. In this way, he came to grips with the reality of life, with the verity that each and every Jew must repeat and hold dear: Every breath we take in our life is a fresh gift from Hashem’s might and goodness. The next time that they might be moved to complain, the people would remember what it means to live without the Heavenly protection to which we have all become accustomed. The image of the serpent will be permanently impressed upon the mind of the one who has been bitten. There is no more effective therapy.

Balak

וישלח מלאכים אל בלעם בן בעור

He sent agents to Bilaam ben Beor. (22:5)

Is it possible that, concerning all outward appearances, one not only manifests himself as righteous, but he even receives the fringe benefits and special treatment accorded to a *tzaddik*; yet, he remains throughout a despicable *rasha*, wicked person, of the lowest order? Yes! Bilaam showed us that it can be done. Bilaam was Hashem’s “gift” to the pagan/gentile world, so that they could not assert that they had no worthy spiritual leadership. Bilaam was on a lofty spiritual plane, a prophet of the highest order. He was the gentile world’s Moshe. So what happened? He refused to purge himself of his flawed *middos*, character traits. He was a wise man who knew quite well how to conceal his moral turpitude. Everything that he said and did could have two connotations. As a spiritual leader to the pagans, they looked at Bilaam’s positive side and assumed that what he was doing had a lofty moral/spiritual foundation, while, in truth, he was an immoral, perverted megalomaniac who probably even believed his own ruse.

Wherein lay the difference between our quintessential leader, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and the pagan’s poor excuse for a leader? Outwardly, Bilaam acted the part of the prophet. Where did Moshe and Bilaam part ways? Let us look at one instance in which they both demurred listening to Hashem, and observe the difference. The mere fact that Bilaam stalled in accepting Hashem’s instructions indicated the spiritual place that he had achieved. The Almighty instructed Bilaam to go with Balak’s agents. Bilaam stalled for more money and greater honor. He (of course) attributed his delay to G-d, claiming that He was not pleased with the idea that he would go with Balak’s agents. This was but one more indication of a man who spoke out of both sides of his mouth, or that his heart (intention) and his mouth (what he said) were not aligned.

Moshe also delayed going to Egypt. He demurred accepting the leadership role of the nation out of respect for his older brother, Aharon *HaKohen*, who had until then been the acting spiritual leader of the people. Thus, we observe two members of the spiritual elite: one who is truly righteous; and one who is evil-incarnate. For all intents and purposes, however, to the unsuspecting, superficial observer, they appear to be one and the same.

I write this during the coronavirus plague that has assaulted the world. It is the day after that first *Shabbos* when thousands of observant Jews throughout the world were compelled to *daven* without a *minyan*,

relegated to their homes for *davening*, *krias haTorah*, *Rosh Chodesh bentching*, etc. It was trying for everyone, but nonetheless spiritually uplifting as each one of us poured out our hearts in unison, albeit physically apart, to the Almighty, pleading for mercy and an end to the scourge that was devastating the world. The next day, I met someone who remarked that he, too, did not go to Temple, so now, for a change, we were both the “same.” I replied that actually there was a major difference between us: I felt bad that I did not go. This was more than I could say for him. (Veritably, he never had the opportunity to attend services as a youth – growing up in a totally secular family. As a result, he was alienated from Jewish religious observance.) The reality is that *Yiddishkeit* is much more than going to *shul*. It is what takes place in *shul*: *Davening* to Hashem makes the experience special. During the especially difficult period of isolation which we all are experiencing it is evident that our *davening*, our actual speaking to Hashem, is what has created the relationship and makes the *shul* experience so meaningful. Sadly, unless one has undergone the spiritual uplift experienced upon *davening* with a *minyan*, it is nothing more than *shul* attendance.

Horav Arye Leib Heyman, zl, explains that Bilaam is a prime example of *ohr v'choshech meshamshin b'arvuyah*, fusion/intermingling of light and darkness. Indeed, in Bilaam's case, the very light itself was corrupted and distorted by his darkness, his flawed character traits. If a person does not expunge the evil/darkness within him, then light and darkness will coexist and influence him equally. Does not a bit of light dissipate much darkness? *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl*, explains that a human being is different. The darkness of a human being is not merely the absence of light. It is, rather, a powerful force in its own right, asserting itself within a person, demanding equal time, even in the company of such a powerful force of light.

Regrettably, one is able to achieve exemplary erudition, to be a scholar of note, a man whose words inspire many, an individual whose students cling to him and are even spiritually elevated by his words and actions, even though his character may be defective. One might argue that Bilaam was a pagan. What more can we expect from an individual whose concept of spiritual devotion and service was the Peor godhead, who was serviced by relieving oneself in its presence. Could one of “ours” set such an example? Doeig Ha'Adomi was the head of the *Sanhedrin*, Achitofel was David *HaMelech's* *rebbe*; and who can ignore the “greatest” of all: Yaravam ben Nevat? Concerning these three individuals who personified *ohr v'choshech mishamshin b'arvuyah*, *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 106B) teach: *Ein lahem chelek l'Olam Habba*; “they forfeited their portion in the World to Come.” Apparently, *choshech*, darkness, evil, can take a front row to light, even in a Jew.

We derive from here that external activity and expression do not define a person's true relationship with Hashem. In order to authenticate our superficial actions, we must purge whatever inner blemishes we have that impugn their integrity. Then, others can see us as we really are.

מה טובו אהליך יעקב

How goodly are your tents, Yaakov. (24:5)

What impressed Bilaam about the Jewish tents? Bilaam saw that the entrances to one another precluded intrusions on the privacy of other families. Furthermore, tents refer to the *batei medrash*, study halls. (According to *Rashi*, it refers to the *Mishkan* and *Batei Mikdash* when they were extant.) At first glance, *tznius*, privacy and modesty, and study halls do not seem to coincide, unless the Torah is suggesting to us that the study hall – or Torah study of those who occupy the *bais hamedrash*, who devote themselves wholly to studying Hashem's Torah – should reflect *tznius*, privacy and modesty, in their every demeanor. Studying Torah is the loftiest ideal, reserved for the few who are willing to relinquish the material fringe benefits of this world for the eternal spiritual reward associated with Torah learning. It should not become a source for one-upmanship and calling attention to one's own achievements. Everything that we do should be executed with modesty.

It is notable that Bilaam focused on *tznius* more than any of the other wonderful attributes in which *Klal Yisrael* excels. The nation that had reached the apex of spirituality during the Revelation at *Har Sinai* was merciful, meek and kind. Why did Bilaam curtail his curse, blessing them instead, specifically because of their modesty? *Horav Tzvi Kushelevsky, Shlita*, cites a life-saving case in which modesty played a leading role. In the struggle between Shaul and David, the king wanted to kill the man who would marry his daughter and ultimately assume the position as king. The story goes that Shaul was pursuing David, so that David and his entourage fled to a cave and made it their hiding place. Shaul was unaware of this. At some point, Shaul required use of the “facilities.” Indoor plumbing was not yet available, so he entered the cave which afforded him a degree of privacy. He had no clue that he was entering David's hiding place.

David saw the king entering his place of refuge and resisted killing him. *Halachically*, Shaul was a *rodef*, pursuer; thus, pursuant to the laws of self-defense, David could save himself by taking his pursuer's life. Instead, David cut a corner of Shaul's garment, later sending a message: “It could have been you.” What did David observe about Shaul that impelled him to change his mind, to restrain himself from killing Shaul?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that David saw this element of modesty in the way Shaul covered himself, even though he was in an apparently empty cave. No one would see him, so why did he bother? He understood that modesty is not only from others, but for oneself. Hashem is always with us wherever we go. To act immodestly is to imply, “I do not care.” Respect for Hashem and respect for oneself should motivate a person's modesty. A person who dresses or acts immodestly indicates that he or she is insecure and requires public recognition, regardless of the consequences.

The *Maharal* suggests that the trait of *tznius* protects one from being subjugated. One who makes himself hidden and covered will not be covered by anyone else. When Bilaam took note of our *tznius*, he realized that Hashem would grant us an extra dose of protection. We have the added protection that accompanies concealment.

Horav Eliyahu Dushnitzer, zl, was one of the premier *talmidim*, students, of the *Chafetz Chaim*. As *Mashgiach* of the nascent Lomza *Yeshivah* in *Eretz Yisrael*, he was spiritual mentor to many of the future *gedolim*, Torah giants, in the Holy Land. He was extremely careful in areas of *kashrus*; thus, he did not ever eat the food served by the *yeshivah*. He had a woman cook for him in accordance with his exacting standards.

During the British Mandate, the British were paranoid about spies. They would send anyone whom they remotely suspected of sabotage to labor camps in British-controlled Kenya. Understandably, conditions in a labor camp situated in a third world country were deplorable, at best. Sadly, one of those incarcerated by the British and destined to be sent to Kenya was Motke, the only son of the woman who cooked for the *Mashgiach*. Distraught and filled with anguish, the woman ran to *Rav Elya* and pleaded with him to give her a blessing that would spare her son.

Rav Elya was acquiescent, and he said that not only would he give her a *brachah*, he would also give her a *z'chus*, merit, to ensure the blessing's successful outcome. He then went on to suggest that she strengthen herself in her *tznius*. While her dedication to *kashrus* was peerless, she could improve certain aspects of the way she dressed. *Rav Elya* told her that he was certain that her son would be spared if she would initiate certain changes to her dress code. In fact, he said, “If you listen to my directive, Motke will be home on Friday two weeks hence.”

The cook listened intently. She loved her son, but the manner of her dress represented who she was. She was prepared to upgrade her performance of any other *mitzvah*, but *tznius* was asking too much. *Rav Elya* was adamant about her son's safety in return for her commitment to *tznius*: Which would it be?

When the woman came home and related her conversation with *Rav Elya* to her husband, he was floored, “You are ready to turn over the world to

get our Motke back, but you refuse to augment the way you religiously dress? If the *Mashgiach* made you a promise, why would you refuse to listen to him?" Her husband's words penetrated her mind, and she immediately made the halachic alterations to her clothing. She was now confident that Motke would arrive in two weeks, in time for *Shabbos*.

Two weeks passed, and all Friday she stood waiting by the window. Finally, she could wait no longer, and, with tears streaming down her face, she went to *bentch licht*, light the *Shabbos* candles. Right then, the door flung open, and Motke was home! Tears of joy replaced those of anguish as she lit the candles with her son standing next to her.

"Tell me, Motke," she asked, after the candles were lit, "how were you able to leave jail? How did you get home from there?"

"Today, we were instructed to pack our belongings in preparation for our trip to Kenya," Motke began. "I stood in line with the other prisoners, knowing that this was it. I would never return to my Land, my house, my family. Suddenly, a British general called and motioned for me to follow him. He led me from one gate through another until I was out of the jail. He said to me, 'Run home!' I had no idea where I was. I jumped into the first car that stopped when I waved, and the driver brought me home."

The mother and father were certain that the British general was none other than Eliyahu *HaNavi*, who was sent to intervene in Motke's behalf. All this was in the merit of *tznius*.

Va'ani Tefillah

על חיינו המסורים בידך – Al chayeinu ha'mesurim b'Yadecha. For our lives which are entrusted in Your hand.

First and foremost, we thank Hashem for giving us our lives. We take life and health for granted until they hang precariously in the balance right before our eyes. It is crucial that we not take them for granted and that we appreciate their Source and appropriately express our gratitude. Hashem is with us from our first breath until our last. *Al kol neshimah u'neshimah tehallel Kah*; "For each and every breath that we take, we must praise Hashem." Nary a moment of our existence passes that He does not will it to be. Perhaps this idea is best expressed by the words, *ha'mesurim b'yadecha*; "which are entrusted in Your hands." Why hands? Do "hands" grant life? I would think that the gift of life is issued from the mouth through a command. The concept of the mouth granting life is pejorative, however, since it might imply that Hashem says, "Live" and a person lives. When we attribute life to Hashem's hands, it is as if we are saying that He holds us up. Without Hashem's constant support, we would fall flat on our face.

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"Love and memories are gifts from G-d that death cannot destroy"

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

From Jeffrey Gross <jgross@torah.org>

reply-To neustadt@torah.org, genesis@torah.org

To weekly-halacha@torah.org

Subject Weekly Halacha

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt (dneustadt@cordetroit.com)

Yoshev Rosh - Vaad HaRabanim of Detroit

Weekly Halacha :: Parshas Chukas :: Amplified Sound Waves

Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

Question: Can one fulfill a mitzvah which involves hearing something recited or read, e.g., hearing Havdalah or the reading of the Megillah, by hearing the words over a telephone or from the loudspeaker of a public address system?

Discussion: The answer to this question, extensively debated by the poskim, depends on the halachic interpretation of certain technical facts. Both the telephone and the public address system "transform" sound waves in air, e.g., spoken words, into an electrical current within the instrument, and, ultimately, back into sound waves. It is debatable, though, how the halachah views these sound waves: 1) Are they an extension of the speaker's voice, merely amplified or carried to a distance that the unassisted human voice cannot reach; or are they 2) distinct from the speaker's voice, since the loudspeaker or receiver "creates" new sound waves from something—an electrical current, which is not sound? Translated from technical into halachic terms, the question is whether the mitzvah in question can be fulfilled only with the authentic, original voice of the speaker, or also by means of sounds generated by electrical impulses derived from the original voice and occurring simultaneously with it.

Some earlier authorities were of the opinion that the sound heard over the telephone or from the loudspeaker is the original speaker's voice[1]. It is permitted, therefore, in their opinion[2] to listen to the Megillah read over a public address system or to Havdalah over the telephone.

Other authorities[3] maintained that the halachic view of amplified sounds is difficult to resolve and cannot be clearly decided. Thus in their opinion it remains questionable if mitzvos can be performed by means of a public address system or telephone. It follows, therefore, that only under extenuating circumstances—when no other possibility exists—is it permitted to fulfill a mitzvah by means of a loudspeaker or telephone[4]. However, the majority of the authorities[5] who have studied this issue, including Rav S.Z. Auerbach[6] who researched it extensively with the aid of a team of technical experts[7], have ruled conclusively that the sound waves emitted by a loudspeaker or telephone receiver are definitely not the speaker's original, authentic voice. In addition, they rule unequivocally that one's obligation cannot be discharged by hearing an electrically generated sound even if the original speaker's voice is heard simultaneously. Accordingly, one cannot fulfill a mitzvah by listening to sound waves from a microphone or a telephone[8].

In practice, therefore, it is clear that when another possibility exists, mechanical voice amplifiers should not be used to fulfill a mitzvah. For example, a woman who is home alone and has no one to make Havdalah for her should rather recite Havdalah herself[9] than listen to it being recited by someone else over the telephone. Even if she cannot or will not drink wine, grape juice, or beer, it is preferable for her to recite Havdalah over coffee[10], tea (with or without milk)[11], or milk alone[12] (and, according to some poskim[13], undiluted grapefruit, orange or apple juice as well) than to listen to Havdalah recited over the phone[14].

If one finds himself in a situation where otherwise he cannot recite Havdalah or hear the Megillah at all, e.g. in a hospital, and there is no one who can come until Tuesday evening[15] to make Havdalah for him, he may have to rely on the poskim who permit listening to blessings, etc., over the telephone[16]. But in a situation where someone could come and recite Havdalah for him before Tuesday evening, the correct procedure is to wait until then for Havdalah to be recited[17]. If he is weak, he may eat before hearing Havdalah. If he is not weak, and he anticipates that he would be able to hear Havdalah before chatzos Sunday, he should refrain from eating until then[18].

A related issue is whether or not it is permitted to answer Amen to a blessing or Kaddish heard over a microphone, telephone, or during a live telecast transmitted by satellite. Some poskim[19] permit this and do not consider the answering of Amen etc., to be *l'vatalah* ("for nothing"), since they remain undecided about the halachic status of amplified sound waves, as explained above. In addition, some poskim[20] permit it, based on the ancient precedent set in the great synagogue in Alexandria[21], where most people did not hear the blessings being recited because of its vast size, but were nevertheless permitted to answer Amen when signaled to do so by the waving of a flag.

Rav Auerbach, though, rejects this comparison and rules clearly that it is prohibited to answer Amen upon hearing a blessing in this manner. He agrees, however, that one who is in the vicinity of the speaker, even though he hears the speaker's voice only over a microphone, etc., is permitted to answer Amen, as was the case in Alexandria where everyone was inside the shul and part of the congregation that was davening[22].

1. *Minchas Elazar* 2:72; *Minchas Aharon* 18 (quoted in *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11).
2. Their argument is based partially on the fact that sound waves—even without being mechanically transmitted—are carried through the air before they are heard by the listener. The fact that the microphone amplifies those sounds and furthers their distance should not be considered halachically problematic.
3. Rav T. P. Frank (*Mikraei Kodesh*, Purim 11 and in *Minchas Yitzchak* 2:113); *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 2:108; O.C. 4:126. [See, however, *Igros Moshe*, E.H. 3:33 and O.C. 4:84.] Rav Y.E. Henkin (*Eidus l'Yisrael*, pg. 122) also does not render a clear decision on this issue. See also *Minchas Shelomo* 1:9 quoting an oral conversation with the Chazon Ish.
4. *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 4:91-4 (and oral ruling quoted in *Kol ha-Torah*, vol. 54, pg. 18); *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11. See also *Shevet ha-Levi* 5:84.
5. *Da'as Torah*, O.C. 689:2; *Gilyonei ha-Shas*, *Berachos* 25a; *Eretz Tzvi* 1:23; *Kol Mevasser* 2:25; *Mishpatei Uziel* 1:5; 1:21; *Minchas Yitzchak* 1:37, 3:38; *She'arim Metzuyanim b'Halachah* 129:25; 193:6; *Yagel Yaakov*, pg. 280, quoting Rav Y.S. Elyashiv and Rav C. Kanievsky; *Kinyan Torah* 1:75; *Yechaveh Da'as* 3:54; *Moadim u'Zemanim* 6:105. See also *Teshuvos P'as Sadcha* 1:126 who quotes a similar ruling from Rav C. Soloveitchik.
6. *Minchas Shelomo* 1:9.
7. Rav Auerbach and *Yechaveh Da'as* opine that those poskim who dissented from this ruling were not familiar with the relevant technology.
8. Rav Auerbach makes clear that the same ruling applies to hearing-impaired individuals who cannot hear without a hearing aid. *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 4:85 is hesitant over whether a hearing aid works exactly like a microphone.
9. Women are obligated to recite Havdalah and may recite it themselves. Although there is a well-established custom that women do not drink the wine from the Havdalah cup, this custom is discounted when a woman needs to fulfill her obligation of Havdalah; *Mishnah Berurah* 296:35; *Aruch ha-Shulchan* 296:5.
10. Instant or brewed (Rav S.Z. Auerbach, *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 60, note 18).
11. The tea or coffee should be cooled off enough to drink at least 1.6 fl. oz. within 3-4 minutes.
12. *Aruch ha-Shulchan* 272:14; *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 2:75.
13. *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:16; *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 60:5.
14. If a woman refuses to recite Havdalah on her own and there is no one available to recite it for her, her husband (or another man or woman) may repeat it for her, even if he has already fulfilled his obligation earlier; see *Mishnah Berurah* 296:36; *Aruch ha-Shulchan* 296:5; *Da'as Torah* 296:8; *Ben Ish Chai*, *Vayeitzei* 22. The blessing over the candle, though, should be omitted, in the opinion of several poskim.
15. O.C. 299:5.
16. *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 4:91-4; *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:11.
17. In this case, one should specifically not listen to Havdalah over the phone, since then it may not be repeated for him when the visitor comes.
18. *Mishnah Berurah* 296:19, 21. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv, too, is quoted (*Yad le-Yoledes*, pg. 135) as ruling that it is better to eat before Havdalah than to listen to it over the telephone.
19. *Igros Moshe*, O.C. 4:91-4.
20. *Yechaveh Da'as* 3:54.
21. See *Succah* 51b and *Tosafos*, *ibid*.
22. See *Halichos Shelomo* 1:22-15.

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Rabbi Neustadt is the *Yoshev Rosh* of the *Vaad Harabbonim of Detroit* and the *Av Beis Din* of the *Beis Din Tzedek of Detroit*. He could be reached at dneustadt@cordetroit.com

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Shabbat Parashat Chukat-Balak

5780 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Kohelet, Tolstoy and the Red Heifer

The command of the parah adumah, the Red Heifer, with which our parsha begins, is known as the hardest of the mitzvot to understand. The opening words, zot chukat ha-Torah, are taken to mean, this is the supreme example of a chok in the Torah, that is, a law whose logic is obscure, perhaps unfathomable.

It was a ritual for the purification of those who had been in contact with, or in, certain forms of proximity to a dead body. A dead body is the primary source of impurity, and the defilement it caused to the living meant that the person so affected could not enter the precincts of the Tabernacle or Temple until cleansed, in a process that lasted seven days.

A key element of the purification process involved a Priest sprinkling the person so affected, on the third and seventh day, with a specially prepared liquid known as "the water of cleansing." First a Red Heifer had to be found, without a blemish, and which had never been used to perform work: a yoke had never been placed on it. This was ritually killed and burned outside the camp. Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool were added to the fire, and the ashes placed in a vessel containing "living" i.e. fresh water. It was this that was sprinkled on those who had become impure by contact with death. One of the more paradoxical features of the rite is that though it cleansed the impure, it rendered impure those who were involved with the preparation of the water of cleansing.

Though the ritual has not been practised since the days of the Temple, it nonetheless remains significant, in itself and for an understanding of what a chok, usually translated as "statute," actually is. Other instances include the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen (shatnez) and sowing a field with two kinds of grain (kilayim). There have been several very different explanations of chukim.

The most famous is that a chok is a law whose logic we cannot understand. It makes sense to God, but it makes no sense to us. We cannot aspire to the kind of cosmic wisdom that would allow us to see its point and purpose. Or perhaps, as Rav Saadia Gaon put it, it is a command issued for no other reason than to reward us for obeying it.[1]

The Sages recognised that whereas Gentiles might understand Jewish laws based on social justice (mishpatim) or historical memory (edot), commands such as the prohibition of eating meat and milk together seemed irrational and superstitious. The chukim were laws of which "Satan and the nations of the world made fun." [2]

Maimonides had a quite different view. He believed that no Divine command was irrational. To suppose otherwise was to think God inferior to human beings. The chukim only appear to be inexplicable because we have forgotten the original context in which they were ordained. Each of them was a rejection of, and education against, some idolatrous practice. For the most part, however, such practises have died out, which is why we now find the commands hard to understand. [3]

A third view, adopted by Nahmanides in the thirteenth century [4] and further articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth, is that the chukim were laws designed to teach the integrity of nature. Nature has its own laws, domains and boundaries, to cross which is to dishonour the divinely created order, and to threaten nature itself. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) and animal death (meat). As for the Red Heifer, Hirsch says that the ritual is to cleanse humans from depression brought about by reminders of human mortality.

My own view is that chukim are commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex. The root from which the word chok comes is h-k-k, meaning, "to engrave." Writing is on the surface; engraving cuts much deeper than the surface. Rituals go deep below the surface of the mind, and for an important reason. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make momentous mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain. We also have an extremely powerful set of reactions to potential danger, located in the amygdala, that lead us to flee, freeze or fight. A moral system, to be adequate to the human condition, must recognise the nature of the human condition. It must speak to our fears.

The most profound fear most of us have is of death. As La Rochefoucauld said, "Neither the sun nor death can be looked on with a steady eye." Few have explored death and the tragic shadow it casts over life more profoundly than the author of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes):

"The fate of man is the fate of cattle; the same fate awaits them both, the death of one is like the death of the other, their spirits are the same, and the pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for it is all shallow breath. All end in the same place; all emerge from dust and all go back to dust" (Eccl. 3:19-20).

The knowledge that he will die robs Kohelet of any sense of the meaningfulness of life. We have no idea what will happen, after our death, to what we have achieved in life. Death makes mockery of virtue: the hero may die young while the coward lives to old age. And bereavement is tragic in a different way. To lose those we love is to have the fabric of our life torn, perhaps irreparably. Death defiles in the simplest, starkest sense: mortality opens an abyss between us and God's eternity.

It is this fear, existential and elemental, to which the rite of the Heifer is addressed. The animal itself is the starkest symbol of pure, animal life, untamed, undomesticated. The red, like the scarlet of the wool, is the colour of blood, the essence of life. The cedar, tallest of trees, represents vegetative life. The hyssop symbolises purity. All these were reduced to ash in the fire, a powerful drama of mortality. The ash itself was then dissolved in water, symbolising continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. The body dies but the spirit flows on. A generation dies but another is born. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, and a trace of us is carried onward to the future.

The person in modern times who most deeply experienced and expressed what Kohelet felt was Tolstoy, who told the story in his essay, A Confession. [5] By the time he wrote it, in his early fifties, he had already published two of the greatest novels ever written, War and Peace and Anna Karenina. His literary legacy was secure. His greatness was universally recognised. He was married, with children. He had a large estate. His health was good. Yet he was overcome with a sense of the meaninglessness of life in the face of the knowledge that we will all die. He quoted Kohelet at length. He contemplated suicide. The question that haunted him was: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?" [6]

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He searched for an answer in science, but all it told him was that “in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.” Science deals in causes and effects, not purpose and meaning. In the end, he concluded that only religious faith rescues life from meaninglessness. “Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life.”[7] What is needed is something other than rational knowledge. “Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something ... If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live.”[8]

That is why, to defeat the defilement of contact with death, there must be a ritual that bypasses rational knowledge. Hence the rite of the Red Heifer, in which death is dissolved in the waters of life, and those on whom it is sprinkled are made pure again so that they can enter the precincts of the Shechinah and re-establish contact with eternity.

We no longer have the Red Heifer and its seven-day purification ritual, but we do have the shiva, the seven days of mourning during which we are comforted by others and thus reconnected with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, as the ashes of the Heifer were dissolved in the “living water.” We emerge, still bereaved, but in some measure cleansed, purified, able again to face life.

I believe that we can emerge from the shadow of death if we allow ourselves to be healed by the God of life. To do so, though, we need the help of others. “A prisoner cannot release himself from prison,”[9] says the Talmud. It took a Kohen to sprinkle the waters of cleansing. It takes comforters to lift our grief. But faith – faith from the world of chok, deeper than the rational mind – can help cure our deepest fears.

[1] Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Book III.

[2] Yoma 67b.

[3] *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:31.

[4] *Commentary to Leviticus* 19:19.

[5] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Penguin Classics, 1987.

[6] *Ibid.*, 35.

[7] *Ibid.*, 50.

[8] *Ibid.*, 54.

[9] Brachot 5b.

The Hidden Meaning of the Bilam Story

Many questions have rightly been asked about the story of Balak and Bilam and the would-be curses that turned into blessings. Was Bilam a true man of God, or was he a fraud, a magician, a sorcerer, a practitioner of dark arts? Did he have genuine powers? Was he really – as some of the Sages said – the equal of Moses?[1] Was he driven by the prospect of reward and honour from the Moabites and Midianites, or was he motivated by animosity toward the Israelites and their seeming closeness to God? Why did God first tell him

not to go, then seemingly change His mind and tell him to go? What is the meaning of the episode of the talking donkey? Did it really happen, or was it, as Maimonides argued, a vision in Bilam’s mind?[2]

These are real questions, much debated. But there are more fundamental ones. What is the story doing here at all? The entire episode occurred away from the Israelites. No one from their side, not even Moses, was there to witness it. The only witnesses were Balak, Bilam, and some Moabite princes. Had the Israelites known the danger they were in, and how they were saved from it, it would have given them pause for thought before engaging in immorality and idol worship with the Moabite women, in the episode that follows on immediately from the story of Bilam. They would have known that the Moabites were not their friends.

Even Moses would not have known what happened, had God not told him. In short, the Israelites were rescued from a danger they knew nothing about by a deliverance they knew nothing about. How then did it, or could it, affect them?

Besides which, why did God need Bilam to go at all? He said ‘No’ the first time. He could have said ‘No’ the second time also. The curses would have been avoided, Israel would have been protected, and there would have been no need for the angel, the talking donkey and the various locations, sacrifices, and attempted curses. The entire drama seems to have been unnecessary.

Why did God put into Bilam’s mouth the extraordinary poetry that makes the blessings among the most lyrical passages in the Torah. All He really needed Bilam to say – and Bilam did eventually say it[3] – was the promise He gave to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse” (Gen. 12:3).

Who was to be affected by this episode? What was the intended change it was meant to bring about? Who was its target audience? It did not affect the Moabites. They proceeded to get their women to successfully entice the Israelite men. A plague then struck the Israelites, taking 24,000 lives.

It did not affect the Midianites, whose hostility to Israel was such that God later told Moses: “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them” (Num. 25:17-18). Several chapters later God instructed Moses to take military vengeance against them (Numbers 31).

It did not affect Bilam himself. The Torah is very subtle about this. First, we read about the Moabite seduction of the Israelites and the deadly plague it caused. Then, six chapters later, we read that in the course of the war against the Midianites, Bilam was killed (31:8). Then, several verses later, “They were

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the ones who followed Bilam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people” (Num. 31:16). In other words, having gone through what should surely have been a transformative experience of finding curses turned to blessings in his mouth, Bilam remained implacably opposed to the people he had blessed, and seemingly to the God who put the words into his mouth, and was still capable of devising a plot to injure the Israelites.

It did not change the Israelites, who remained vulnerable to the Moabites, Midianites, and the enticements of sex, food and foreign gods. It did not change Moses, who left it to Pinchas to take the decisive act that stopped the plague and was soon thereafter told that Joshua would succeed him as leader.

So, if it did not change the Moabites, Midianites, Israelites, Bilam or Moses, what was the point of the episode? What role did it play in the story of our people? For it does play a significant role. In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that the Moabites “did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Bilam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you” (Deut. 23:4-5).

Joshua, when he came to renew the covenant after the conquest of the land, gave an abridged summary of Jewish history, singling out this event for attention: “When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Bilam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Bilam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.” (Josh. 24:9-10).

The prophet Micah, younger contemporary of Isaiah, said in the name of God, “My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Bilam son of Beor answered,” just before he delivers his famous summary of the religious life: “He has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:5, 8).

At the culmination of the reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah after the Babylonian exile, Nehemiah had the Torah read to the people, reminding them that an Ammonite or Moabite may not enter “the assembly of the Lord” because “they did not meet the Israelites with food and water but had hired Bilam to call a curse down on them. Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing” (Neh. 13:2).

Why the resonance of an event that seemingly had no impact on any of the parties involved, made no difference to what happened

thereafter and yet was deemed to be so important that it occupied a central place in the telling of Israel's story by Moses, Joshua, Micah and Nehemiah?

The answer is fundamental. We search in vain for an explanation of why God should have made a covenant with a people who repeatedly proved to be ungrateful, disobedient and faithless. God Himself threatened twice to destroy the people, after the Golden Calf and the episode of the spies. Toward the end of our parsha, He sent a plague against them.

There were other religious peoples in the ancient world. The Torah calls Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, "a priest of God most high." (Gen. 14:18). Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite priest who gave his son-in-law sound advice as to how to lead. In the book of Jonah, during the storm, while Jonah the Hebrew Prophet was sleeping, the Gentile sailors were praying. When the Prophet arrived at Nineveh and delivered his warning, immediately the people repented, something that happened rarely in Judah/Israel. Malachi, last of the Prophets, says:

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is honoured among the nations – said the Lord of Hosts – but you profane it ... (Mal. 1:11-12)

Why then choose Israel? The answer is love. Virtually all the Prophets said so. God loves Israel. He loved Abraham. He loves Abraham's children. He is often exasperated by their conduct, but He cannot relinquish that love. He explains this to the prophet Hosea. Go and marry a woman who is unfaithful. He says. She will break your heart, but you will still love her, and take her back (Hos. 1-3).

Where, though, in the Torah does God express this love? In the blessings of Bilam. That is where He gives voice to His feelings for this people. "I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights: This is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations." "Lo, a people that rises like a lion, leaps up like the king of beasts." "How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!" These famous words are not Bilam's. They are God's – the most eloquent expression of His love for this small, otherwise undistinguished people.

Bilam, the pagan prophet, is the most unlikely vehicle for God's blessings.[4] But that is God's way. He chose an aged, infertile couple to be the grandparents of the Jewish people. He chose a man who couldn't speak to be the mouthpiece of his word. He chose Bilam, who hated Israel, to be the messenger of His love. Moses says explicitly: "The Lord your God would not listen to Bilam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you."

That is what the story is about: not Balak, or Bilam, or Moab, or Midian, or what happened next. It is about God's love for a people, their strength, resilience, their willingness to be different, their family life (tents, dwelling places), and their ability to outlive empires.

The Rambam explains that all God's acts have a moral message for us.[5] I believe that God is teaching us that love can turn curses into blessings. It is the only force capable of defeating hate. Love heals the wounds of the world.

[1] Sifrei Deuteronomy 357.

[2] Guide for the Perplexed, II:42. For Nahmanides' critical view on Maimonides' approach, see his Commentary to Gen. 18:1.

[3] Num. 24:9: "May those who bless you be blessed, and those who curse you be cursed!" Earlier, 23:8, he had said, "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?"

[4] However, Devarim Rabbah 1:4 suggests that God chose Bilam to bless the Israelites because when an enemy blesses you, it cannot be dismissed as mere partiality.

[5] Hilchot Deot 1:6.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"The entire House of Israel wept over Aaron" (Numbers 20:29). Why was Moses, the greatest prophet who ever lived and who sacrificed a principedom in Egypt to take the Hebrews out of Egypt, denied entry into the land of Israel? Was it because he struck the rock with his staff rather than having spoken to it? But it was God, after all, who commanded him to "take the staff, gather together the witness-congregation, and speak to the rock" (Num. 20:8)! And previously, shortly after the splitting of the Reed Sea, but before the Revelation at Sinai, God had commanded him to strike the rock with his staff to bring forth water for the nation (Ex. 17:5). Apparently, striking the rock could not have been such a heinous crime.

I believe that the key to our understanding of the incident of the rock lies in a curious contrast between Moses and Aaron hinted at in our Biblical text, which highlights the profound tragedy – as well as the exalted majesty – within the unique persona of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.

Our Biblical portion of Hukat also records the death of Aaron the High Priest: "And Aaron died there at the top of the mountain... and the entire house of Israel wept over Aaron for thirty days" (Num. 20:28-29). At the conclusion of the Pentateuch and amidst great praise, the text teaches regarding Moses' passing: "and the children of Israel wept over Moses at the plains of Moab for thirty days" (Deut. 34:8), – with Rashi commenting (ad loc) "the children of Israel refers to the males, but regarding Aaron it was written 'the entire house of Israel wept, which includes the females; this was because Aaron pursued peace between neighbors and between husbands and

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wives." Apparently, Aaron was a more popular religious leader than was Moses.

The Bible also hints at the reason for this. You will remember that in the beginning of the Book of Exodus, after the occurrence of the burning bush, whenever God proposes that Moses assume leadership over Israel, the prophet is reluctant to do so. "I am not a man of words... I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Ex 4:10 – Kevad Peh, Kevad Lashon), he demurs, usually understood to mean that he stutters and stammers. Indeed, a bit later on the Bible reports that the people do not listen to Moses "because of impatience and hard work" (ibid. 6:9) – usually interpreted to mean that the enslaved and persecuted Hebrews were so embroiled in their toil and suffering that they lacked the patience and vision to hear Moses' goal, to even dream of freedom and independence.

Rav Levi ben Gershon, philosopher and Biblical commentary (Languedoc, France 1288-1344), takes the text differently: the Hebrews do not listen to Moses because of his impatience and hard work (avodah, Divine service). Moses was a prophet, a master in jurisprudence, a philosopher-theologian; he had spent sixty years in Midian – 'far from the madding crowds' – attempting to come close to God, and he was continually developing his intellectual and spiritual powers so that his "active intellect" (seikhel ha'po'el) could "kiss" God's active intellect, so that he could divine God's will and communicate God's Torah to the Israelites. (Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed 2: 32, 45).

Moses recognized his own prophetic potential in the realm of the intellectual and spiritual; he craved and gloried in his fellowship with the Divine. But he also realized that to be a leader of the people you must be a superb shepherd of your flock, you must get into the details of their daily lives, and you must be involved in the often petty arguments between neighbors—picayune problems between husbands and wives. This requires the patience of "small-talk" and human camaraderie, whereas Moses could reach the level of communicating God's Torah only because his soul constantly yearned for "heavy-talk", God-talk. Moses knew he would not have the patience to "win over the nation" to his side by drinking le'haim with them and dancing at their weddings.

Hence God suggests to Moses that Aaron "be his spokesman to the people, that (Aaron) be his mouthpiece" (for small talk) – Ex. 4:15). Hence Moses succeeded in communicating a Divine Torah for the generations, but failed in convincing the Hebrews to conquer Israel in his generation.

For, you see, the contrast between Moses the man of God and the necessity for a person of the people become only greater with every passing year in the desert. After all, in the beginning everyone felt only gratitude to the

individual who removed their pain of enslavement. But unfortunately, such gratitude barely survives the first dearth of water. And so when Korah rebels, not one Hebrew stands up for Moses, and when the prophet asks to meet “in his office” with Datan and Aviram, they refuse to come!

So when the Hebrews again kvetch for water, God tells Moses to take his staff of leadership not to strike in punishment the hard, stiff-necked rock which symbolized ungrateful Israel, but rather to speak to the Hebrews with words of love and empowerment, with words of the leniency and softness of the Oral Law which will and must emerge from them as they continue to mature, as they partner with God in completing both His Torah and His World (Rabbenu Tzadok).

But alas, the ungrateful nation has worn Moses down; he can only strike them (the rock) in frustration and refer to them as rebels. And since Moses can no longer love and empower Israel with loving words of the Oral Law, Moses’ leadership must end in the desert.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

We Must Integrate the Lesson of the Snakes Into Our Daily Lives

The pasuk in Parshas Chukas says, “They journeyed from Hor HaHor by way of the Sea of Reeds to go around the land of Edom, and the spirit of the people grew short with the road.” [Bamidbar 21:4] Aharon haKohen had just passed away, and the people again became agitated. “The people spoke against G-d and Moshe: ‘Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this wilderness? For there is no food and there is no water, and our soul is at its limit with the insubstantial food.’” [Bamidbar 21:5] If there seems to be one underlying theme about which they repeatedly complain – it is about the mann. Basically, they say they are disgusted with the mann.

It is important to realize something that is not readily apparent. Thirty-eight years elapsed between last week’s parsha (Parshas Korach) and this week’s parsha (Parshas Chukas). The incident of the Meraglim (in Parshas Shelach) preceded – at least according to the Ramban – the story of Korach. Those events both occurred at the beginning of their sojourn in the Wilderness. For the next 38 years, nothing dramatic occurred — at least not anything the Torah shares with us. Thirty-eight years later, they are again on the boundary of Eretz Yisrael, and they are complaining again. They complained at the beginning of the 40 years and they complained at the end of the 40 years. What is their complaint? “We can’t stand the mann.”

It would seem to be that the mann is the greatest thing going. It tasted like whatever each person desired. Someone wants milchigs one night – it tastes like dairy. Someone wants fleishigs the next night – it tastes like meat. There was no bodily waste created by it. It was

great! Yet, it seems that when Bnei Yisrael start complaining, they always complain about the mann. What is the message here?

The pasuk continues, “Hashem sent the snakes, the burning ones, against the people, and they bit the people, and a large multitude of Israel died.” [Bamidbar 21:6] Throughout Sefer Bamidbar, the Almighty punished the people in different ways. Here, Hashem uses a new method – they are attacked by snakes. Why snakes? Why could they not just drop dead? Why did the earth not swallow them up like last week? Why did fire not come down from heaven and consume them like in Parshas Shmini? Why snakes?

“The people came to Moshe and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against Hashem and against you! Pray to Hashem that He remove from us the snakes.’ Moshe prayed for the people.” [Bamidbar 21:7] What was the remedy for this plague? What was the cure for someone who was bitten by the snake? “Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Make yourself a burning one and place it on a pole; and it will be that anyone who has been bitten will look at it and live.’” [Bamidbar 21:8]. The remedy for snakebites was to look at a snake! This has to be the most peculiar anti-venom serum ever created! Just look at the snake and you will be cured.

In fact, the international symbol of medicine has become the caduceus, a staff with two snakes wrapped around it. The source for that is this Biblical passage – the cure was the snakes. What is the message here? The plague is strange and the cure for the plague is even stranger.

My son, Reb Yakov, told me he heard an interpretation from a Rabbi Bukspan, which provides an interesting answer to this question. The Gemara [Yoma 76a] says that the disciples of Rabi Shimon bar Yochai asked him, “Why did the mann not descend for Israel once a year (in a quantity enough to last them for a whole year)?” Rabi Shimon bar Yochai answered them with a parable to a king who had an only son. He provided his son with his needs of sustenance once a year, for the whole year. Therefore, the son only came to see the king once a year, when he needed money.

When I went off to Yeshiva, my father used to send me a weekly allowance. Every week he would send me a check – five dollars a week. This way I could buy toothpaste and pay for any other miscellaneous expenses. The Yeshiva provided meals as part of the room and board. My father sent that check like clockwork. Every single week, I received a check for \$5.00. Today, parents give their children a credit card. When does the father hear from the son? Maybe never. When the father sees that the son has overdrawn the credit card, then the son hears from the father!

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The Gemara says that when the king gave his son enough money for a whole year, he heard from him once a year. Therefore, the Gemara continues, the king changed his method of financing his son. He provided for his daily needs, one day at a time. This way the king heard from his son every day.

So too it was with Bnei Yisroel. Every single day people would worry – how am I going to feed my family? Every day they were afraid – maybe the mann will not fall tomorrow and my entire family will be wiped out in famine. The result was that everyone had their hearts focused on their father in heaven. The mann came from heaven so they needed to pray every day: “Master of the Universe, give us food.” That is why the mann came down every day.

This Gemara is saying something that the Sefas Emes articulates in a different context. The Sefas Emes says that Hashem cursed the Snake – “You shall eat dust all the days of your life.” The world asks – what kind of curse is that? Dirt is available ubiquitously. The Snake will never worry about the source of his next meal. However, the curse is that the Almighty is, in effect, saying to the Snake: “Here is your sustenance. Do not bother me again. I do not want to see you ever again.” The contact that every other living creature needs to have with its Creator does not apply to the Snake. This is not a blessing. It is a curse.

This is why Hashem gave mann every single day. He wanted Klal Yisrael to realize that we are dependent on Him, and that “He is the one who gives you strength to act with valor...” [Devorim 8:18]. That is precisely why they did not like the mann. Human beings do not like to feel their dependence. We like to delude ourselves and think we are independent. That is why they kept on complaining about the mann. The Ribono shel Olam had this calculation – you should know that you are dependent on Me. The people resented that. They did not want to admit this fact.

“Modim Anachnu Lach...” Modim does not only mean ‘we thank.’ Modim means ‘we admit...’ that our lives are given over to Your Hand, and that our souls are delivered to You, and that Your miracles are with us every single day. We need to admit these facts, as much as we do not like to do so. That is why they did not like the mann.

Now the punishment they received makes sense. The punishment came from snakes because the people were acting like snakes – they did not want to be dependent on Divine handouts. That was the fate of the Snake. The Ribono shel Olam was sending them a message: Snakes. You want to be like the primordial Snake? Then the snakes will bite you. Do you know what the cure for this is? “You shall stare at the copper snake and be cured.” The Talmud [Rosh Hashannah 29a]

comments that it was not a matter simply of looking at the snakes – because snakes cannot cure. The idea was that they put the snake on a high place and raised it on a flagpole. When they lifted their eyes towards their Father in Heaven, they were cured. The cure was in looking upwards and figuring out from where their Help came from, and upon whom they were dependent.

That was the aveyra [sin]. That was the punishment and that was the cure. The aveyra was saying, “I want to be independent. I do not want to realize my dependence on the Almighty.” The punishment was: You are acting like snakes – you will get bitten by snakes! The cure came when Israel cast their gaze up toward heaven. This is a lesson that is as important today as it was then. We think that with all our wisdom, we can go and we can come, and we can invent and we can function independently. However, it is “He who gives you strength to act with valor.” We dare not say, “It is my strength and the power of my hand which has made for me all this valor.” [Devorim 8:17] We need Him for every step and breath we take. The lesson of the snakes is one we need to integrate into our daily lives.

The Death of Aharon: Mission Accomplished

The pasuk says, “And Aharon shall be brought to his people, for he shall not enter the Land that I have given to the Children of Israel...” [Bamidbar 20:24] The Sefas Emes asks a very simple question here: If his time to die had not come yet, just because he was not able to enter the Land, is that a reason to diminish his lifespan? If it is not the time for him to die, he should not die. On the other hand, if his pre-destined time to die had already arrived, why was it necessary for the Torah to link his death with his not being able to enter the Land? What does this pasuk mean?

The Sefas Emes interprets based on a basic concept: The length of time we live in this world is not pre-determined to be X number of days or years. We live in this world until the time we complete our assigned mission. When we complete our mission, then we leave this world. Some people take 80 years to complete their mission. They live until 80. The Ramoh (Rav Moshe Isserles) died when he was 33 years old. Apparently, he completed his mission by the time he was that age. He wrote 33 sefarim. He died on the 33rd day of the Omer). He only needed 33 years.

The Sefas Emes explains that Moshe and Aharon asked to enter Eretz Yisroel so that they would be able to fulfill Mitzvos that were land-dependent. [Sotah 14a] In other words, they felt “Our mission in this world is not finished yet – we have not been able to fulfill the mitzvos ha’teluyos b’Aretz. The Almighty told them “I have other plans.”

According to the approach of the Sefas Emes, if Aharon’s mission included going into Eretz Yisrael, he would not have died yet, because he would not have completed his spiritual mission in life, which included fulfillment of the mitzvos of terumos and ma’asros, etc. He was a Kohen who never ate terumah in his life. The Torah therefore says, “He will die now, because he is not going to enter...” — meaning that entering Eretz Yisrael and fulfilling the special mitzvos there is not part of his life’s spiritual mission. Perhaps that mission was removed from him as some kind of punishment for the sin of Mei Merivah, but ultimately his time to die came because he was not going to enter the Land, and his mission in life was already complete.

A friend of mine, who unfortunately died recently, told me a rather chilling statement before he died. He said, “We go into the supermarket and buy a quart of milk or a pound of cream cheese and we check its expiration date. After that it is not good anymore.” He told me, “We all have expiration dates printed on our foreheads. We just do not see the expiration date, but it is there.” That expiration date is dependent on when we complete our mission in life. When we complete our mission, we leave this world.

“...Because he will not enter...” Aharon is not going to go into Eretz Yisrael because the Land-dependent mitzvos are not part of his life’s mission. If so, that is why “Aharon died on Hor HaHor.”

OU Dvar Torah

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm, z”l Weakness – The Fatal Flaw

Our sidra this morning tells of one of the most painful episodes in biblical history, one which was seared into the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the incident of mei meriva, “the waters of contention” (Numbers 20:13). The Israelites, after the death of Miriam, complained about the lack of water. From a mere water shortage, they escalated their complaints to a general attack on Moses, expressing a preference for having remained in Egypt as comfortable slaves over being in the desert as starving and thirsty freemen.

Thereupon, the Lord told Moses and Aaron, “You shall address the rock [or, speak concerning the rock] before them, and it will give forth its waters” (v. 8). Moses and Aaron then turned to the Children of Israel and said, “Listen here, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” Then Moses raised his hand with the staff in his hand he smote the rock twice and the water came out.

The punishment ordained for Moses and Aaron was severe: “Because you did not have sufficient faith to sanctify My Name before the Children of Israel, therefore you will not enter the Promised Land but will die on this side of the Jordan” (v. 12).

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What was their sin? The biblical text is unclear, and many interpretations have proposed by commentators both ancient and modern. Rashi offers the most popular explanation: Moses was commanded to talk to the rock, and he hit it instead. However, Nahmanides is unhappy with this interpretation because everything Moses did during his ministry was performed by the striking of the staff. Besides, as we indicated above, Moses and Aaron were not commanded to speak to the rock, but about it. Maimonides maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was their anger. They lost their temper when they said, “Listen here, you rebels.” Nahmanides, however, criticizes this interpretation as well because, first, Moses was right in expressing his anger, and second, there are other occasions when Moses appeared to lose his temper and he was not reproached. Nahmanides therefore follows the interpretation of Rabbenu Hananel and maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was to use the first person, “Shall we bring forth water,” rather than, “Shall He (the Lord) bring forth water.”

My own interpretation, which I respectfully submit to you, is an expansion and modification of that offered by Abarbanel and certain modern exegetes: The misdeed of Moses and Aaron was that of weakness. The first reaction of Moses and Aaron when they heard the rebellious complaints of the Children of Israel was not the immediate response of challenge, but of fear and retreat.

Moses and Aaron retreated from before the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and there they fell on their faces. When they should have stood up, they fell back.

More precisely, I believe we can pinpoint the sin of Moses in the second strike of the staff. Permit me to explain.

Moses and Aaron started to assert themselves when they confronted the Children of Israel and said, “Listen here, you rebels.” However, they kept themselves back. They restrained their response. Now psychologists, especially psychoanalysts, have taught us that inhibited aggression is usually directed against the self or against inanimate objects. If I am angry at someone and secretly wish to harm him I will stamp my foot or slap my thigh.

Now, the first time that Moses struck the rock was understandable. Everything he did, from splitting the Red Sea to bringing forth water, was performed with a strike by the staff. However, the second time he hit the rock, it was an act which expressed misplaced hostility, originally felt toward the Israelites, now redirected towards the rock.

Why was that wrong? What should he have done? Simply this: He should have expressed

his anger directly to the Israelites, rather than the inanimate rock. Crudely put, he should have wielded the staff not on an innocent rock, but on the heads of this ungrateful and recalcitrant people who, after thirty-eight years in the desert, still proved that they were immature slaves, still whining, "Why did you take us out of Egypt?" One could expect this from a generation that was born in slavery and still primitive and immature – not from a generation born in freedom in the wild desert.

Moses and Aaron should not have fled, not have feared, not have conceded, not have compromised, not have taken it out hysterically on a rock. They should have encountered the Israelites with force and indignation.

In other words, Moses and Aaron were taught – and through them, we are taught – that weakness in a leader can be a fatal flaw.

Jewish leaders have always been commanded to be tender and loving. Moses and David are, in our tradition, the archetypes of gracious leadership. Both were taken from the sheepfold to become the shepherds of Israel. Just as a shepherd must learn to look after every stray lamb, to pick it up tenderly and hold it close to his breast, so must the leader of our people be a shepherd to human charges. But not always! There are times that strength and power and courage and resistance are called for in a leader. So, the first King of Israel, Saul, was deposed because he was too merciful, too compassionate, too soft, towards Amalek, where he should have been firm and strong. The Talmud (Ketubot 103b) tells us about the death of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was both the most eminent scholar of his generation and the nasi, the political leader of all of Israel. On his deathbed, his children came in to bid him farewell. Rabban Gamliel, his son, entered, and his father transmitted to him the orders of leadership, telling him how

to conduct himself as his successor. And he said to him, "My son, conduct your presidency with strength." Lead from on high, with dignity and power and pride.

Leadership is not meant for diffident weaklings. A leader must often act against the masses. A leader need not necessarily be a "consensus president." He must be at the head of his people and sometimes demand of them, reproach them, rebuke them. That vox populi vox dei, that the voice of the people is the voice of God – is not a Jewish idea!

The Torah teaches us something of historic importance in recording the punishment meted out to Moses because of that second strike. Weakness is a fatal flaw in Jewish leadership. Sometimes you think you are being good when you are really doing evil. You think you are helping, and you are destroying. You submit to momentary compassion, and in the process you lose the Promised Land.

A Jewish leader must be gentle but must also be strong. He must be considerate but must know how to use power. Power, of course, can corrupt. But the attainment of a good life requires the benevolent use of power. Without it, we are in contempt of emuna (faith) and we have failed to perform kedushat Hashem (the sanctification of God's Name).

When we do use power benevolently, then it becomes a source of blessing: "Blessed are You, O Lord, ozer Yisrael bigvrura (who girds Israel with strength)."

And blessed is Israel when it responds with its own strength.

Bar Ilan University: Dvar Torah
Moses' and Aaron's Sin: Truly No Answer?
By David Henshke
 Rabbi Yitzhak Arama, from the time of the expulsion from Spain, is well-known for his

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work, *Sefer Ha-Akedah*, in which he says the following on this week's reading: That is the most difficult and trying question of all—to understand the sin that our teacher Moses committed and the punishment given him, for, "Behold a table, meat and knife, yet we have no mouth to eat!" (*Kiddushin* 46a). Namely, the Lord's command to Moses is written clearly before us, and the deed he committed is not hidden from our eyes, and yet the Almighty's wrath at him is beyond our understanding. We have no interpretation that will soothe the ear, neither that explains his sin nor that reconciles the scriptural text.¹

A. B. Ehrlich went even further and said that the problem has no resolution.²

Indeed, all the facts are ostensibly laid out clearly before us in the account of the deed (Num. 20:1-13), yet nevertheless none any of the many explanations that have been proposed leaves us at ease, whether because they fail to explain sufficiently the nature of the sin and the magnitude of the punishment, or whether because they are inadequate in "reconciling the text."³

For the sin is explicitly described in the Torah, repeatedly, in a variety of expressions: "Because **you did not trust Me** enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people" (Num. 20:12); "because you **disobeyed my command** about the waters of Meribah" (Num. 20:24); "when the community was contentious, **you disobeyed My command** to uphold My sanctity in their sight by means of the water" (Num. 27:14); "**for you both broke faith with Me** among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribah-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, **by failing to uphold My sanctity** among the Israelite people" (Deut. 32:51).⁴ The question is how the actions of Moses and Aaron expressed **disobedience** to the Lord's command, **breaking faith** and lack of trust in Him "in the sight of the Israelite people"?

* Prof. David Henshke, Department of Talmud, Bar Ilan University. Originally published in Hebrew in 2018; this translation has not been reviewed by the author.

¹ *Akedat Yitzhak*, Section 80, question 4 (p. 95b).

² A. B. Ehrlich, *Mikra ki-Peshuto* (Berlin 1899), in his commentary, *loc. cit.*: "All those who toil to find the sin Moses committed, toil in vain... Perhaps Scripture is obscure regarding Moses' sin, but the Lord had discovered the sin of his servant and did not want any human beings to know, just as no human knows the place of his burial."

³ See the exhaustive survey by J. Milgrom, who presents three basic exegetical approaches that have been proposed to resolve the issues in this passage, these approaches subsuming a variety of specific suggestions (J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary, Philadelphia 1990, pp. 448-456). Milgrom himself, after a fine presentation of the fundamental weak points of two approaches, follows and even further refines the third approach—introduced by Rabbenu Hananel—that Moses sin lay in the way he phrased his words, not ascribing the miracle to the Lord. It is quite hard to find this convincing, however, as Nahmanides has remarked on this approach: "It is good for putting of the one who asks questions."

For the actions of Moses and Aaron only came after the glory of the Lord had appeared in the Tent of Meeting, so that it was clear to Israel that Moses and Aaron were then doing what they had been commanded at the outset by the word of the Lord in the Tent of Meeting. Moreover, the author of *Or ha-Hayyim* rightly notes, *loc. cit.*: "Moses was known to be the emissary of the Lord, and his every action was by force of the Lord; it could not be that it was Moses' own volition—for from the greatness of the servant one comes to know the greatness of the Master."

⁴ As we know, in Deut. 1:37-38 a fundamentally different explanation is given of the decree that Moses not be permitted to enter the land. Even though it would be possible to integrate this explanation with the explanation given in all the other places, it seems more correct to view this contrast in the context of the general picture of contrasts between the way Moses recounts things in Deuteronomy as opposed to the way they are presented by the Torah in earlier books of the Pentateuch. Note also that in Psalms 106:32-33 it says: "They provoked wrath at the waters of Meribah and Moses suffered on their account, because they rebelled against Him and he spoke rashly (*va-yevateh bi-sefatav*, lit. "he expressed with his lips")."

Some interpret *va-yevateh bi-sefatav* as referring to Moses, in which case the implication is that his sin focused on the way he spoke (cf. Radak, *loc. cit.*, citing his father, Rabbi Joseph Kimhi). But since the expression "*le-vateh*" is used mostly in conjunction with oaths (Lev. 5:4; Num. 30:7, 9), it seems preferable to read "*va-yevateh*" as referring to the Lord's swearing (Deut. 4:21) that Moses will not enter the land (cf. Rashi, *loc. cit.*). Thus this passage follows what is written in Deuteronomy: "Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too" (Deut. 1:37), and in Psalms: "Moses suffered on their account."

It seems that what stands in the way of understanding their deed is reading the story as a continuum in which the end informs us about the beginning. If Moses hit the rock and that action made abundant water spring forth, the implication is that that was what Moses intended from the outset, in which case it is hard to see any disobedience here. However, it truly appears that water issuing forth **was the exact opposite of anything Moses intended**, as he himself expressed!

This is what we suggest: Moses was commanded, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts." In view of what had been happening, however, Moses felt that his superhuman efforts over the course of the long and hard forty years that he had spent with the Israelites had been to no avail and that all his work had been in vain.

Now, at the end of the forty years,⁵ the same thing was happening as had happened at the beginning; now, too, "the people quarreled with Moses" just as they had forty years earlier (Ex. 17:2), and now, too, the horrible complaint was voiced, "Why did you make us leave Egypt," just as they had said forty years ago (Ex. 17:3). Moses, upon hearing and seeing all this, became angry with them down to the core.⁶ At first he managed to control his wrath, and reluctantly did as he had been commanded: "Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock."

But at this point, with the congregation

standing in front of him, rebellious and contentious, Moses was incapable of carrying out what he had been commanded, and **he refused to get water out of the rock!** "He said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?'—do you really think that "for you," disobedient rebels that you are,⁷ the same great miracle of getting water from the rock will be performed once more?

Indeed, as water came forth from the rock for your predecessors, do you really think today to "out of this rock" we will get water "for you" too, you "breed of sinful men, who have replaced your fathers" (Num. 32:14)? Such a thing was unthinkable! So now Moses picked up the rod that he had taken "from before the Lord," the rod that had been placed "before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels" (Num. 17:25),⁸ and with it he struck the rock twice, as if to say: what use is there in this rod when the rebels remain just as rebellious and there is no point in working miracles for them.⁹ Therefore, I will not speak to the rock, as I was commanded now, but I will strike it, as I had been commanded then, forty years ago, for nothing has changed; only now, when I have not been commanded to strike the rock, clearly water **will not** issue forth!

But at that very moment a great miracle took place. For the Holy One, blessed be He, had not gone back on his word in view of Moses' disobedience,¹⁰ and if Moses was not going to fulfill the words, "**you** shall produce water for them from the rock," then the water would come of its own accord: "Out came copious water." Not only had Moses refused to bring forth "water," the rock itself put forth "**copious** water." While Moses refused to perform the act, "thus you **shall...provide drink** for the

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congregation and their beasts," that very thing happened of itself: "and the community and their beasts **drank**."

Thus it turns out that Moses and Aaron did indeed disobey the word of the Lord "in the sight of the Israelite people," for everyone heard their resounding refusal to get water out of the rock, yet nevertheless all witnessed that the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to do precisely that. There can be no doubt that this action was a betrayal of the Lord's command, a lack of faith in His word, and refusal to sanctify Him "among the Israelite people."¹¹ The background to all of this is clear: when Moses and Aaron heard the bickering of the Israelites, their complaints and accusations, they could not help but view this as a direct continuation of all that had taken place in the past forty years, and this brought them to understandable anger and despair, with which it is hard not to identify.

However, in so doing, Moses and Aaron indicated that their time of leadership was over. A new generation stood before us; not those who had left Egypt, with all of their complaints, but those who were going to come into the promised land, with all their hardships; and a new generation cannot be led according to the characteristics of the preceding generation. Moses and Aaron no longer had the strength to begin everything anew with the next generation, to understand its nature and its particular problems. Hence, a change in leadership was called for: "therefore you shall not lead **this congregation into the land that I have given them**."¹²

After all this, surely one might ask whether it is conceivable that Moses, servant of the Lord, should have refused to do what the Lord

⁵ See *Seder Olam*, 9 (Milikowsky ed., p. 246): "It was the fortieth year." Milikowsky, in his commentary there, p. 166, refers the reader to Josephus (*Antiquities* 4.78), who upholds this tradition, which indeed is well-rooted in Scripture (cf., for instance, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, *loc. cit.*).

⁶ That Moses' anger caused his sin has been noted by Maimonides (*Shemoneh Perakim*, 4). However, he was of the opinion that this anger was not only the cause but comprised the sin itself. This view of Maimonides was sharply challenged by Nachmanides (in his commentary on the Torah, *loc. cit.*), where he accuses him of piling "empty words, one on another." Cf. Ritba, *Sefer ha-Zikaron*, *loc. cit.* (R. K. Kahana ed., pp. 80-84), who in his characteristic manner sought an "apology" for Maimonides but had to admit that "Nachmanides' rebuttal still appears to have substance" (Ritba, *loc. cit.*, p. 81). According to our interpretation, his sin lay not in his anger, but the former appears to have actually led to the latter, as Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, "In three instances Moses gave in to anger and that led him to err," etc. (*Sifre*, Numbers, par. 157, Kahana ed., p. 530).

⁷ Deuteronomy 9:7: "From the day that you left the land of Egypt until you reached this place, you have continued defiant toward the Lord." Cf. Rabbi Abraham Sav'a, *Tzeror ha-Mor*, *loc. cit.*: "'Listen, you rebels—tiresome, recalcitrant ones, 'shall we get water for you out of this rock?' 'Should one give aid to the wicked?' (II Chron. 19:2). For when the Lord works wonders, it is fitting that He do them for the sake of honoring the righteous; but for the wicked, it is not fitting that the Lord work wonders.

Therefore, he said to them, 'Shall we get water for you out of this rock,' seeing that you are wicked, rebellious and disobedient'?! (Warsaw 1878, p. 30). He is cited by Y. Moriel, *Iyyunim ba-Mikra: Be-Midbar*, Tel Aviv 1969, p. 110, note 23, but neither of them brings up our suggestion that Moses indeed refused for this reason to get water for them out of the rock; hence, even what they say does not suffice to resolve the main difficulty, namely establishing the nature of the rebelliousness of which Moses and Aaron were accused.

⁸ Rashbam, *loc. cit.*, has noted that the rod was not Moses' staff of which we know from the book of Exodus, and which he used to strike the rock at Refidim, for the rod in this week's reading was taken "from before the Lord." Hence, it is none other than the staff familiar to us from the previous weekly reading, *Parashat Korah*, the staff of Aaron which put forth blossoms, which was precisely the one Moses had been commanded to place before the Pact. Cf. Ibn Ezra's commentary, *loc. cit.*

⁹ For all the clear differences, this still calls to mind Moses breaking the tablets. See Rabbi Tz. Ha-Cohen, below.

¹⁰ Compare this to Jonah's disobedience and the Lord's response to it, or the disobedience of the "man of Gd" and the Lord's reaction to it (I Kings 13).

¹¹ The Lord was especially strict with Aaron, for his guilt lay only in silently identifying with his brother rather than protesting against him. Perhaps the golden calf provides the background to this, for there too Aaron did not stand up to the people face to face, but rather appeared to be going along with them. Even though, in the wake of the golden calf, "the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him" (Deut. 9:20), nevertheless "so I also interceded for Aaron **at that time**" (*loc. cit.*). However, this time, at the Waters of Merivah, the Lord was no longer willing to forgive Aaron's passive stand.

¹² Rabbi Simeon's interpretation is well known: "*And Gd separated the light*—corresponding to the book of Numbers, which divides between those who departed from Egypt and those who entered the land" (Genesis Rabbah, III.5, Soncino ed., p. 21). Indeed, it is precisely the Lord who could make this distinction clear. See Moriel (note 7, above), p. 112.

commanded him, even out of anger? Indeed, it is generally thought that Moses violated the Lord's command to speak to the rock,¹³ but according to our presentation, his refusal was far greater and more demonstrative. This question, however, goes beyond exposition of the plain sense of the text, and touches on philosophical and theological matters, hence we shall do no more than hint at one possible direction. One must not forget that Moses was not the sole one to sin in this affair; rather, the Israelites sinned first: "Those are the Waters of Merivah (= Quarrel)—meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Lord" (Num. 20:13). Such behavior was decried by the prophet Isaiah: "**Shame on him who argues with his Maker**" (Isa. 45:9). Now Rabbi Tzadok ha-Cohen of Lublin (*Tzidkat ha-Tzadik*, 154) teaches us that Moses and Israel are one, so there is no sin of the Israelites to which Moses was not also a party:

For Moses, too, was guilty of all the sins the Israelites committed, for he represented them as a whole... With the golden calf, Moses' sin was in breaking the tablets. Indeed, it is most strange and inexplicable to rend in anger and cast down to the ground even a scroll of Torah written by a scribe of flesh and blood, not to speak of tablets in the Lord's hand; so he really committed a sin regarding the calf... And at Kibberot ha-Taavah we have (Num. 11:22), "Could enough flocks and herds be slaughtered to suffice them?..." Likewise at the Waters of Merribah, and with the spies his sin was sending them on such a mission, as in the interpretation of *shelah lekha* (Num. 13:2)—you send, on your own initiative. But this is not the place to explain every single instance.
Translated by Rachel Rowen

¹³ See the author of *Akedat Yitzhak* (note 1, above), 95a: "Moses and Aaron were liable to the death sentence by the laws of the Torah, as one who transgresses the words of prophecy," following the saying of Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar in tractate *Shabbat* 55b: "Moses and Aaron too died through their sin."

Parshat Chukat

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

Parashat Hukat is a potpourri of different events and literary modes: it begins with halakha (Para Aduma) and then moves to narrative, recounting a(nother) tale of rebellion (a two-fold tale of rebellion, as we shall see), moving on to several military battles (or near-battles) with other nations, and telling of the death of Aharon. Besides legal and narrative material, there is also a light sprinkling of poetry.

So much for the overview. We will focus on the episode of Mei Meriva, the place where Moshe and Aharon disobey Hashem's command:

1. What is Moshe's crime? Is the crime simply that he strikes instead of speaking to the rock, and that this is not precisely what Hashem had commanded? If there is deeper significance to the crime, what is it?
2. Perhaps another way to ask the question: what does Hashem want to accomplish in having the rock provide water when spoken to, and how does Moshe's action fail to accomplish this goal? If Hashem wants to impress the people with this miracle, what is the difference whether the rock provides water when spoken to or when struck? Isn't it a miracle either way? And what's the big deal anyway -- Hashem has split the sea for this nation, causes their daily bread to rain from the sky, caused the Earth to swallow some rebels in last week's parasha; are these people going to be impressed by water from a rock?
3. What is Aharon's crime, given that the Torah tells us that Moshe is the one who strikes the rock?
4. Why does Moshe hit the rock twice instead of just once? Or, to phrase it somewhat differently, why doesn't Hashem cause the water to come out after just one hit?
5. Why do Moshe and Aharon do it? Why, after all, do they disobey Hashem and hit the rock? We are not talking about the common folk, malingerers, complainers, yesterday's slaves -- we are talking about Moshe and Aharon! Moshe, "My servant Moshe," "the most trusted in My entire house," the one God speaks to "like a man speaks to his friend." How is this very same Moshe capable of rebellion? Aharon, the chosen holiest -- joining the rebels against Hashem?
6. What exactly is their punishment for disobeying Hashem? Take a careful look at the text to see how the punishment is worded.
7. How is this punishment appropriate to the crime?
8. In the end of this short section, we hear that Hashem is "sanctified" ("va-yi-kkadesh"). But how is He sanctified?
9. There are several poems in the parasha. At least one of them may be very important for understanding our story. Which is it, and why is it important?
10. It is crucial also to look at other places in which the Torah refers to this story. See the following places: BeMidbar 20, BeMidbar 27, Devarim 1, Devarim 3, Devarim 32, Devarim 34.

TO BEGIN:

One way in which to understand the episode facing us is to look through the Torah for whatever evidence seems relevant. So before commenting extensively on any one section, we will first survey the various places in the Torah where the episode is mentioned.

BEMIDBAR 20:1-13 – Now they came, Bnei Yisrael, the entire community, to the wilderness of Tzin, in the first month. The people stayed in Kadesh. Miryam died there, and she was buried there.

Now there was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moshe and against Aharon; the people quarreled with Moshe, they said, saying: "Would that we had expired when our brothers expired before the presence of Hashem! Why did you bring the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, us and our cattle? Why did you make us go up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place -- not a place of seeds and figs, vines and pomegranates! And water there is none to drink!"

Moshe and Aharon came away from the presence of the Assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Appointment, and flung themselves upon their faces. The glory of Hashem appeared to them, and Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: "Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aharon your brother; you are to speak to the boulder before their eyes so that it gives forth its water; thus you are to bring out for them water from the boulder, that you may give drink to the assembly and to their cattle."

So Moshe took the staff from before the presence of Hashem, as He had commanded him. And Moshe and Aharon assembled the Assembly facing the boulder. He said to them: "Now hear, you rebels, from this boulder shall we bring you out water?" Moshe raised his hand and struck the boulder with his staff, twice, so that abundant water came out; and the community and their cattle drank. Now Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon: "Because you did not trust in Me, to sanctify me before the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I give to them!" Those were the waters of Meriva/quarreling, where Bnei Yisrael quarreled with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them.

BEMIDBAR 20:22-29 – They marched on from Kadesh, and they came, Bnei Yisrael, the entire community, to Hor ha-Har. Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon at Hor ha-Har, by the border of the land of Edom, saying: "Let Aharon be gathered to his people, for he is not to enter the Land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael, since you rebelled against My orders at the waters of Meriva. Take Aharon and Elazar his son, and bring them up on Hor ha-Har; strip Aharon of his garments and clothe in them Elazar, his son. Aharon will be gathered up and will die there." So Moshe did as Hashem commanded him: they went up Hor ha-Har before the eyes of the entire community; Moshe stripped Aharon of his garments and clothed in them Elazar, his son. So Aharon died there on top of the hill. When Moshe and Elazar came down from the hill, the entire community saw that Aharon had expired, and they wept for Aharon thirty days, the whole House of Yisrael.

BEMIDBAR 27:12-19 – Hashem said to Moshe: "Go up this mountain . . . and see the land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael. When you have seen it, you will be gathered to your people, even you, as Aharon your brother was gathered; since you rebelled against My order in the wilderness of Tzin when the community quarreled, to sanctify Me through water before their eyes; they are the waters of quarreling at Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin."

Then Moshe spoke to Hashem, saying: "Let Hashem, the God of the spirits of all flesh, designate a man over the community who will go out before them, who will come back before them, who will lead them out, who will bring them back, so that the community of Hashem will not be like a flock that has no shepherd." Hashem said to Moshe: "Take yourself Yehoshua son of Nun, a man in whom there is spirit, and lean your hand upon him. You are to stand him before Elazar the priest and before the entire community, and you are to commission him before their eyes."

DEVARIM 1:37-38 – "Also at me was Hashem angry for your sake, saying: "You also will not enter there! Yehoshua son of Nun, who stands before you, he will enter there; him shall you strengthen, for he will give it as inheritance to Yisrael."

DEVARIM 3:24-29 – "I pleaded with Hashem at that time, saying: 'My Lord Hashem, You have begun to let Your servant see Your greatness and Your strong hand; who is so powerful in heaven and on earth that he can do the like of Your deeds and Your power! Pray, let me cross over, that I may see the good land that is across the Jordan, this good hill country, and the Lebanon!' But Hashem was angry with me on your account, and He would not listen to me. Hashem said to me: 'Enough for you! Do not speak to Me any more again about this matter! Go up to the top of the range and lift up your eyes -- toward the sea, toward the north, toward the south, and toward sunrise; see it with your eyes, for you will not cross this Jordan! But command Yehoshua, make him strong, make him courageous, for he will cross over before this people, and he will cause them to inherit the land that you see.'"

DEVARIM 32:48-52 – Hashem spoke to Moshe on that same day, saying: "Go up these heights . . . Mount Nevo, that is in the land of Mo'av, that faces Jericho, and see the land of Canaan that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael for a holding. You are to die on the mountain that you are going up, and are to be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother died . . . and was gathered to his people, because you *MA'ALTEM* Me in the midst of Bnei Yisrael at the waters of the quarrel at Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin, because you did not sanctify Me among Bnei Yisrael. Indeed, at a distance you shall see the land, but there you shall not enter, the land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael."

*note: "ma'altem" comes from the root "ma'al," to take something which is dedicated to a holy purpose, i.e., property of Hashem, and use it for personal benefit.

DEVARIM 34:1-6 – Moshe went up from the Plains of Mo'av to Mount Nevo, at the top of the range that faces Jericho, and Hashem let him see all the land: Gil'ad as far as Dan, and all Naftali, and the land of Efrayim and Menashe, and all the land of Yehuda, as far as the hindmost sea, and the Negev and the round-plain, the cleft of Jericho, the town of palms, as far as Tzo'ar. And Hashem said to him, "This is the land that I swore to Abraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya'akov, saying, 'To your seed I give it!' I have let you see it with your eyes, but there you shall not cross!" So there died Moshe, servant of Hashem . . .

Two distinct patterns appear in almost all of these passages:

1) **There is a consistent pattern of "seeing":**

a) Bem. 20: The original event at Kadesh takes places "in the EYES of the congregation": Hashem wants everyone to gather and

witness the miracle.

- b) Bem. 20: Aharon ascends the mountain "in the EYES of the people." When Moshe returns, the entire nation "SEES" that Aharon has died.
- c) Bem. 27: Moshe is told -- twice -- that he will "SEE the land" but not enter it. Then Hashem repeats that the sin he committed was "in the EYES of Bnei Yisrael."
- d) Dev. 1: [no "seeing" pattern here].
- e) Dev. 3: Moshe begs to "SEE the land," by which he means to allow him to enter the land; Hashem refuses him, telling him he will only "SEE with his EYES," but not enter there.
- f) Dev. 32: Hashem repeats -- twice more -- that Moshe is to "SEE the land" but cannot enter it.
- g) Dev. 34: Hashem "SHOWS" Moshe the land, then tells him, "I have SHOWN you in your EYES, but you will not pass to there."

2) There is also a **consistent pattern of succession and successors connected explicitly with the punishment of Moshe and Aharon**. This confirms that the punishment is not merely a personal one -- that these two people will lose their privilege of entering Eretz Yisrael -- but that they are punished by losing the leadership of the people. They will not lead the people into the Land:

- a) Bem. 20: The original event: "You shall not bring the people"
- b) Bem. 20: Aharon dies in such a manner as to make the succession of Elazar an integral part of his death: the High Priestly clothing is removed from him and placed upon his son, and then he dies, as his son succeeds him.
- c) Bem. 27: when Hashem commands that he die, Moshe responds by worrying about the succession; Hashem commands him to appoint Yehoshua, and he does so.
- d) Dev. 1: "Encourage Yehoshua."
- e) Dev. 3: "Encourage Yehoshua."
- f) Dev. 32: "Encourage Yehoshua" (not in the text above, but just before the Song of Ha'azinu, 32:22-23).
- g) Dev. 34: [not part of the succession pattern].

These two patterns are important because they hint at 1) what Moshe and Aharon's crime is, and 2) what the nature of their punishment is. **The crime is somehow tied to seeing, to the people's seeing something they should not have seen, and the punishment is played out in their losing their positions as leaders of the people. We will return to these issues in the course of our discussion.**

To move back to the account in BeMidbar 20 itself, what does the Torah tell us about the sin? Mefarshim (commentators) offer many possibilities:

1) Abravanel: this is the straw that broke the camel's back. In truth, Aharon loses the right to enter Eretz Yisrael because he built the Egel (Golden Calf) back in Sefer Shemot (Exodus); Moshe is punished for encouraging the meraglim (spies) in Parashat Shelah, which we read two weeks ago. Both of these episodes contributed to the people's loss of their privilege to enter the land; the crime at Kadesh was only the minor crime of hitting the rock as opposed to speaking to it, but it added just enough to tip the scales in favor of punishment for Moshe and Aharon.

Abravanel is motivated to suggest this interpretation because hitting the rock seems so minor a crime, and the punishment which ensues seems too harsh. His solution: the punishment addresses more serious wrongs. One weakness with this interpretation, however, is that, as the above citations from the Torah show, the Torah repeatedly focuses on this *particular* episode as the key to Moshe and Aharon's loss of their privilege to enter the Land. This focus is undue if the real focus is on the Egel and the spies.

2) **Hazal: the crime was that Moshe spoke roughly to the people as he provided them with water:** "Listen, you rebels!" Despite its didactic significance, this interpretation is difficult, as several mefarshim (commentators) point out: if Moshe's manner of addressing the people is such a great crime, Moshe seems not to have learned his lesson, as in Sefer Devarim (Deuteronomy), he tells the people, "You have been rebels against Hashem from the day I knew you!"

3) Several mefarshim suggest that hitting is less impressive than speaking, so by hitting the rock, Moshe destroyed an opportunity for

greater kiddush Hashem (sanctification of God's name). Ramban responds to this suggestion by pointing out that from the perspective of physics, hitting and speaking should be equally likely to cause water to come out of a rock, so both would be equally miraculous. Abravanel raises the additional problem that hitting as opposed to speaking seems too minor a crime to merit such a weighty punishment.

4) Rashi: speaking to the rock would have inspired people to draw a "kal va-homer" (a fortiori reasoning) to themselves: "If the rock is obedient when Hashem (or His servant) speaks to it, surely we should be at least as obedient as the rock!" As an inspiring midrashic perspective, this suggestion is beautiful and has much merit. But it is difficult to believe that the stiff-necked people we know so well from the rest of BeMidbar would be so easily and so subtly inspired. In addition, as Ramban points out, if this is indeed the crime, why does Hashem later describe it as "me'ila," which implies that Moshe and Aharon usurped a prerogative of Hashem's?

5) **Rambam (Shemona Perakim): the crime was Moshe and Aharon's inappropriate anger with the people.** This suggestion is vehemently and powerfully rejected by the Ramban, who points out that this does not account for the phrases we find in the various descriptions of the sin: "You did not believe in Me," "You rebelled against My word," etc. [Rambam's suggestion does, of course, fit nicely with his view of anger: unlike other personal characteristics, with regard to which Rambam advocates moderation, when it comes to anger (and arrogance), Rambam insists that we must be radical, allowing no room at all for this emotion. It is understandable, in this light, how anger in Moshe and Aharon would be understood as a fundamental failing and a grave sin.]

6) Ibn Ezra: Moshe's sin was in his momentary distraction from his usually perfect spiritual concentration on Hashem. This, I believe, is difficult to refute, but even more difficult to support from the text or from logic.

7) Rabbeinu Hananel, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Ramban, Sefer Ha-Ikkarim (R. Yosef Albo): Moshe and Aharon did not make clear who had caused the water to come out; it sounded like Moshe and Aharon were ascribing to themselves (rather than to Hashem) the act of providing water. This is supported by the text, which has Moshe and Aharon saying, "Now hear, you rebels, from this boulder shall ****we**** bring water for you?"

This last possibility is the one to which we will now turn our attention, as it is a fascinating and usually neglected perspective.

Read Bem. 20 again and think about the following: What is the people's complaint? Is it any different from any of the complaints we have seen before?

The people blame Moshe and Aharon for their misery and for the entire process which has ripped them away from Egypt -- that great carefree vacation-land, that Eden of luxury and leisure -- and dropped them into the barren and waterless desert. There is nothing new about this sort of talk. But one element seems new: the people refer to themselves as "Hashem's people"! Instead of just saying "us," they refer to themselves as "Hashem's nation." In other words, it is not just "us," a group of innocent people whom you have harmed -- it is Hashem who has been stricken, in effect, by your leading His nation into this predicament! This is a new level of chutzpah: accusing Hashem's chief messenger of having led His people astray!

Moshe and Aharon have no response. This, too, is not new, as we noted in Parashat Shelah, where Moshe has no response to the evil report of the spies. Moshe and Aharon now turn to Hashem, who delivers a series of instructions to them. Hashem wants to provide water for the people in a public, miraculous way: "Speak to the rock and extract from it water for the people and their animals."

Moshe bitterly says to the people, "You rebels! Will we now take water from this rock for you?" Let us leave this enigmatic phrase for now; we will return to it soon.

Now look at the poem in 21:17-18:

"Then Israel sang this song:
'Spring up, O well, sing in chorus to it;
The well that was dug out by princes
That was excavated by nobles of the people
With scepter
With their rods.'"

Now, to whom do the people give credit for the well in this joyous song? To Moshe and Aharon: they are the "princes" or "nobles" who dug out the well with their "scepter," their staff! The people give Moshe and Aharon credit for the great miracle of providing them with water; the credit was supposed to have gone to Hashem, but instead goes to Moshe and Aharon. Now look back at the story of the rock: where is the source for the people's giving credit for the miracle to Moshe and Aharon?

"Will ****we**** now take water for you from this rock?"

There are a number of ways to understand this enigmatic phrase:

1) "You ungrateful people! Don't you realize Hashem is among you, providing all your needs? Look here -- can Aharon and I get water from a rock? Certainly not! So if water does indeed come out of this rock, you will know that it is Hashem who has done it!"

2) "You ungrateful people! Don't you see what Aharon and I have done for you, providing for all your needs (by representing you before Hashem)? How can you accuse us of bringing 'Hashem's people' into the wilderness to die? You ungrateful rebels, we are about to facilitate another miracle for you, even as you rebel against us and reject us -- look here, is it possible for us to get water from this rock? Watch closely!"

Which of these interpretations is superior? Let us give some context to this story, and then we will decide. (Please note that all of what follows is brief summary of issues we have discussed in much greater detail in previous weeks, so if you haven't been with us for those weeks and think that the stuff below seems kind of skimpy and unsubstantiated, please visit <http://parsha-themes.homepage.com> for these parshiot.)

Sefer BeMidbar starts with the organization of the nation into an integrated religious and military organism. But these grand structures soon begin to crumble, as the people refuse to bend themselves into the shapes demanded by the new structure.

1) BeHa'alotekha: The people complain for water, then for meat. Moshe experiences a catastrophic sense of failure as a leader: he is unable to provide for his "baby," as he puts it. He cannot meet the people's needs, and he turns to Hashem in anger at the burden placed upon him. Hashem accedes to Moshe's request to share the burden of leadership with others -- the Zekenim (Elders). While this spreads the burden onto other shoulders, it does not mitigate Moshe's feeling of powerlessness and failure. He believes that he may have been right from the very beginning, when he said to Hashem in Sefer Shemot: "I am not a man of words"; "Send someone else -- anyone!"; "I am a man of uncircumcised lips." Send someone else, I am not capable of the job.

Hashem then turns to the problem at hand -- providing the people with meat -- and instructs Moshe to let the people know that meat will soon be arriving. Moshe refuses to believe it: there is not enough meat in the whole world for the people! Hashem scolds Moshe, but gently: "Is God's arm too short? Now you shall see if My words come to pass or not!" In Moshe's mind, the task of feeding the people had for a moment loomed impossibly enormous, so overwhelming that it surpassed even what Hashem could do. Moshe's feeling of failure and despair is so black that for a moment, it is not only *he* who cannot feed the people, but that the people simply cannot be fed. It is an impossible task.

This is the first sign that Moshe's faltering belief in himself has begun to affect his function as the conduit between Hashem and the people: he momentarily loses sight of Hashem's omnipotence.

The next crucial event is Miryam's harsh criticism of Moshe, which we discussed in detail last week. Miryam's words are so painful to Moshe not only because they are so patently false -- the humblest of all men did not marry a Cushite woman in order to take on airs -- but because it is his very sister who voices the words, and Moshe, the humblest of all men, is deeply affected by them. Moshe is shaken: perhaps she is right -- perhaps he has taken more honor and authority than his due. Moshe, so vulnerable, so humble, is so hurt by Miryam's words. Hashem responds ferociously, trying to prop Moshe up by purposely scolding Miryam in Moshe's presence. Hashem delivers a breathtaking account of Moshe's special place in Hashem's "house," attempting to undo the damage Miryam's words have done, but it is too late. Moshe has been seriously weakened.

2) Shelah: the debacle of the spies shows again how Moshe has been weakened. He sends the spies with the hope that they will return with beautiful fruits, with an impressive report of the Land and its riches. When they return with an evil report instead, Moshe is silenced: he makes no response, abandoning the stage to Yehoshua and Calev. Moshe manages to save the people's lives when Hashem threatens to kill them on the spot, but he can do more: he has lost faith in himself and in the people, and he cannot generate the will to beg Hashem to forgive the people (and allow them to enter the Land), as he did after the Egel. Hashem offers him opportunity after opportunity to jump in and demand that He forgive them, but Moshe remains eerily silent. He cannot take up the cause of the nation because he has lost faith in their ability to accomplish the mission, and because they have attempted to replace him as leader: "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!"

3) Korah: as we discussed last week, Moshe first interprets Korah's attack as directed against Aharon, but eventually discovers, to his shock, anger and frustration, that the people are rejecting him as well. He becomes defensive and bitter, insisting on his innocence of any abuse of power. More importantly, when he at first sees the attack as directed against Aharon, he responds by telling the people that they are really attacking Hashem, not Aharon. But when he realizes that he is a target as well, he does not say the same thing: he turns to Hashem and defends himself instead of deflecting the attack and telling the people (and himself!) that the real target is Hashem, and that there is no cause for him to be defensive.

Moshe continues to defend himself as the parasha goes on -- another sign of trouble. He summons the Earth to swallow the rebels in order to prove his legitimacy as leader, not in order to defend Hashem per se. When the people then accuse Moshe and Aharon of having murdered the people who died, Hashem becomes angry with them: have they not learned by now that He is behind Moshe and

Aharon? But there is an echo of truth in the people's accusation -- it is not clear how much of what has happened was for Hashem, and how much was necessary to prop up Moshe's and Aharon's leadership.

4) Then comes Hukkat: Moshe is wounded, angry at the people for rejecting his selfless leadership and for accusing him of self-aggrandizement. But then the people complain once again, and this time it is too much. As usual, the people complain not against Hashem, but against Moshe and Aharon. In fact, they specifically acknowledge Hashem, referring to themselves as His people. So the villains are Moshe and Aharon, not Hashem. But this time it is too much. Moshe responds differently to this rebellion than he has in the past. Instead of trying to show the rebels that their real complaint is with Hashem and not with him, Moshe simply becomes angry at the people.

Hashem instructs Moshe and Aharon to provide the people with water from a rock. This is just the latest chapter in the long process of the people's learning to trust Hashem. One more miracle. Not a great one, nothing like the splitting of a sea, but impressive nevertheless. And perhaps impressive also because of its mundanity: there is no dramatic backdrop here, no Egyptian cavalry giving murderous chase, there are only thirsty people and thirsty animals. And Hashem cares enough to perform a miracle to provide for them.

It is also an opportunity for Moshe to show that he is dedicated to the people's welfare, repudiating their claim that he has imposed his leadership on them for his own aggrandizement and that he has led them to die in the desert. But Moshe is already impatient with the people and angry at their accusations. For him, the personal issue has begun to overshadow all else. Extracting water from the rock is not just another effort to strengthen the people's faith in Hashem, it is a chance to bitterly blast the people for their attacks on him and to demonstrate his continued readiness to care for their needs despite their behavior. "Ungrateful rebels! I provide you with everything I can, even as you reject me again and again! And here I offer you water from this rock!"

It is not that Moshe believes that he (and not Hashem) has made the water come out of the rock. It is that he feels vilified by the people, accused of having his own interests at heart instead of theirs, accused of having done them wrong. Moshe says bitterly, "I remain devoted to you even as you reject me!" Moshe means only to show the people that he now does and always did do his best to help provide for the people's needs. Moshe does not mean for the people to understand that he and Aharon should get the credit for the miracle -- but that is exactly what happens. This is what the people sing as they celebrate the "digging" of this magical well. Moshe did not mean to give himself credit as opposed to Hashem, he meant only to defend himself, to show that he was devoted to the people even as they rebelled against him, but the result was that what should have been an opportunity to nurture the people's trust in Hashem became instead an opportunity for the people to acknowledge Moshe and Aharon as devoted to their care.

Moshe's function from the beginning has been to be the conduit between Hashem and the people. He hears the Torah from God and teaches it to the people; he leads the people out of Egypt as Hashem's messenger. He brings Hashem to the people. But once he is attacked and rejected by the people, he becomes defensive. He makes personal use of what should have been another opportunity to act as that identity-less conduit to Hashem. The people come away impressed with Moshe, not with Hashem.

For a religious leader, this misstep is fatal. A religious leader is so only insofar as he bridges the gap between Hashem and the people. The degree to which his personal issues cloud his actions is the degree to which he fails as a religious leader.

"Since you did not believe in Me" -- as Ramban interprets, "You did not cause the people to believe in Me" -- you caused them only to believe in you!

"To sanctify Me in the eyes of the Bnei Yisrael" -- to make Me appear special in the eyes of the people; instead, you made yourself seem special.

"Therefore you shall not bring" -- therefore, you are removed as leaders. The punishment is not formulated as a "personal" one, that Moshe the man and Aharon the man will never enter the Land, but that they will not bring the nation to the Land: they are no longer the leaders because instead of taking this opportunity to sanctify Hashem, they use it to sanctify themselves in the eyes of the people. This is why, every time this story is mentioned afterward in the Torah, it is always connected with Elazar and Yehoshua. Moshe and Aharon's punishment is not simply not entering the Land, but joining the failed generation of the desert as its failed leaders, never to enter the Land as leaders of the successful new generation.

"And He was sanctified in them" -- do not think that just because Moshe and Aharon failed to sanctify Hashem here with the water, that He is not sanctified through this event: He sanctifies Himself through Moshe and Aharon themselves! As punishment for not sanctifying Hashem through the rock, Moshe and Aharon themselves become objects through which Hashem is sanctified. **The entire people was supposed to have SEEN Hashem's great miracle, but they SAW "Moshe and Aharon's great miracle" instead;** in return, the entire nation SAW as Aharon ascended the mountain, and the entire nation SAW that he did not return: they SAW that Hashem had denied him the opportunity to lead into Eretz Yisrael, and had replaced him with his son. And the same with Moshe, who in addition is told time and again that he will "SEE" the land but never enter it. He sinned by distracting the SIGHT of the nation from Hashem, so his

own VISION of the Land would be only from afar. By punishing Moshe and Aharon publicly for usurping the stage, Hashem demonstrates to the people His power.

"Ma'altem bi" -- appropriating something dedicated for a higher purpose, and using it for personal use: "You stole from Me an opportunity to show My caring for the people and My power, a chance to sanctify Myself, and used it to show the people that YOU cared for them."

"I have shown it to you with your eyes" -- I have shown it to you with your EYES, but you will not go there as leader, because of the PEOPLE'S eyes -- because you took advantage of the people's sight for your purposes. The moment your orientation became personal, you automatically ceased to be a religious leader, and therefore, "to there you shall not go."

Shabbat Shalom
Emphasis added

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Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

for PARSHAT CHUKAT[& DEVARIM]

BETWEEN KADESH & KADESH BARNEA
(or When did the Mei Meriva incident take place?)

How (and where) did Bnei Yisrael spend their 38 years in the desert? Most of us would answer: 'wandering somewhere in the desert'. Yet, in Parshat Devarim there appears to be a more precise answer; an answer that could radically change our understanding of certain events that take place in Sefer Bamidbar.

To explore this possibility, the following shiur will undertake a careful reading of several psukim in Parshat Devarim and compare them to their parallel sources in Sefer Bamidbar.

[To follow the shiur, you'll definitely need a Tanach in hand; in fact using two Tanachim (and a "mikraot gdolot") would come in very handy.]

INTRODUCTION

Just about everyone takes for granted that the Mei Meriva incident takes place in the 40th year. The reason why is quite simple - Mei Meriva takes place immediately after the death of Miriam (see Bamidbar 20:1), and Miriam died in the first month of the FORTIETH year - didn't she?

Let's double check this assumption by taking a closer look at that pasuk in Parshat Chukat:

"And Bnei Yisrael [the entire congregation] arrived at MIDBAR TZIN on the first month, and the people settled down in Kadesh, there Miriam died and was buried." (20:1)

Note, that we are only told that this took place on the first month, but there is no mention of the year at all! So why does everyone assume that it is year FORTY?

Most of the classical commentators deal with this question. Let's start with Rashbam's explanation (on 20:1):

"And Miriam died there: On the first month at the end of the FORTY years - for Aharon died on the fifth month of the fortieth year, as it states [explicitly] in Parshat Masei."

Rashbam's logic is quite straightforward. Since later in this same chapter we learn about Aharon's death (see 20:22-29), AND since Parshat Masei states explicitly that Aharon died on the fifth month of the FORTIETH year - therefore we assume that Miriam died (four months earlier) during that SAME year.

Note however that Rashbam's assumption is based on "parshanut" (exegesis) and not on a "masoret" (tradition).

[In other words, Rashbam doesn't say that we have a tradition that tells that Miriam died in the 40th year, rather, one can deduce this date from the psukim. Therefore, if by using the same tools of "parshanut" [i.e. by carefully studying all of the psukim involved] one arrives at a different conclusion, it is permitted to suggest (and discuss and debate) other possibilities as well - better known as "la'asok b'divrei Torah"/ "v'akmal"]

IBN EZRA in his pirush (on 20:1) gets right to the point:

"In the first month: In the FORTIETH YEAR. And (thus) behold that there is neither a story nor a prophecy in the Torah other than in the FIRST year and in the FORTIETH year."

Ibn Ezra makes a very bold statement. He claims that from the moment that God decreed the punishment of forty years (after chet ha'meraglim) Chumash goes into a 'coma' for 38 years, no stories, no mitzvot - we learn about nothing until the fortieth year, and those events begin here in chapter 20!

[One could ask concerning the story of Korach which would seem to have taken place in the interim, but recall that Ibn Ezra

himself claims that narrative to be 'out of order' and places it BEFORE Bnei Yisrael left Har Sinai! See his pirush to Bamidbar 16:1 and Ramban's refutation as well.]

However, Ibn Ezra does not explain here how he arrives at that conclusion. [We'll return to a possible source later in the shiur, but most probably he would explain as Rashbam does.]

Also RAMBAN agrees that Bnei Yisrael first arrive at Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year. [Later we'll see how he and why he argues here with Ibn Ezra.] But most important is how he concludes his pirush to 20:

"But this KADESH is located in MIDBAR TZIN, and [Bnei Yisrael] arrived there in the FORTIETH year, and there Miriam died, and the psukim are EXPLICIT!"

[Note that the "girsat" in Torat Chaim's Ramban is "u'mikraot m'furashim HEYM" while Chavel's edition has: "u'mikraot m'furashim SHAM"!]

Now Ramban tells us that the psukim are explicit, but he doesn't say which psukim he is referring to!

[Note again how neither Chavel's Ramban nor Torat Chaim's provide a footnote to explain what psukim Ramban is referring to (even though you would expect them to).]

Most likely, Ramban is referring to psukim in Moshe's first speech in Sefer Devarim. In fact, in CHIZKUNI's parallel explanation (on 20:1/ he concurs that they arrive at Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year), he attempts to reconcile these psukim with parallel psukim both in Parshat Masei and in Sefer Devarim.

[I suggest that you see that Chizkuni inside, but AFTER you are familiar with those sources.]

To figure out what Ramban is referring to we must first take a step back and try to follow the flow of events, and then take inventory of all of the related sources in Chumash that describe this leg of Bnei Yisrael's journey.

WHERE HAVE THEY BEEN TILL NOW?

Where were Bnei Yisrael before they arrive at KADESH Midbar Tzin (in 20:1)? Let's work backwards to figure it out.

The previous story in Sefer Bamidbar was the incident with Korach. But no where in that narrative are we told WHERE that story took place. [That is what allows Ramban & Ibn Ezra to argue about it.] Therefore we must work our way backwards again to the story of the "meraglim" in Parshat Shlach which took place in KADESH BARNEA.

In other words, the last PLACE (in Chumash) before Miriam's death that Bnei Yisrael were 'spotted' was in KADESH BARNEA. But the Torah never tells us WHEN they left Kadesh Barnea, and what they did (and how longed they travelled) until they arrived at Midbar Tzin!

However, if we return to the story of the "meraglim", we can bring a very strong proof that they must have left Kadesh Barnea soon after. Recall that immediately after the chet ha'meraglim God commands them to leave Kadesh Barnea and head SOUTH:

"... the Amalekites and Canaanites are sitting in the valley, TOMORROW turn around and travel into the desert towards the Red Sea." (14:25)

Despite this warning the "ma'aplim" decide to attack anyhow (and are defeated/ see 14:39-45), but that defeat would not be a reason for Bnei Yisrael to stay in Kadesh Barnea. That incident would only be an additional reason for them to travel into the desert - to the south- AWAY from Eretz Canaan. If they would stay near Kadesh Barnea, there would be fear of an attack by Canaanites who most likely are already on guard because of the 'rumors' about Bnei Yisrael's plan to conquer 'their' land.

Now Parshat Shlach stops right here without telling us if, when, or how they actually left Kadesh Barnea; but according to "pshat", based on 14:25 (quoted above), it would be safe to assume that they left immediately, just as God commanded them to!

As Sefer Bamdibar continues, the next time an encampment is recorded is in Parshat Chukat, as Bnei Yisrael arrive at Kadesh Midbar Tzin (see 20:1). What happened in the meantime. How many years elapsed? Did they travel to (or toward) the Red Sea as God commanded them?

At least partial answers to these questions are found in Parshat Masei and in Sefer Devarim.

THE 18 STOP JOURNEY IN PARSHAT MASEI

Parshat Masei provides with a detailed list of Bnei Yisrael's journey through the desert (see 33:1-49). Even though that account mentions many locations that are not mentioned elsewhere in Chumash (and skips many locations that are mentioned - such as Kadesh Barnea itself!) - it will still be helpful for our discussion.

Let's pick up Parshat Masei as it records Bnei Yisrael's journey from Har Sinai (see 33:16). From Sinai they travel to Kivrot ha'taava, and then to Chatzerot, and then to Ritma. Now Kivrot ha'taava and Chatzerot have already been mentioned in Parshat Bha'alotcha (see 11:34-35), but Ritma is not. However, Parshat Bha'alotcha tells us that they camped next in Midbar Paraan (see 12:16), and from there Moshe sent the meraglim (see 13:3) from an area known as KADESH BARNEA in Midbar Paraan.

[Parshat Shlach never mentions Kadesh Barnea itself, but everywhere else in Chumash when chet ha'mergalim is mentioned, it states explicitly KADESH BARNEA - see Bamidbar 32:8 and Devarim 1:3,19; 2:14; and 9:23! Most likely "Kadesha" mentioned in 13:26 refers to (and is a short form of) Kadesh Barnea.]

Therefore, Chazal identify Ritma with Kadesh Barnea, and its 'new name' reflects the events which took place there (see Rashi 33:18). Then Parshat Masei mentions an additional 18 stops from Ritma until Bnei Yisrael arrive in Midbar Tzin (see 33:18-36), which were not mentioned anywhere else earlier in Sefer Bamidbar.

[Now you can read the first part of the Chizkuni on 20:1 and better understand what he's talking about.]

Now among the 18 locations we find Yotvata and Etzion Gaver, sites which almost for sure are somewhere in the SOUTHERN Negev, not far from the Red Sea (i.e. near Eilat). Most likely, this journey SOUTHWARD was a fulfillment of God's command to leave Kadesh Barnea towards the Red Sea (see again 14:25).

Then, Parshat Masei tells us that Bnei Yisrael travel from Etzion Gaver and arrive at Kadesh Midbar Tzin (see 33:36-38/ compare with 20:1), but does not tell us on what year they arrived.

[However, it is quite clear that they LEAVE Kadesh Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year, for from Kadesh they travel to Hor Ha'Har to bury Aharon - and that event for sure took place in year 40 as the pasuk itself testifies (33:38).]

So was Kadesh Midbar Tzin the LAST stop after a long 38 year journey wandering through the desert, OR was Kadesh Midbar Tzin the LONG stopover where Bnei Yisrael may have spent MOST of the years while waiting for the first generation to die?

Enter Parshat Devarim!

Recall that in Moshe Rabeinu's first speech in Sefer Devarim (chapters 1-4), he explains why forty years had elapsed since Bnei Yisrael SHOULD have entered. Therefore, the first part of that speech includes the story of chet ha'meraglim, for that was the primary reason for the forty year delay.

WILL THE REAL 'KADESH' PLEASE STAND UP

That story states specifically that the meraglim were sent from KADESH BARNEA (see 1:19), and also includes God's

commandment that Bnei Yisrael must immediately leave and travel back into the desert toward the Red Sea (see 1:40). But after the story of the "ma'apilim" (see 1:41-45) there is one small, but very important pasuk:

"va'teshvu ba'KADESH yamim rabim, kayamim asher ya'shavtem."

[And you settled (or sat) in KADESH many days - as the days that you settled (or sat) there." (1:46)]

[Note the difficulty in translating this pasuk! See for example JPS and its footnote.]

So what KADESH is this pasuk referring to? There are two 'candidates':

- 1) KADESH BARNEA - where the meraglim were sent from
- 2) KADESH MIDBAR TZIN - where the Mei Meriva story took place

But based on our analysis above, it CANNOT be Kadesh Barnea! After all, God commanded them to LEAVE Kadesh Barnea - "machar" -the NEXT DAY. Why then would they stay there for a long time?

[It cannot be because the ma'apilim lost their battle, since that defeat is only more reason to retreat to a safer location farther away. Most likely the Canaanites have heard rumors of Bnei Yisrael's impending attack and now that they are camped so close [Kadesh Barnea borders on eretz canaan (see Bamidbar 34:4)] - God commands that they move to the south for their own safety. Otherwise they will be attacked and God is no longer 'with them' to protect them in battle.]

So why do almost all of the commentators explain that KADESH here means KADESH BARNEA? [see Ibn Ezra & Chizkuni]

After all, in this very same chapter Kadesh Barnea has already been mentioned twice (see 1:3 & 1:19 and 2:14) and each by its full name KADESH BARNEA! Why then would Moshe refer to it now simply as KADESH - especially when there is another location called KADESH (i.e. Kadesh Midbar Tzin) which is always referred to simply as KADESH?!

THE EVENTS FROM MERAGLIM TO ARVOT MOAV

Most probably, the reason why everyone explains KADESH here as KADESH BARNEA is because of the immediate context of this pasuk.

[Before continuing, you must review 1:40->2:14 on your own, and attempt to follow the flow. Compare them with the parallel account in Bamidbar 20:14->21:4, and especially 20:16 & 21:4! Pay careful attention to Dvarim 2:14 as well.]

Let's follow the flow:

- * the story of chet ha'meraglim (1:19-40)
- * God's command to LEAVE Kadesh Barnea -> Yam Suf (1:40)
- * The "ma'apilim" are defeated, Bnei Yisrael cry (1:41-45)
- ** -- AND YOU SETTLED IN KADESH FOR MANY DAYS (1:46)
- * "Then we turned and travelled into the DESERT towards YAM SUF, as GOD HAD COMMANDED US, and we circled Har Seir for many days". (22:1 / this pasuk is KEY)

The last pasuk which we quoted is the KEY to understanding what happened, [and its most likely what Ramban was referring to when he said "ha'mikraot m'furashim"].

As Chizkuni (on 2:1) explains - the travel described in this pasuk is precisely the same 18 stops described in Parshat Masei from Ritma to Kadesh Midbar Tzin. Most likely, he reaches this conclusion for the following reason:

Since God commanded Bnei Yisrael to travel towards Yam Suf in 1:40, it only makes sense that this pasuk describes HOW Bnei Yisrael fulfilled this command. In fact the pasuk states explicitly "as God had commanded us" (2:1) - i.e. his command in 1:40. Furthermore, that journey took "many days" - therefore it coincides perfectly with the 18 stop journey from Ritma to Kadesh

as described in Parshat Masei. If so, then KADESH which is mentioned in the previous pasuk (1:46) CANNOT be Kadesh Midbar Tzin, since Bnei Yisrael had not arrived there yet, since they only arrive there after the journey described in 2:1. Therefore, KADESH in 1:46 must be KADESH BARNEA, and it would seem that Bnei Yisrael remained for a long time in Kadesh Barnea, most probably feeling quite devastated by the events of the meraglim and ma'apilim.

But what about God's command of "machar, pnu u'su lachem" (1:40)? Should they not have left right away?

On the other hand, 2:1 must be talking about the 18 stop journey, for that is the only journey when Bnei Yisrael travel for 'many days' in the direction of Yam Suf. [Isn't it?]

Therefore all of the commentators prefer this explanation of 2:1, and prefer to overlook the problem with "machar" (in 1:40) - and hence KADESH in 1:46 must be KADESH BARNEA and therefore, they only arrive in Kadesh Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year.

[I'm almost sure that this is how all of the rishonim understood these psukim, if anyone has heard a different explanation - please write me.]

NOT SO FAST!

However, there is one small 'hole' in this interpretation. The assumption that 2:1 refers to the 18 stop journey was based on two very strong points:

- 1) they travelled south to Yam Suf/ at that was only once.
- 2) just as God had commanded / in 1:40

But one can argue with both of these points. [It's a bit complicated, so follow carefully with your Tanach in hand.]

Note how the next set of psukim in Sefer Devarim (see 2:2-8) relate BACK to the journey described in 2:1. Let's explain how:

"Then God said to me saying: You have been circling this mountain for too long - turn to the NORTH. And command the people saying: You are passing now along the border of your brother Esav... then we passed thru the land of 'bnei Esav' along the way of the ARAVA from Eilat & Etzion Gaver and then we passed Moav... until we reached Nachal Zared."

(see 2:2-14)

Now this journey CANNOT be the 18 stop journey from Ritma to Kadesh, since this journey ends in Transjordan, in the land of Moav. In fact, this is the final journey of the end of the fortieth year when Bnei Yisrael pass thru Seir, Moav, and Amon and fight with Sichon & Og and camp in Arvot Moav. In other words, this is no the journey of 33:16-36 in Parshat Masei, rather it is the last leg of the journey described in Parshat Masei, i.e. 33:40-49, AFTER they leave Kadesh Midbar Tzin.

And if the journey described in 2:2-13 is from Kadesh Midbar Tzin to Arvot Moav, then (based in its context) so must be the journey described in 2:1!

And if 2:1 describes this last leg of the journey, the KADESH mentioned in 1:46 must be Kadesh Midbar Tzin - just as its name implies!

But how about our two anchors? How can this last leg of the journey be considered a travel TOWARDS YAM SUF, and how could it be referred to "as God had commanded us" (see 2:1)?

The answer is simple. Go back to Parshat Chukat and the parallel account of Bnei Yisrael's departure from KADESH Midbar Tzin:

"And Moshe sent messengers from KADESH to the King of Edom saying:... we are now in Kadesh - a city on your border - let us pass thru your land..." (see Bamidbar 20:14-21)

But Edom [=bnei Esav] did not allow Bnei Yisrael to pass. But God COMMANDED them not to attack Edom, but instead to CIRCLE the land Edom by travelling south TOWARDS YAM SUF, and then crossing the ARAVA towards the east, and then turning north towards Moav!

And this is exactly what Parshat Chukat tells us in the next chapter:

"And we left Hor ha'Har (next to Kadesh), and travelled

TOWARDS YAM SUF, to CIRCLE the land of EDOM..." (21:4)

[From there they travelled north (see 21:10-20) thru Moav etc. ending up in Arvot Moav. Compare this journey with the second leg in Parshat Masei (33:38-48/ you'll see that its the same journey!]

So lo and behold we find a SECOND journey, commanded by God, where Bnei Yisrael travel TOWARDS YAM SUF and CIRCLE HAR SEIR. It is this journey, described in Parshat Chukat and detailed in Parshat Masei (33:38-48) that Devarim 2:1 could very easily be referring to! And hence, this SECOND journey as well fulfills both criterions mentioned above ("derech Yam Suf" and "as God commanded")- and KADESH in 1:46 can still be KADESH Midbar Tzin -and all of the psukim work out perfectly!

The final proof that Bnei Yisrael must have left Kadesh Barnea immediately and not waited there for too long is from Devarim 2:14:

"And the days that we travelled from KADESH BARNEA until we reached NACHAL ZARED (border with Moav) were 38 YEARS..."

This pasuk states explicitly that Bnei Yisrael LEFT Kadesh Barnea in YEAR 2, and therefore, they could not have stayed there for "yamim rabim" [which implies many years / see Breishit 24:55].

IN CONCLUSION / & SOME REMARKS

So "I'mai nafka minah" - what difference does it make when Bnei Yisrael first arrived in KADESH.

If we understand that they arrive in Kadesh Midbar Tzin only in year 40, the Mei Meriva takes place in year 40 and begins the events of that final year, and Miriam dies at an age well over 130!

If we understand that they possibly could have arrived in Kadesh Midbar Tzin only several years after chet ha'meraglim, i.e. after the 18 stop journey towards Yam Suf back, then back north to Kadesh (which could have taken several years and served as a precaution against any further Canaanite attacks); then Moshe's sin at Mei Meriva could have taken place only a short time after chet ha'meraglim and the story of Korach. If so, this would fit in thematically very nicely with our shiurim on Bhaalotcha, Shlach, and Korach, which all indicate a slow but definite gap between Moshe and people and hence the collapse of his leadership. [It would also have Miriam's death at an age under 120.]

There are several other implications, but the main purpose of the shiur is simply to study Chumash, trying to figure out all of the possibilities. Once again, it could be I missed something, since I'd expect to find the possibility in one of the commentaries. [I haven't looked that much yet, so if anyone finds something, please write. Also if anyone finds a mistake in the shiur or another source that I overlooked, please write.]

In the meantime, it's a two hours before sunset in Israel and want to send it out before shabbat (at least for those of you in the western hemisphere). As you must have noticed, the shiur is a very rough draft, hopefully, after hearing your comments, by next year we'll have an edited and updated version. Till then,

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note also from Bamidbar 34:4 that Kadesh Barnea is located on the SOUTHERN border of Eretz Canaan, and that's exactly why the meraglim are sent from there. (Today, this area is identified just over the Egyptian border with Israel in the Negev, about 20 kilometers east of Sdeh Boker and south of Nitzana.)

PARSHAT CHUKAT - Mei Meriva

Ask most anyone:

- * What was Moshe Rabeinu's 'sin' at Mei Meriva?
They will answer: He hit the rock instead of talking to it.
- * What was his punishment?
They will answer: He was not allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael.
- * Does this punishment seem fair?
They'll say: No, but God must be extra strict with tzadikim.

Even though there is nothing 'wrong' about any of the above answers, they certainly 'oversimplify' a very complex topic.

In this week's shiur, as we carefully analyze the story of Mei Meriva, we will see how and why there are many other ways to understand both Moshe's 'sin' and his 'punishment'. In Part One, we undertake a careful textual analysis to explain why there are so many different opinions. In Part Two, we re-examine this entire topic from a 'wider angle' to show how Moshe may not have sinned after all.

INTRODUCTION

Rashi's explanation - that Moshe is punished for hitting the rock instead of talking to it - is definitely the most popular explanation of Moshe's sin. However, just about every other commentator disagrees and offers a different reason instead. For example:

- * IBN EZRA -
claims that he hit the rock TWICE, instead of once;
- * RAMBAM -
argues that Moshe 'lost his temper' and spoke harshly;
- * RAMBAN -
(quoting Rabeinu Chananel) explains that Moshe was not careful in his speech, for he said: "can WE get water from this rock?" instead of saying: "can GOD get water from this rock?".

In fact, Abrabanel (commenting on Devarim 1:37) summarizes some TEN different opinions; and proves why each one is incorrect.

There is a very simple reason why we find such a variety of opinion. Even though the Torah tells us WHY Moshe and Aharon were punished, we are never told WHAT they did wrong. To appreciate this distinction, let's carefully note how the Torah informs us of their punishment:

"...because you did not 'believe' in Me ["lo he'emantem bi"] to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you will not lead Bnei Yisrael into the land...." (see 20:12)

[Note that this is a very difficult pasuk to translate. (Note as well that just about every English translation translates this pasuk in a different manner.)]

Clearly, this pasuk implies that Moshe & Aharon did something wrong, but it doesn't tell us precisely WHAT that was. Nevertheless, because this pasuk forms the conclusion of the Mei Meriva story, we can safely assume that somewhere within that incident there must be a flaw in their behavior. Therefore, all the commentators scrutinize the psukim that describe that event, in search for some action that would warrant this punishment.

To appreciate their various conclusions, let's begin by doing exactly what they did, i.e. let's carefully study those psukim that immediately precede the punishment - Bamidbar 20:7-11.

[This is very important methodological point. Our assumption is that the variety of conclusions stems from the analysis of these psukim by each commentator [= "parshanut"], and not from a variance in passed down traditions [= "mesora"] from generation to generation since the time of Chumash. This assumption not only explains why there are so many different opinions, it also explains why each new generation continues to study Chumash in search of additional possible explanations.]

THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS!

As you review 20:7-11, note how 20:7-8 describes God's command to Moshe and Aharon; while 20:9-11 describes its fulfillment.

Therefore, it should be quite simple to figure out what they did wrong. We simply need to compare what God had commanded - to what Moshe actually did! Let's begin with God's instructions to Moshe, noting how they contains several explicit commands:

"And God spoke to Moshe saying: TAKE the staff, and GATHER the congregation together, you and Aharon your brother, and SPEAK to the rock before their eyes that it should give water, and TAKE OUT for them water from the rock, and GIVE DRINK to the people and their animals."
(20:7-8)

Review these psukim one more time, paying attention to the FIVE commands that Moshe (and Aharon) must execute:

- (1) TAKE the staff;
- (2) GATHER the congregation;
- (3) SPEAK to the rock... and it will give water;
- (4) TAKE OUT for them water from the rock;
- (5) GIVE DRINK to the people.

Note how each of these five commands contains an active verb, and hence requires that Moshe take a specific action. [In other words, Moshe must (1) TAKE the staff, (2) GATHER the people, and (3) SPEAK to the rock, etc.]

However, there appears to be a contradiction between the third and the fourth command (concerning how the water would be taken out of the rock).

According to command #3, Moshe should speak to the rock, whereupon it should immediately start giving its water. But the next command (#4) is for Moshe to 'take water out of the rock' (without explaining HOW he should do it). But if by SPEAKING to the rock (3) the rock will already be giving its water, how can Moshe fulfill command (4) to TAKE OUT water from the rock? The rock is already giving its water - so what would command (4) entail?

As we continue our analysis, keep this question in mind.

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

The next step of our analysis will help us understand the underlying reason for the various opinions. We begin our analysis (of 20:9-11) to see how Moshe fulfilled (or didn't fulfill) each of these five commands.

We will compare each command to its execution in search of any slight variance that could be considered a lack of "emunah" that would warrant such a severe punishment (as described in 20:12).

COMMAND #1 - "TAKE the staff"; (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"And Moshe TOOK the staff from before the Lord, as God had commanded him..." (20:9)

Nothing seems to be wrong here, after all the pasuk itself testifies: "as God commanded him". Certainly, this could not be a sin.

[Later in the shiur we will return to this pasuk.]

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COMMAND #2 - GATHER the "eydah" (congregation)... (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"And Moshe and Aharon GATHERED the "kahal" (congregation) people together in front of the rock..." (20:10)

Here again, nothing appears to have been done wrong. [There is slight discrepancy between "kehal" and "eydah", but these two words in Chumash are usually synonymous. [It should be noted that Malbim disagrees.]

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COMMAND #3 - SPEAK to the rock that it should give water...

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"...And he [Moshe] said to THEM (i.e. to the people): Listen here you rebellious people, is it possible that WE can take water from this rock?" (20:10)

Here we finally find our first major problem. Even though God had instructed Moshe to speak TO the rock- so that it would give water; instead Moshe speaks to the PEOPLE - ABOUT the rock (that it would give water)! Therefore, most of the commentators [Rashi, Rambam, Ramban, Rashbam] will find fault with some aspect of Moshe's behavior in this pasuk (which will be discussed below).

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COMMAND #4 - TAKE OUT for them water from the rock... (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"... and Moshe lifted his hand and HIT the rock with his staff TWO times, then much water came out..." (20:11)

Even though RASHI claims that this is Moshe's primary transgression [for he hit the rock INSTEAD of 'talking' to it], based on this careful comparison it becomes clear why other commentators disagree. After all, God commanded him to 'take out water', but didn't tell him HOW to accomplish this. It seems as though Moshe understood that he was supposed to use his staff to do so (as he had done forty years earlier). Furthermore, God had commanded him to 'take his staff' (i.e. command #1) -if he wasn't supposed to hit the rock, why was he commanded to take his staff? Ibn Ezra advances this argument, and concludes instead that Moshe erred by hitting the rock TWICE instead of once.

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COMMAND #5 - Give drink to the people and their animals. (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"...and the people and their animals drank. (20:11)

Clearly, Moshe does nothing wrong in this final stage. After all, we surely don't expect Moshe to 'pour drinks' for everyone; rather he fulfills this command by allowing the people to gather the water for their needs.

=====

This analysis shows that the primary problem in Moshe's behavior lies somewhere between his execution of commands 3 & 4. Let's return to our discussion of command #3. Recall how God had instructed Moshe:

"SPEAK to the rock and [or that] it should [or will] give water..."

[Note the two possible translations.]

Considering that we never find that Moshe actually talked to the rock (and based on the above parallel comparison), we must conclude that the following phrase is Moshe's execution of this command:

"...And he [Moshe] said to THEM (i.e. to the people): Listen here you rebellious people, is it possible that we can take water from this rock?" (20:10)

At first glance, it even appears as though there may have been a small 'misunderstanding'. As we explained above, even though God had instructed Moshe to speak TO the rock, instead Moshe speaks to the people ABOUT the rock. At this point, there are three different approaches that one can follow:

- a) Moshe indeed misunderstood what God wanted.
Hence his transgression would fall under the category of "shogeg" - an unintentional sin / see Rashbam.
- b) Moshe understood God's command; but acted differently.
In other words, he acted defiantly [= "mayzid" - an intentional transgression]. This leads Rashi to his conclusion that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it.
- c) Moshe acted properly (in this regard), and understood God's command.

In other words, speaking to the people about the rock was precisely what God commanded. As Ramban explains, in the phrase "v'dbartem EL ha'sela" - the word "el" should be understood as "odot" (about). God commands Moshe to speak to the people ABOUT the rock THAT it should give water; and that is exactly what Moshe does!

Even though this third possibility (that this was indeed God's intention) may seem a bit 'stretched', it definitely can be supported from the next commandment: "And you shall TAKE OUT water for them from the rock" (see 20:8). As we pointed out earlier, this fourth command implies that Moshe must now do something to 'take out' water from the rock.

Therefore, it is possible that hitting the rock was exactly what God expected Moshe to do. After all, this is exactly how God had instructed him to take water from the 'rock at Chorev' many years earlier (see Shmot 17:6). Furthermore, once Moshe understands that 'speak TO the rock' means 'speak ABOUT the rock' then obviously "take out water" must imply to take a certain action to

extract the water - i.e. to hit the rock! Certainly, it would be no less of a miracle now than it was forty years earlier!

Because of these considerations, all of the commentators (except Rashi) must search elsewhere for a flaw in Moshe's behavior. For example, Rambam and Ramban take issue with how Moshe's words his rebuke:

"...And he [Moshe] said to them: Listen here you rebellious people, is it possible that WE can take water from this rock?" (20:10)

Rambam takes issue with the TONE of this rebuke, while Ramban takes issue with its CONTENT.

RAMBAM claims that the tone of Moshe's statement - "listen you rebels..." - reflects an unnecessary anger which caused a "chillul Hashem" (a desecration of God's Name). [See Rambam in "shmoneh perakim", or simply see its quote by Ramban in his pirush to 20:7.]

RAMBAN claims that Moshe caused a "chilul Hashem" by saying 'we' in their rhetorical question - "is it possible that WE can take out water from this rock". This 'careless' statement may have caused the people to conclude that it was Moshe and Aharon (and not God) who cause the water to come out from the rock.

[See Ramban 20:7 in name of Rabeinu Chananel.]

Nonetheless, it remains possible to understand that Moshe's rebuke in this pausk was entirely in order. This leads Ibn Ezra to find fault in the next stage:

"... and Moshe lifted his hand and HIT the rock with his staff TWO times, then much water came out..." (20:11)

After refuting all of the other opinions, Ibn Ezra finds Moshe's flaw in the fact that he hit the rock TWICE instead of only once. [It seems that according to Ibn Ezra, this reason 'wins by default'. Note that Ramban (towards the end of his commentary) also supports this opinion - to a certain extent.]

Thus, by careful comparing Moshe's execution of each of God's commands, we are able to find the underlying reason for the opinions of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Rashbam, Ramban, etc.

Nonetheless, no matter how we explain WHAT Moshe's sin was, a more fundamental question remains - i.e. WHY was his punishment so severe?

PART II

DID MOSHE DO ANYTHING 'WRONG' ?

From the above analysis, a very interesting possibility arises. If we combine all of the reasons advanced by each commentator to reject the other interpretations - we could conclude that Moshe did nothing wrong at all!

[See the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Abrabanel on this sugya. Each of them present very convincing arguments why all of the other opinions are wrong.]

In fact, Abrabanel himself raises this possibility, then he advances his own opinion (based on Devarim 1:37) that Moshe & Aharon are really being punished for earlier sins - Moshe for "chet ha'mergalim" and Aharon for "chet ha'egel". Mei Meriva, he explains, serves as a kind of 'cover-up' to differentiate between Moshe &

Aharon's punishment, and the punishment of the nation.

Nonetheless, his interpretation remains difficult because the text states explicitly that Moshe is punished because of the events that took place at MEI MERIVA! [See not only here in 20:12-13, but also in 20:24, 27:14 and Devarim 32:51.] Therefore, we should be quite reluctant to look for the PRIMARY reason elsewhere.

But, where else can we look to find Moshe's sin? On the one hand, it must be related to the events of Mei Meriva, but when we examined those psukim, it was very hard to pinpoint a 'sin'; and certainly not a sin severe enough to deserve such a harsh punishment.

To answer this question, we must first take a closer look at precisely WHAT their punishment was.

CRIME & PUNISHMENT

It is commonly understood that Moshe and Aharon's punishment is that they are forbidden from ENTERING the land of Israel. However, this popular assumption is not precise. Let's take a look once again how the Chumash explains their punishment:

"And God told Moshe... because you did not trust Me enough to sanctify Me... therefore you shall NOT LEAD THIS NATION into the LAND which I promised them..." (20:12)

Note, that God doesn't say that they cannot enter the Land; rather they cannot LEAD the people into the Land. In other words, Moshe and Aharon are not being punished as INDIVIDUALS, rather as NATIONAL LEADERS. As such, their 'sin' must relate in some manner to a flaw in their leadership traits.

In fact, the very pasuk that explains their punishment already hints to a flaw in leadership:

"...BECAUSE you did not trust Me enough TO SANCTIFY ME in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael..." (20:12)

God's statement implies that He had expected Moshe and Aharon to take the rebellion at Mei Meriva and somehow create from it a "kiddush Hashem" - a sanctification of God's Name. Therefore, to find that 'sin', we must examine the Mei Meriva once again, in search of leadership crisis. But this time, we must begin by studying those events from their onset.

LET'S START FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

Recall that the Mei Meriva incident began when Bnei Yisrael encountered a terrible water shortage immediately upon their arrival at Midbar Tzin. Let's begin our study by taking a closer look at how the Torah described that crisis:

"And Bnei Yisrael arrived at Midbar Tzin... but there was not enough water for the people, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon. They argued with Moshe saying: It would had been better had we died with our brethren "lifnei Hashem" [before God]... So - why did you bring us to this desert to die?...and why did you take us out of Egypt to bring us to this terrible place... - there are no fruits here and there is no water to drink." (see 20:1-5)

Not only did Bnei Yisrael ask for water, they expressed their total disgust with the entire process of Yetziat Mitzraim. Even though they direct these harsh complaints to Moshe and Aharon, they can be understood no less as a complaint against God; questioning not only His ability to save them, but also the very

purpose of their special relationship.

How should Moshe and Aharon respond to these blasphemous complaints? Should they not argue by defending God? Should they not encourage the people to remain faithful?

Instead, Chumash describes what appears to be a rather 'pathetic' reaction:

"And Moshe and Aharon came to the Ohel Moed [in fear] from the congregation, and they fell on their faces..." (20:6)

One could suggest that already at this stage a leadership crisis has unfolded. To clarify this point, let's compare this event to the parallel incident that took place when Bnei Yisrael complained for water at Refidim many years earlier (see Shmot 17:1-7). Note Moshe's immediate response to an almost identical complaint:

"mah trivun iy'madi, mah t'nasun et Hashem" -Why are you arguing with me, why are you TESTING God? (see 17:2)

At Refidim, Moshe immediately challenged the people - reprimanding them how their complaint reflected a lack of faith in God. Afterward, when the people continued to complain, Moshe cries out to God, begging for a solution (see 17:4).

In contrast, at "Mei Meriva" Moshe's reaction is quite different. Instead of confronting these almost identical complaints, Moshe & Aharon immediately 'run away' to the Ohel Moed and 'fall on their faces' (20:6). [Even if this means that they prayed - is this a time for prayer? Compare with Shmot 14:15 and its context!]

Was 'running away' the proper reaction? Should they not have assured the people that God will indeed take care of their needs. Should they not have challenged the people's irreverent statement that "it would have been better had they remained in Egypt"?

One could suggest that already at this early stage in the narrative - Moshe & Aharon have already 'failed' as national leaders, for they do not SANCTIFY God's name when the opportunity arose. In fact, this may be precisely what God is referring to when He states: "because you did not trust Me enough to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael..." (20:12).

Even though God immediately gives Moshe & Aharon specific instructions on how to deal with the situation, it is already too late. As soon as the incident is over, even though Moshe & Aharon may have properly fulfilled all of God's instructions when hitting the rock, God informs them that their days as the nation's leaders are numbered. Before Bnei Yisrael will begin their conquest of Eretz Canaan, it will be necessary to appoint new leadership.

[Note that later in Sefer Devarim when Moshe begs that he be allowed see the land (3:23-26), he does not ask to LEAD, only to ENTER and see for himself.]

However, if this interpretation is correct, why do we need the story of 'hitting the rock' (20:7-11) in between? Let the Torah first inform us of Moshe's punishment, and then let God provide water for the people.

To answer this question, and to understand this entire incident in its wider perspective, we must turn back a few pages to a related event in Parshat Korach.

WHOSE STAFF IS IT?

To our surprise, the key to understanding this complicated sugya lies in its connection to Parshat Korach! To appreciate that connection, let's pay careful attention to how the narrative continues (after Moshe & Aharon run away to the Ohel Moed):

"And God spoke to Moshe saying: "kach et ha'mateh" - take THE STAFF and gather the people..." (see 20:8)

It is commonly assumed that Moshe is instructed to take his own staff, i.e. the very same staff with which he brought the plagues; split the sea; and brought forth water from the rock at Chorev; etc.

However, it cannot be Moshe's own staff, for the pasuk states explicitly:

"And Moshe took the staff - M'LIFNEI HASHEM - from before God, as God had commanded him..." (20:9)

In Chumash, "lifnei Hashem" usually refers to in front of the ARON, i.e. the ark of the covenant located in the holiest domain of the Mishkan (see Shmot 29:11,42;30:8; etc.). Surely, Moshe would not keep his staff "lifnei Hashem"! [The "kodesh kedoshim" is not his personal closet!]

[Note that God commands Moshe -"kach et HA'mateh" - THE staff, not -"matecha" - YOUR staff. Compare with Shmot 14:16, 17:5.]

If it is not his own staff that Moshe must take, then what staff is it? Is there someone else who keeps his staff in the "kodesh ha'kedoshim"?!

The answer, as Rashbam and Chizkuni so beautifully explain (see their commentaries to 20:8), is quite simple - it is AHARON's special staff!

Recall from Parshat Korach that God had commanded Moshe to conduct a test between the staffs of each of the tribal leaders (see 17:16-24) to establish that the tribe of Levi is indeed chosen. Carefully note God's command to Moshe after Aharon's staff wins that test:

"... return the STAFF OF AHARON - "lifnei ha'eydut" - [in front of the 'tablets of testimony', i.e. the ARON] for safe keeping, in order that it be a SIGN FOR ANY REBELLIOUS GROUP ["ot l'bnei meri"]- so that they will stop complaining and not die..." (17:25-26)

In other words, God tells Moshe - NEXT TIME that Bnei Yisrael complain or rebel, take out Aharon's staff from the Ohel Moed and REMIND them of what happened to Korach's rebellion.

And sure enough - the next complaint in Chumash is the incident at Mei Meriva!

This not only explains Rashbam's pirush, but it also neatly explains why the Torah (in 20:9) must inform us that Moshe takes specifically the staff "m'lifnei Hashem" - from before God. Moshe doesn't take his own staff - he takes the staff of AHARON that was kept "lifnei Hashem" - for it was set aside for specifically for this purpose.

In other words, in 20:8 God instructs Moshe to do exactly what Moshe should have done on his own!

This also beautifully explains why Moshe prefaces his rebuke with: "shimu na ha'MORIM" [listen o' you rebellious ones /see 20:10]. Considering that God had instructed Moshe to take the "mateh Aharon" which was set aside for an "ot l'bnei MERI", it is only appropriate that he would rebuke the people by saying: "shimu na ha'MORIM"! [See Chizkuni on 20:10, note also that "meri" & "morim" are derived from the same shorash.]

In a similar manner, the Torah's use of the word GAVANU in both these parshiot provides additional (textual) support for this interpretation. Recall how the complaints at Mei Meriva first began:

"And the people quarrelled with Moshe saying: 'loo GAVANU B'GVA acheinu...' - if only we had perished with our brothers" (20:3)

This complaint echoes the cry of Bnei Yisrael in the aftermath of Korach's rebellion (immediately after Aharon's staff is set aside/ see 17:25-27):

"And Bnei Yisrael said to Moshe: 'heyn GAVANU avadnu' - lo, we perish, we are lost... anyone who comes close to the Mishkan will die, alas we are doomed to perish..." (17:27-28) [Compare also 20:4-5 with 16:13-14.]

MAKING NO MISTAKES

Once we explain that Moshe was commanded to take MATEH AHARON - almost every following action that he takes makes perfect sense. Let's explain why:

As we explained earlier, because MATEH AHARON is an "ot l'bnei meri", it is only logical that Moshe understands "speak to the rock" as "speak ABOUT the rock" and therefore begins his rebuke with "SHIMU NA HA'MORIM".

Then, Moshe's next statement: "Can we take water from this rock?" can be explained as precisely what God commanded him to do: i.e. to speak about (or at) the rock - "v'natan meimav" - THAT IT SHOULD give water. In other words, God instructs Moshe is to challenge the people's belief, to ask them - is it possible for a rock to give water? - And that's exactly what he does!

This also explains why Moshe hit the rock. Once he understands that "speak TO the rock" means "speak ABOUT the rock", then God's next instruction: "v'hotzeita" [you shall TAKE OUT water] must imply that Moshe himself must cause the water to come out. How? Exactly as he did forty years earlier by the rock in Chorev, using his OWN mateh (not Aharon's / read 20:11 carefully - "matey'hu").

[This implies that there were actually TWO staffs at Mei Meriva:

- (1) The staff of Aharon - was taken by Moshe and most probably given to Aharon to hold up in front of the people during this entire event. And (2)- the staff of Moshe - which he himself used to hit the rock to bring forth water.]

The only detail that remains to be explained is why Moshe hit the rock twice (see Ibn Ezra). However, as Ramban asks, could it be that hitting the rock twice instead of once makes the miracle any less impressive? Furthermore, God did not tell Moshe to hit the rock ONCE or TWICE! He just commanded him to 'take out water'. Certainly, Moshe should have the leeway to hit the rock as many times as he feels necessary. [Even at Chorev, it never mentions how many times Moshe hit the rock. And even if this action was incorrect, could this slight 'transgression' warrant such a severe punishment?]

This explanation of "mateh AHARON" only strengthens our claim that Moshe indeed followed God's instructions properly - but he and Aharon are punished for not sanctifying God's Name earlier - when Bnei Yisrael FIRST complained at Mei Meriva.

With this background, it becomes easier to understand why their punishment relates to this leadership crisis. Failure in

leadership is not necessarily because the leader does something 'wrong', nor is it a sin. Leadership, as its name implies, must LEAD the people - i.e. it must do something right, it must take an initiative.

As individuals, Moshe & Aharon never 'sinned' at Mei Meriva, but as leaders they failed. Therefore, God reaches the conclusion that they will not be able to succeed should they be the leaders who will take Bnei Yisrael into the Promised Land.

BELIEVING or SUPPORTING

Based on this interpretation, we can suggest an alternate understanding of the word "EMUNAH" (used in the pasuk which explains the reason for their punishment):

"ya'an lo he'EMANTEM BI" - because you did not have FAITH IN ME in the EYES of Bnei Yisrael" (see 20:12).

The word "emunah" in this pasuk may not refer to belief in God in the theological sense. Surely, Moshe and Aharon 'believe' in God. However, they were not 'supportive' enough of God in the eyes of the people. The Hebrew word "emunah" stems from the shresh aleph.mem.nun which means to support or sustain.

[For example, in Shmot 17:12 - "v'haya yadav emunah..." in the war against Amalek, when Aharon & Chur support Moshe's arm, or in Megilat Esther (2:7) - "va'yehi OMEYN et Hadassah..." - i.e. Mordechai supported (or adopted) Esther, or "omnot ha'bayit" the pillars supporting the Beit Ha'Mikdash (II Melachim 18:16), or the word "amen", which confirms or supports a bracha or statement made by others, etc.] .

In hindsight, the reason for Moshe's 'punishment' may even be quite logical. Considering the many difficulties that will face Bnei Yisrael once they begin conquest of the Land, it is only inevitable that many more rebellious situations such as these will arise. Leadership, which can deal with such complaints, is essential.

THE FINAL STRAW

Had this been the only incident where Moshe & Aharon's leadership faltered, their punishment may not have been so harsh. However, this problem of leadership had already surfaced numerous times in Sefer Bamidbar. In fact it could almost be considered its secondary theme. Recall, that from the time Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, almost every event which Chumash records reflects this pattern of faltering leadership:

- * At "kivrot ha'taaveh" Moshe himself claims that he can no longer lead the people (11:11-15).
- * Later, even Miriam, Moshe's own sister, complains about his leadership (12:1-3).
- * When the "meraglim" return, Moshe and Aharon fall on their faces (14:5); Kalev and Yehoshua take leadership positions.
- * In the rebellion of Korach (chapter 16), again Moshe and Aharon's leadership is challenged, again they fall on their faces (16:4,22).

[This approach also explains why later in Sefer Devarim, Moshe claims that it was because of "chet ha'meraglim" that he could not enter the land (see Devarim 1:37).]

As we have explained, surely as individuals, Moshe and Aharon are "tzadikim"; they do nothing 'wrong'. However, as happens over and over again in Sefer Bamidbar, their leadership fails. At Mei Meriva, possibly a personal example of patience, stamina, confidence, and calm rebuke may have been able to create the necessary

"kiddush Hashem"; but this did not happen.

Can we be critical of Moshe and Aharon for their behavior? Should we consider their actions as sinful? Not necessarily! This leadership crisis does not have to be considered a question of 'good or bad' behavior. Rather, it could be considered a tragedy - a problem of compatibility.

As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Shlach, already when Bnei Yisrael first left Har Sinai, there were signs of a lack of compatibility between Moshe Rabeinu and Bnei Yisrael. After all, Moshe had spent months on Har Sinai with the SHCHINA, and was no longer capable of dealing with complaints concerning mundane manners. [Note also Shmot 34:35. See also commentary of the Sfatai Emet on the Mei Meriva incident.]

To meet the challenges of taking Am Yisrael into the Promised Land, new leadership was essential. Not necessarily because Moshe and Aharon did anything 'wrong', rather because Am Yisrael were not worthy of their leadership.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. One could even go one step further and suggest that Moshe, even before God's command, should have taken MATEH AHARON and shown it to the people and rebuked them. If so, then God's first command to Moshe - "kach et ha'mateh" may simply be a reminder to Moshe of what he SHOULD HAVE DONE on his own (as he was instructed in Parshat Korach)! This could explain "ka'asher tzivahu" in 20:9. It may imply: as God commanded him - not just now, but earlier - in PARSHAT KORACH!]

B. Later in the Parsha, a similar situation where the people need water, arises at "B'ey'rah" (21:16-18). There Moshe gathers the people together, God provides water, and the people respond with a song of praise! This shows that given the proper circumstances, such a situation can result in a "kiddush Hashem". Moshe may have learned his lesson, however, by then it is already too late for God to change His decision.]

C. REASONS OR INDICATORS

Our interpretation in the shiur (part two) does not necessarily have to conflict with the various opinions raised by the "rishonim" which we discussed in Part One. One could suggest that each of those reasons can be understood as INDICATORS of this faltering leadership, not just REASONS for Moshe's punishment. For example, Moshe and Aharon's use of a harsh tone; their quick anger; their lack of patience hitting the rock twice instead of once; their running away to the Ohel Moed, etc. All of these opinions point to the same general problem of leadership.

D. According to our explanation above, the most difficult pasuk to explain is 20:24, in relation to Aharon's death at Hor haHar:

"... al asher m'ritem et pi, lmei m'riva"

"meri" implies more than not doing something right, it seems as though something of a rebellious nature was done.

1. Explain why this pasuk led many commentators to explain the sin as hitting the rock instead of speaking to it.

2. How else can one explain this pasuk?

3. Explain the "lamed" in "lmei m'riva".

4. Read Devarim 32:51. What does "m'altem" mean?

(What is "me'ilah", in general)?

Relate this pasuk to Bamidbar 20:24 and 20:12-13, and use it to explain your answer to 1 & 2 above.

E. See the Netziv's pirush in Emek Davar to Bamidbar 20:8-11.

Note how he insists that the mateh is Moshe's mateh, and hence he must explain that "ka'asher tzivayhu" - is that God had sometime earlier commanded Moshe to take his "mateh" and put it next to the Aron. He also solves the problem of the contradiction between command 3 and 4 by explaining that God gave Moshe TWO options for bringing water: 1) speak to the people that they should pray for water, and if that didn't work, as a back up - he could alternately hit the rock, and that would also bring forth water. Even though our shiur has followed a very different approach, it is interesting to note the originality of the Netziv's approach, and how he deals with many of the questions that we raised in the above shiur.

Parshas Chukat: Revisiting Mei Merivah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. The Text: Bamidar 20:1-13

1 And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2 And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before Hashem! 4 And why have you brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? 5 And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.' 6 And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces; and the glory of Hashem appeared unto them. 7 And Hashem spoke unto Moses, saying: 8 'Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink.' 9 And Moses took the rod from before Hashem, as He commanded him. 10 And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: 'Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?' 11 And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. 12 And Hashem said unto Moses and Aaron: 'Because ye believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' 13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with Hashem, and He was sanctified in them.

II. The Method

A: The panoramic view

Immediately when reading the text, besides the well-known question of the gravity of the punishment meted out to Moses and Aaron and identifying the particular sin of which they are held liable – we find another oddity. The mention of the death and burial of Miriam seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the story and doesn't seem to belong here. (The midrashic device of Miriam's well [Tosefta Sotah 11:1, Seder Olam Rabbah Ch. 10] seems to have been introduced to solve this problem. The gist of the Midrash is that perhaps her death occasioned an unexpected thirst that caused the crisis. A cursory look at the sources cited above will bear this out.)

Any student of Tanakh will have long realized that deaths and burials are never inherently significant (except, perhaps, in the royal chronicles of Melakhim as part of the royal-biography formula) – deaths and/or burials mentioned in the text are reported due to another consideration. Often as not, it is a demonstration of the fulfillment of a Divine promise (e.g. the funeral of Jacob was a direct fulfillment of God's last words to him in Gen. 46:4; the death of Sarah was occasion for Abraham to finally realize God's commitment of over 60 years that he will inherit the Land); as such, the mention of Miriam's death and burial seems to be unnecessary here.

Note that the complaint of the people isn't about thirst – they only mention "u-mayim ayin lish'tot" (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought – strangely enough, their main complaint is about the desert not being a land for seed, figs, grapes and pomegranates, which rests upon an odd premise. Why would the Israelites think that this way-station on their way to the "good, wide land" should have any of those resources?

In numerous essays, I've underscored that a successful reader of Tanakh must become "part of the story" – we, the omniscient reader, know how everything is going to turn out; we know that Pharaoh will refuse, we know that Esau will discover Jacob's masquerade, we know that Rachel will die on the road – and we know that Moses will never enter the Land. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do – either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are – just that they have been traveling for a long time with a beautiful land awaiting them at the end of that journey. They may have heard that the Land is "flowing with milk and honey," they may have even heard about the famed seven species (although only adumbrated in Deut. 8:8) – but all that they've seen is grapes, figs and pomegranates – which, surprisingly, lists exactly the same three types of fruit brought back by the scouts (above, 13:23), the absence of which they bemoaned here.

So...the Israelites must have thought they were in Israel – and that's why they are complaining about the lack of fig and pomegranate trees and grape vines. What might have given them the idea that they had already reached that Land?

The answer lies in again, using the frame of reference of the people themselves; in the middle of our camp, held in trust by the Levites, is a box containing Joseph's bones. Why didn't we bury our ancestor in Egypt? Evidently, we bury important people in the Land – Joseph has a special location (cf. Gen. 48:22), but no one is buried "out there" (except for the entire generation that passed away in the desert and whose death was a fulfillment of a Divine decree). So...if Miriam died and was buried "there" ("sham"), we must have arrived at the Land!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis – the people believe that they've arrived – but the "beautiful land, flowing with milk and honey, boasting fantastic fruit" is nowhere to be seen. "And what of the grapes, figs and pomegranates which we've seen with our own eyes (or our parents saw and related to us)?"

B: Anticipatory reading

We would expect that Moses' response – or that directed by God that he take – would be to assure them that they are still on the road, not yet arrived and that, indeed, the Land to which they are coming is truly filled with luscious fruits and grains.

It takes a strong imagination to be able to see the text as it is not, to imagine what might have come next and then to "be surprised" at what actually ensues. This is nothing less than the traditional approach of Midrash (especially Midrash Halakhah) which is built on what should be written and then allowing what is written to teach additional lessons. We train ourselves to recognize a rhetorical pattern in Tanakh, whether it be nomenclature (see Rashi's comment at Gen. 1:1 noting that the "unexpected" use of Elokim followed, in ch. 2 [v. 4 ff.] by Hashem Elokim indicates a change in "Divine Policy" vis-à-vis creation), presentation of laws or any other genre of Biblical literature, we train ourselves to notice what is "off" about a particular passage and what that unusual twist may be signaling. This also makes reading the classical medieval commentators that much more empowering and impactful, as the students can already identify with "what's bothering Rashi/Ramban/ibn Ezra (etc.).?"

As such, we are surprised that God neither instructs Moses to march them into the Land or to inform them that they haven't yet arrived – which we can take in one of two ways. Either our hypothesis is wrong and the confrontation between Moses and the people isn't about the Land, but about thirst – or we may be right, but there may also be something bigger going on, beneath the superficial complaint, and that is what God is instructing Moses to address.

C: Back to the panoramic view

If we take a look at the passage, we can see that the people's complaint doesn't jibe with what we know about the narrative. We know that God took the people out of Egypt, that God is leading them through the desert and directing their travels – but we are so accustomed to hearing the people's plaint to Moses (and Aaron): "Why have YOU brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness... And why have YOU made us to come up out of Egypt..." that we don't necessarily pick up on the incongruity of their complaint. Why aren't they angry at – or disappointed with – God, who has led them to this place?

There is a simple answer which, at once, illuminates and disappoints: The Israelites of this new generation believe, as did their parents, that it was Moses and Aaron who led them out of Egypt and who are leading them through the desert... in effect, nothing has changed since the complaints first registered just after we were miraculously brought through the Sea (Exodus chapters 15-17).

D: The Crisis: A Summary

We can identify three different issues going on in our passage –

- 1) An elemental and existential need for water – as confirmed by v. 2
- 2) A disenchantment with the "Land" that they believe they have come to (v. 5)
- 3) A gross theological error about who (or Who) is leading them

Furthermore, we can then identify a causal chain of malaise: The lack of water opens up the wounds about the place, which in turns reveals a festering problem of belief.

E: Testing the hypothesis

If we are right, then we should expect God's response to address the ultimate problem of belief; He does so (as we will discover forthwith) without sacrificing a solution to the most immediate problem of water. He directs Moses to act in such a way that belief in God's all-encompassing role in their deliverance, journeys and eventual destination would be confirmed.

The command to take the staff implies that Moses should use it to strike the rock (as ibn Ezra argues, and based on the parallel story in Exodus 17; see, however, R. Yoseph B'khor Shor's comments here); what are we to make of the directive "ve-dibbartem el ha-sela". Here again, the students' familiarity with the rest of Tanakh, their learning to focus only on the text (and suspend interpretive memories) and to read with anticipation will help.

Here is where our trusty tool, the Concordance, comes in handy. To be fair, a concordance proper wouldn't help here; but familiarity with Tanakh ("bekiut") is the larger meaning and intent here. As there is no other occasion in all of Tanakh when anyone is commanded to speak to (and command) an inanimate object, perhaps we should challenge the usual translation of the prepositional *el* and to read, rather *al* (here we can use a "real" concordance; there are dozens of examples in the canon where the two are interchanged) and read, rather, "speak about the boulder" and understand that Moses and Aaron were directed to speak to the people, in front of the rock, about that selfsame boulder. But what were they to say?

Once we recall the underlying crisis of faith that lies at the heart of our textual onion, we may come to the conclusion that Moses and Aaron were to use the rock as a way of showing the people that it was God, not they, who were directing the people's lives, feeding them, leading them and protecting them through the desert.

Our hypothesis, that the real cause of the crisis was the people's misconception about Moses and Aaron's role in their destiny, can now be substantiated and, at the very least, we can continue to use it as a tentative approach as we come to the denouement of the passage.

F: The "sin"

What do we expect Moses to say at this point? (more "anticipatory reading") "I will bring water from the rock, something no human can accomplish – therefore, you all see that it is God Almighty who is protecting and leading us"....or something to that effect.

Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point "ha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?" – but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen's mother declares "Do you call this a clean room" – her son understands that she is calling it a mess – but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing – he may think that she is impressed with his work or even asking him what he thinks about the room.

Evidently, the new generation of Israelites didn't properly understand Moses' intent and his opportunity to inspire belief was lost – they could have been moved by his words to renew their belief in God, but instead (evidently) understood his words as anger, or defiance; either way, as confirmation of their belief in Moses as the "wizard" who was leading them.

A careful read of God's punishment is not that Moses and Aaron were punished with being condemned to die in the desert; but were stripped of their leadership. Read not "lo tavo'u" – you shall not come – rather "lo tavi'u" – you shall not lead; the inability to lead this new generation, evidenced by a communication gap between the old leader and the new community, necessitated a removal of Moses from the helm of leadership.

III. AFTERWORD

In this brief essay, we've looked at the infamous "waters of strife", a scene that, in one sense or another, signals the end of Moses'

leadership of the people. We've utilized various methodological tools to assay the narrative and to cut "between the lines" of the story to identify the underlying issues and how they interrelate. By using our familiarity with Tanakh in general, with the desert narratives in particular, we were able to identify several anomalies in the text and place them in (tentative) proper perspective. By utilizing the skill of "anticipatory reading", we allowed ourselves to be surprised by the text and to take a fresh look at this well-studied Parashah.

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PARASHAT BALAK

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

QUESTIONS:

- 1) The elders of Mo'av and Midyan bring "kesamim" with them to Bil'am. What are they, and why are they brought? Where else in the parasha is this word mentioned, and how does that reflect back on the "kesamim" here?
- 2) When the elders come to Bil'am and solicit his sorcery, he invites them to stay the night so he can consult Hashem about the matter. Hashem asks him, "Who are these men with you?" Why does Hashem ask a question, since He certainly already knows the answer? Where else does Hashem ask questions like this, and what is the significance of the connection between this story and that story?
- 3) Our parasha is a great place to look at the ways in which people play "telephone" in real life. Hashem tells Bil'am one thing, but Bil'am reports something slightly (but significantly) different to the elders of Mo'av; they in turn report something slightly (but significantly) different to Balak. What are these subtle differences, and what accounts for them? Are they important to the theme of the parasha, or are they just an interesting side comment on the nature of communication? How is Balak's understanding of Bil'am's response reflected in his comments to Bil'am in 22:37 and later in 24:11?
- 4) Bil'am responds to Balak's second group of emissaries by consulting Hashem again about going with them. Hashem tells Bil'am to go (22:20). But, incredibly, just two pesukim later (22:22), Hashem "was angry because he was going." Well, does Hashem really want him to go or not?
- 5) Next comes the story with Bil'am and the donkey. But what is the point? Why is this story in the Torah? What are we supposed to get out of it?
- 6) Why does the angel show up to threaten Bil'am at all, if in the end he is going to tell Bil'am to keep going with Balak's men anyway? And what is the point of delivering to Bil'am again the same instructions Hashem had already given him in 22:20?
- 7) When Bil'am meets Balak, they embark on their joint effort to curse Bnei Yisrael. Why does Bil'am say nothing about himself in the first two "meshalim" he offers, but in the third and fourth "meshalim," he prefaces his words with extensive self-description? And what is the significance of the content of the self-description?
- 8) Bil'am makes several theological statements in the course of the "meshalim" he delivers. How does this theological information contradict his own behavior?
- 9) Finally, a very basic question which should have been on our minds all this time: who is this Bil'am, anyway? Is he a close friend of Hashem's who is believed to have power to bless and curse, or is he a sorcerer, a devotee of darker powers than Hashem? Or is he something else?

QUESTIONS WE WILL NOT ADDRESS:

- 1) Why, in the beginning of the parasha, is there so much switching back and forth between "Balak" as an individual and "Mo'av" as an entire nation? For example, if "Balak" sees what Bnei Yisrael have done to their enemies, then why is "Mo'av" afraid?
- 2) Where is the first time we come across the phrase "va-y-khas et ein ha-aretz" ["They covered the 'eye' of the land"]? By using this phrase, what is the Torah trying to tell us about the Moavites' perception of Bnei Yisrael?
- 3) Balak, Bil'am, and Hashem (in that order, in the parasha) use several terms for the word "curse." What do they each mean, and do they all indicate the same degree of cursing? If not, what is the significance of the shift between one term and the next?
- 4) In 22:7, we hear that the elders of both Mo'av and Midyan come to Bil'am to seek his cursing services, but in the very next pasuk (verse), we hear that only the elders of Mo'av stay the night with Bil'am. Where have the elders of Midyan gone?
- 5) For that matter, there seems to be a lot of confusion about Mo'av and Midyan: in the beginning of our parasha, the elders of Mo'av and Midyan appear together, discussing the approaching threat. Soon, as noted, the elders of Midyan disappear. In the end of the parasha, we hear that Bnei Yisrael become involved in all sorts of bad doings with the people of Mo'av, but this seems to change into "Midyan" before long. What is going on?

PARASHAT BALAK:

In this week's parasha, several things seem to happen more than once. In fact, many things (three of them, in fact) seem to come in threes:

1) **WARNINGS TO BIL'AM:** In the beginning of the parasha, Balak, king of Mo'av, sends messengers to summon Bil'am, a local sorcerer, to curse Bnei Yisrael so that he (Balak) can defeat the powerful young nation in battle. Bil'am consults Hashem about going to curse Bnei Yisrael, and Hashem tells him not to go with Balak's men and not to curse the nation, "for it is blessed" (= warning #1). The messengers leave, but soon another group of Balak's messengers comes to urge Bil'am to offer his cursing services. Once again, Bil'am consults Hashem; Hashem tells him to go with them, but warns him to follow whatever directions Hashem gives him (= warning #2). Bil'am reports the good news to the messengers and travels with them back to their home. On the way, Hashem sends an angel to deliver another warning to Bil'am to follow his instructions carefully (= warning #3). In total, then, Bil'am is warned three times.

2) **THE SCENE WITH THE DONKEY:** Bil'am, riding on his donkey toward Balak's headquarters, is confronted by an angel which at first only his donkey can see. This hilarious scene provides us with three sets of three:

- a) The Torah tells us three times that the donkey sees the angel (22:23, 22:25, 22:27);
- b) Three times, the donkey turns aside from the path, or in other ways refuses to go on (turning into the field =1, pressing itself into a wall =2, crouching down under Bil'am =3);
- c) Three times, Bil'am hits his donkey with his stick to make it return to the path and behave itself. This thrice-repeated hitting is noted by the donkey itself in 22:28, when the donkey miraculously acquires the power of speech and complains to its master for hitting it thrice; the triple hitting is also noted by the angel when Bil'am's "eyes are opened" and he sees the angel (22:32 and 22:33).

3) **BIL'AM'S ATTEMPTS TO CURSE THE PEOPLE** also provide us with sets of 3:

- a) Bil'am and Balak erect a set of altars and sacrifices each time Bil'am attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael (i.e., three times in total).
- b) Bil'am delivers three prophetically inspired speeches in which he praises/blesses Bnei Yisrael.
- c) In response to each of Bil'am's blessings/speeches, Balak complains of "breach of contract"; he had hired Bil'am to curse, not to bless (23:11, 23:25, 24:10). In fact, after the third blessing, Balak notes explicitly that he and Bil'am have now been through the same thing for the third time: "I took you here to curse my enemies, but you have blessed three times!"

So not only do we have several patterns of triads, but we also have several explicit statements in the Torah which demonstrate awareness by the characters in the stories that there are triads here. It is almost as if the Torah is trying to direct our attention to the fact that there are these triads. But what are they supposed to mean?

There is no way to be sure, but to me they suggest the following: When something happens once, you can dismiss it completely. Even when it happens twice, you can still sort of pretend it didn't happen or wonder if maybe you misinterpreted it somehow. But when it happens for a third time, there's no denying it any longer: the number three has a certain solidity and certainty to it. This is perhaps related to the halakhic principle of "hazaka," a state which is created when something happens three times (e.g., once something has happened three times, we assume that it will happen again in the future).

For now, let us defer further development of this issue and look at other features of the parasha. Once we have greater clarity in the story as a whole, these patterns will provide deeper meaning.

BIL'AM THE SORCERER:

When Balak's men set out for Bil'am, they bring "kesamim" -- magical charms or totems -- with them. The fact that Balak provides these items for Bil'am tells us that Balak sees Bil'am as a professional sorcerer. As a magician, he will of course need the standard sorcerer's toolbox, full of the usual tools: amulets, figurines, spell books, colored powders, rare herbs, incense to burn, and sundry other items. Unlike today, when a service professional usually brings his own tools -- the plumber comes with his own plunger and wrench, the doctor brings his own medical bag, etc. -- Balak provided Bil'am with "kesamim," magical trinkets, tokens, or totems. (Without meaning to compare my son's mohel to Bil'am the Evil, I recall that the mohel instructed me to bring gauze, antibiotic creams, pillows, and several other things. On the other hand, he did bring his own scalpel and scissors.)

So whoever Bil'am really is, we know that Balak thinks he is a sorcerer, a magician, a practitioner of mystical arts. We will take a closer look at Bil'am as sorcerer as we move on.

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT:

So Balak's men arrive and set their master's cursing-request before Bil'am, who consults Hashem. Hashem first wants to know who these people are who are spending the night at Bil'am's place: "Who are these men with you?" Bil'am tells Hashem that they are Balak's men. But this whole conversation certainly is a strange exchange. Why does Hashem have to ask Bil'am who the men are? Can't He "see" for Himself?

By way of seeking an answer, where else have we seen Hashem ask questions to which He knows the answer? Some examples

which come to mind:

1) Bereshit 4:9 -- Hashem said to Kayyin, "Where is Hevel, your brother?"

This is, of course, just after Kayyin has murdered his brother Hevel.

2) Bereshit 3:9 -- Hashem, the Lord, called to the man and said, "Where are you?"

This is, of course, just after Adam has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge against Hashem's instructions. His eyes are opened, and he now knows that he has no clothing; he is hiding, he says, because he is naked. So Hashem has another question for him:

3) Bereshit 3:11 -- He said, "Who told you that you are naked?"

And then another question:

4) Bereshit 3:11 -- "Have you -- from the tree which I commanded you to not eat from it -- eaten?"

Without belaboring the point, one thing seems clear: Hashem asks questions when someone has done something wrong and He wants that person to own up to the deed: Kayyin is supposed to admit to the murder of his brother (he instead denies knowledge of Hevel's whereabouts). Adam is supposed to admit that he is hiding because he is afraid of being punished for his deed (instead he claims modesty, but Hashem traps him anyway because he is not supposed to know about modesty!). Adam is supposed to respond to Hashem's next question by admitting having eaten from the tree (but he instead blames it on his wife).

In other words, a question from Hashem usually signals that someone has done something wrong. And in the cases above, human nature attempts to hide the deed anyway.

Bil'am is no exception to the pattern: Hashem asks, "Who are these men with you?" because he wants Bil'am to understand that He knows who these men are -- and that Bil'am's relationship with them should end right here. But Bil'am doesn't take the hint, just as Kayyin and Adam didn't.

On the other hand, Bil'am is a bit different from Adam and Kayyin: instead of shrugging his shoulders ("Well, uh, how should I know where my brother is?") or trying to sidestep the question ("Uh, I'm behind this tree because I, uh, have no clothes"), he decides to brazen right through: "Oh, these men here? You want to know who they are? They, uh, they're Balak's men. Yeah. From Mo'av. They came to me to ask me to curse someone. You know, that nation that left Egypt, the nation that's swarming across the desert towards Balak. Balak wants my help in defeating them. That's who these men are." Bil'am either pretends that he doesn't understand the significance of Hashem's question, or he really is blind and doesn't see the problem: that these are Hashem's most favorite people and that He is not excited about their being cursed.

Hashem listens to Bil'am and makes it explicit: don't do this job. Don't go with them, and don't curse this people, "for they are blessed."

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT . . . AGAIN:

When Bil'am receives this first warning, he obeys the direct order not to go with the men, but he is still quite eager to do a little hexing on Bnei Yisrael if the opportunity presents itself. So instead of telling Balak's men that he will not do the job because the target nation is blessed, i.e., because he himself feels it would be wrong to curse them, he tells them that his Boss said no: "Hashem has refused to allow me to go with you." He himself, of course, would be delighted to do the job and take the money.

Balak's men return to their master and report Bil'am's response -- except that they make an important emendation to Bil'am's response: "**Bil'am** refused to go with us." This is not exactly how Bil'am himself had formulated it: Bil'am had said, "**Hashem** has refused . . .", making it clear that he was willing but that Hashem was not. But Balak's men don't notice this fine point, so in the game of telephone which is all of human communication, they flub it and change Bil'am's answer and make it sound like Bil'am himself doesn't want to do the job. Balak's thought, naturally, is that Bil'am must have refused his request because the messengers he sent weren't important enough to give Bil'am the honor he felt he deserved, and because Bil'am wasn't happy with the price (or didn't think Balak could afford his fees for a house call).

So Balak sends men again, "more numerous and more honorable than these" [i.e., than the first group], and they carry Balak's message that "I will surely honor you greatly," paying whatever you ask. Bil'am responds by correcting Balak; to paraphrase, "It is not I, Bil'am, who stand in the way here, it is Hashem! Even if you offered me your whole treasury, I could not go against Him!"

On the surface, Bil'am sounds like a faithful servant of Hashem. Nothing can make him disobey his God.

But we have already seen that Bil'am's dedication goes only so far. He is not so bold as to actually defy Hashem by going with Balak's men and cursing Bnei Yisrael, but he has not at all internalized Hashem's will as his own. In other words, he is only behaviorally saintly. He will not actually *do* anything to contravene Hashem's explicit instructions to him, but he is completely uninterested in Hashem's unexpressed will, even when it should be apparent to him what Hashem wants.

Of course, it is sometimes appropriate to want to do something which is forbidden. In such cases, we show our loyalty and dedication to Hashem by not doing the forbidden thing we want to do. But this is true only where the prohibition is not a moral or ethical one. For example, it is not praiseworthy to desire greatly to sleep with your neighbor's spouse but to refrain from doing so because you know it is forbidden. It is something we should not *want* to do because it is wrong, because to do so violates the sanctity of marriage and destroys the fabric of the family. On the other hand, we might say that it is praiseworthy to want to sample a piece of marinated squid but to refrain simply because it is forbidden. (Some might argue with this last example, too.) The point is that we are supposed to develop into ethical and moral people, not remain internally corrupt and simply *behave* externally the way ethical and moral people would behave.

Bil'am is a saint, externally. "Curse these innocent people for money? Sure! Let me just ask the Boss."

When Bil'am asks Hashem for the second time about going with Balak, Hashem allows him to go, but warns him to follow His directions carefully. As far as we can tell, Bil'am is ready to obey, and so he tells us himself: "I cannot transgress the mouth of Hashem, my God, to do a small or great thing." But as soon as he hits the road on his trusty donkey, we hear that "Hashem was very angry because he was going." Now, Hashem is the One who just told him to go -- so why is He angry?

Hashem is angry because Bil'am didn't take the hint. Bil'am tells Balak's men that he cannot do a thing without Hashem's approval -- but he is hardly making this journey just to be Hashem's mouthpiece to Balak, whether blessing or curse is to be delivered! Bil'am is hoping against hope that he will somehow be able to curse Bnei Yisrael and take home the jackpot Balak has offered him. So although he is making the journey with permission, he is quite eager to find a way to get around Hashem's earlier instruction: "Do not curse the nation, for it is blessed!" A true servant of Hashem, sensitive to His will, would not be making this journey at all.

WHO IS BIL'AM?

Here is the place to start to think about what Bil'am could possibly be thinking. Since Hashem has forbidden the cursing, what does Bil'am hope to accomplish? Don't we hear from Bil'am himself, later on in the parasha, that Hashem is not One to change His mind like a fickle human being ("No man is Hashem, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should retract"), that once He has blessed, He will not turn around and curse?

This brings us to one of the central questions of this week's parasha: what exactly is Bil'am? A great prophet? A small-time seer? A sorcerer of the dark arts, a necromancer? What exactly is his relationship with Hashem? Where does he get his power?

I believe that a careful reading of the parasha indicates that Bil'am's ideas about Hashem, and his conception of his own function, undergo radical change as a result of his experiences in trying to curse Bnei Yisrael in our parasha. And as his own ideas change and he learns who Hashem really is and who he himself really is, his sponsor, Balak, learns along with him.

SORCERER AND PROPHET:

At the beginning of the parasha, Bil'am is really more sorcerer than prophet. Unlike a prophet, a sorcerer is not a moral giant -- he is simply a technician. The power of the sorcerer does not come from Hashem's gracefully performing the sorcerer's will out of regard for his moral stature and faithful dedication; instead, the sorcerer is trained in tapping into the Divine power grid (or other sources of power) to do his work.

While the prophet works primarily on himself, perfecting his moral character and devotion to Hashem and achieving a level of focus on the Divine which enables him to communicate with Hashem, the sorcerer works primarily on manipulating other things: he uses magical totems, sprinkles colored powders, writes secret amulets, pronounces special incantations and obscure spells, and sacrifices animals to "appease" the demanding deities. The sorcerer manipulates forces which exist and which he sees as external to himself; there is nothing intrinsically holy or exalted about the sorcerer. The prophet, on the other hand, is a profoundly moral and religious figure; above all, his aspiration is not to manipulate the external supernatural for external purposes, but to come into direct relationship with Hashem by changing himself.

These two mentalities control how the sorcerer and prophet each conceive of God (or gods, if he believes in several): the prophet sees God as the moral North star, a transcendent, highest good and benevolence whose will must be obeyed. It would be inconceivable, under normal circumstances, for him to flout God's will. And, more importantly, he does his best to match his own will to God's. He obeys not only God's spoken, explicit command, but attempts to ascertain God's unexpressed will and follow it. The sorcerer, however, sees God (or gods) primarily as a force to be tapped, not a source for imperatives or a Will to be matched with his own will. He

therefore does not pay attention to the desire of the deity except insofar as disobeying explicit commands might interfere with the sorcerer's ability to tap the deity's power.

Bil'am begins the parasha as a sorcerer. He has tapped into Hashem's power grid and acquired a reputation as a powerful person: Balak says to him, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." When Balak's men come to him and request a hex on Bnei Yisrael, Bil'am goes right away to check with Hashem, his power source. Hashem tells him not to go with the men and not to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bil'am sees that he has no support for this stunt, so he tells Balak's men he can't do the job.

Then Balak sends more men to Bil'am, and Bil'am asks Hashem again. Bil'am has completely ignored the internal side of the issue -- that he is not supposed to curse Bnei Yisrael for an actual **reason** (which he himself will articulate later, in his own blessings to the people), and he once again checks the power grid for available "current." Hashem gives Bil'am what Bil'am sees as an equivocal response: go with the men, but take care to do what I tell you to do. Bil'am is encouraged: he has gotten approval from the power source for half of what he wants; maybe the next time he asks, he will be able to somehow get the other half: power to curse. As far as Bil'am is concerned, Hashem is not so much an identity with will as a power to be mechanically manipulated. If so, it may be possible to manipulate this power into serving his needs, as time goes on.

Hashem understands what Bil'am is up to and decides that he needs to be educated.

THE DONKEY:

As Bil'am rides along with Balak's men, an angel appears in front of him, sword drawn, looking menacing. As we know, Bil'am's donkey sees the angel, but Bil'am is blind to it. The donkey makes three attempts to turn aside and avoid the angel swordsman, and each time Bil'am beats the donkey with his stick (especially when it crushes his foot against a wall!).

After the third time, the donkey turns to Bil'am and miraculously says, "What have I done to you, that you have hit me these three times?" Again, like Hashem's question to Bil'am earlier on ("Who are these men with you?"), we have a question to which the answer is obvious! Of course, he hit the donkey for disobedience! But Bil'am is supposed to understand that he is being told something by Hashem, who is speaking through his donkey.

Hashem had caused the donkey to turn aside three times, but Bil'am didn't take those hints. Now Hashem opens the donkey's mouth and causes it to ask a question to which it knows (and Bil'am knows it knows) the answer. Bil'am is not supposed to answer the question, he is supposed to just turn himself around and go home. But Bil'am still doesn't take the hint; he simply gives the answer: "Because you have disobeyed me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now!" Bil'am does not know as he says this that there is a sword in the **angel's** hand ready to kill him, but he will soon see.

Hashem opens Bil'am's eyes (the donkey sees before the "seer" sees, and also acquires speech before he acquires sight!), and he sees the angel. In a flash, he is apologetic and humble: "Hey, I didn't know You were upset about this trip I'm taking. If You really want, I'll just turn around and go right on home!" Although Bil'am's eyes are opened physically, he remains blind. He cannot see that a prophet would turn around without an explicit command, that Hashem's will is enough for the prophet. Bil'am is thinking about all that money.

The angel, echoing the donkey, emphasizes that Bil'am has been given three subtle warnings through his donkey, but that he has ignored all of them. And then the angel **repeats** this to Bil'am to give him **another** chance to decide to go home. But instead of just going home, Bil'am **asks** if he should go home. Bil'am will obey only a direct behavioral order. He is not interested in God's unexpressed will: "I cannot transgress the **word** of Hashem, my God" -- but he certainly can and does transgress the desire of Hashem. He is a sorcerer, not a prophet; a manipulator of the spiritual, not a man of God.

NOW REPEAT AFTER ME:

The angel then warns Bil'am once again that even as he continues his journey, he is to do exactly what Hashem tells him to do. Why is it necessary to deliver this warning once again?

A careful look will show that this warning is different than the earlier ones: before, Bil'am was warned not to disobey Hashem behaviorally. Now, he is being told that he must not act as a sorcerer at all, but instead as a prophet! He was hired as a sorcerer, to speak his own will and make God perform it: to curse. But Hashem tells him here that he is not to speak his own thoughts at all: "Only the thing that I speak to you shall you speak." Bil'am is being forced to act as Hashem's mouthpiece. He cannot curse the people, he can only report what Hashem has said.

The message sinks in: when Bil'am arrives at Balak HQ and Balak scolds him for delaying his arrival -- "Why did you take so long?" -- Bil'am responds: "Look, I'm finally here. And let me tell you: I no longer do that cursing stuff on my own. I just say what Hashem tells me to say. Whatever He tells me to say, that's what I'll say." Now, Balak probably doesn't catch the difference between the old Bil'am and

the new, but he has just been told that Bil'am will act only as Hashem's mouthpiece. He has been expressly forbidden to do otherwise.

But Bil'am is still hoping that Hashem will change His mind and agree to curse the people! Twice, he has Balak prepare sacrifices to appease the Deity, and twice Hashem appears to him on schedule. But Hashem is not impressed with Balak's korbanot, and He sends Bil'am back to bless Bnei Yisrael.

BIL'AM'S EYES ARE OPENED:

As we know, Bil'am's first and second contacts with Hashem yield him only praises and blessings for Bnei Yisrael instead of the curses for which he had hoped. By the third time, Bil'am gives up. He has finally taken the hint: "Bil'am saw that it was good IN THE EYES OF HASHEM to bless Yisrael." He has not heard anything *explicit* from Hashem, but he decides of his own volition to stop pretending, to stop blinding himself to the Divine will. And he makes no further attempt to use sorcery to curse the people: " . . . and he did not go as he did in the previous times toward sorcery."

Bil'am has finally begun to listen to his own words, placed in his mouth by Hashem in his second vision: "Not a man is Hashem, to lie, nor a person, to retract. Would He say and not do, speak and not fulfill?" He sees that Hashem's will is iron, and he bends to it for the first time. He gives up the hope that Hashem will agree to curse the people, and he turns toward Bnei Yisrael to offer them a blessing of his own. This is why this third blessing is so repetitive of the second: he has taken Hashem's material and adopted it as his own. And Hashem, sensing his new approach, inspires him: "And there came upon him a spirit of God."

Bil'am for the first time prefaces his blessing with a self-description -- here and in the fourth vision, because he is now highly self-aware. He realizes that his eyes have been opened, and he is now the man who is "geluy eynayyim," "of opened eyes." Hashem has opened his eyes, and now he truly sees! He is now the "yode'a **da'at** Elyon," the one who knows not just what Hashem *tells* him, but also what Hashem *desires,* what His will is. And Bil'am finally becomes not a sorcerer, but a prophet.

[Of course, this does not make him a hero. Still hoping to collect Balak's reward money, but having realized that Hashem operates within a moral rather than magical/mechanical framework, he gives up his attempts to sabotage Bnei Yisrael through magic and turns to moral sabotage: he advises Balak to send the Moabite women out to tempt Bnei Yisrael into sexual immorality, betting that this will arouse Hashem's anger against them and enable Moav and Midyan to gain the upper hand in battle. He is partially successful, as Bnei Yisrael are drawn into the sexual trap and stricken by a plague, but Hashem maintains His fundamental support for them, and Bil'am is eventually killed by Bnei Yisrael in retribution for his key role in their stumbling.]

Shabbat Shalom

Parshat Balak: Bilam: The Prophet and the Consultant **by Rabbi Menachem Leibtag**

Is Bilam really such a 'bad guy'? Indeed, God's anger with his decision to travel with Balak's messengers (see 22:12,22) suggests that his true intentions may have been to curse Am Yisrael. However, this fact may prove exactly the opposite - that Bilam is a man of high moral stature! After all, over and over again, Bilam overcomes this personal desire to curse Yisrael and blesses them instead, "exactly as God commands him" (see 23:12,26 and 24:13). In fact, his final blessing of Am Yisrael appears to have been on his own initiative (see 24:1-6).

Why then do Chazal cite Bilam as the archetype "rasha" (a wicked person - see Pirkei Avot 5:19)? Simply for once having 'bad intentions'?

This week's shiur attempts to answer this question by reconstructing what really happens in Parshat Balak, based on other Parshiot in Chumash.

Introduction

From Parshat Balak alone it is hard to pinpoint any specific sin that Bilam commits. In fact, a careful reading of the entire Parsha shows that not only did he do nothing wrong, he is even quite a "tzadik" (a righteous man). Before leaving on his journey he clarifies to Balak's messengers that he will not stray one iota from whatever God will tell him (see 22:18). Upon his arrival in "sdeh Moav," he blesses Am Yisrael instead of cursing them, precisely as God commands him (see 23:1-24:9). Bilam is so 'pro-Israel' that by the conclusion of the story, Balak is so angry that he basically tells Bilam to 'get lost':

"Balak's anger was kindled with Bilam and, striking his hands together, Balak tells Bilam: I asked you to curse my enemy and instead you have blessed them three times! Now, run away to your own place..." (24:10-11)
Before Bilam leaves, as though he had not disappointed Balak enough, he informs Balak of how Yisrael will one day defeat Moav and Edom in battle. Finally:

"Bilam gets up and goes to his homeland, and Balak also went on his way." (24:25)

Clearly, Parshat Balak leaves us with the impression that Bilam and Balak split on 'no-speaking' terms. Bilam the 'loyal prophet' returns home, and Balak is left to deal with his problems by himself. Surely, had this been the only story in Chumash about Bilam, it would be quite difficult to judge him as a "rasha."

To take case with Bilam's behavior it is necessary to look elsewhere in Chumash - in Parshat Matot - where the Torah tells us about Bilam's untimely death.

We begin by showing how these two Parshiot are connected.

Bilam and the War with Midyan

Immediately after the story of Bilam (chapters 22-24), we find the story of Bnei Yisrael's sin with "bnot Moav" (the daughters of Moav and Midyan; see chapter 25). Although the Torah does not specify who instigated this sin, the juxtaposition of these two stories already suggests a thematic connection (see Rashi and Ramban 25:1).

Due to this sin, Bnei Yisrael are punished by a terrible plague, but finally they are saved by the zealous act of Pinchas (25:1-9). At the conclusion of that entire incident, God commands Bnei Yisrael to avenge the Midyanim with a reprisal attack (see 25:16-18). For some reason (to be discussed in the shiurim to follow), the details of that battle are only recorded several chapters later - in Parshat Matot (see 31:1-12).

In the brief detail of that battle, the Torah informs (almost incidentally) that Bilam is killed together with the five kings of Midyan (31:8).

Why is Bilam executed? What did he do to deserve the death penalty?

The answer to this question is alluded to in the story that follows. When the army returned from battle with Midyan, Moshe mentions Bilam in his censure of the military officers for taking female captives:

"And Moshe became angry at the military officers... saying: Were they not the very ones who - b'dvar Bilam - at the bidding of Bilam, induced Bnei Yisrael to sin against God in the matter of Peor!" (31:14-16)
What is Moshe referring to when he mentions "dvar Bilam?" The Gemara in Sanhedrin 106a explains that "dvar Bilam" refers to Bilam's advice to use the daughters of Moav and Midyan to lure Bnei Yisrael towards the idol worship of "Baal Peor." (See Rashi there.) Now, the connection between these two parshiot becomes clear. It was Bilam himself who instigated the entire incident of "chet bnot Moav!" It was his idea to lure Bnei Yisrael into sinning. Bilam is so involved that this entire incident is associated with his name!
[Furthermore, from this statement by Moshe, we see that Bilam's involvement in this scheme is 'common knowledge' for it takes for granted that the military officers are aware of what "dvar Bilam" is. In other words, everyone knows that Bilam was the instigator.]

Therefore, when Bilam is executed, it is not because he had once intended to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilam is found guilty for it is he who orchestrated the entire scheme of "chet bnot Midyan."

So why the sudden change of heart? Why, after blessing Am Yisrael, does he turn around and orchestrate their demise? Was "dvar Bilam" simply some last minute advice to Balak before leaving? It doesn't seem so. Recall from Parshat Balak that when Bilam was sent away, he and Balak were not exactly on speaking terms. Furthermore, what is Bilam doing in Midyan at all? Had he not gone home?

Before we can answer these questions, we must first determine where Bilam is from. [Time for a little Biblical geography.]

Bilam's Home Town

To better understand Bilam's true character, it is important to recognize that he lived in Mesopotamia, a very far distance away from Moav and Midyan! How do we know this? In the opening psukim of the Parsha we are told that:

"Balak sent messengers to Bilam ben Be'or to city of Ptor which is by the river... to call him." (22:5)

In Chumash, the river ("ha'nhar") refers to the Euphrates ("n'har prat"), the main river flowing through Mesopotamia. (See Board #1.) This assumption can be confirmed by Sefer Devarim, in a short reference to Moav and the story of Bilam:

"...and because they hired Bilam ben Be'or from Ptor Aram Naharaim [Aram (located between) the two great rivers (the Euphrates and Tigris)]." (23:5)

(See Board #2.) Furthermore, Bilam's opening blessing states specifically that he came from Aram, from the East (modern day Syria/Iraq):

"From Aram, Balak has brought me... from mountains in the East [har'rey kedem]." (23:7)
Why is it so important that we know that Bilam came from Mesopotamia, a location so far away?

The Return of Bilam

Recall that Bilam had returned home (see 24:25), i.e. to Mesopotamia, after blessing Bnei Yisrael (instead of cursing them). Nevertheless, only a short time later, when Bnei Yisrael sin with "bnot Midyan," we find that Bilam is back in the 'neighborhood,' together with the five kings of Midyan (31:8). Thus, we must conclude that after Bilam had returned home, he comes back to Moav - a second time!

For what purpose does he return? Why does he embark on another journey of several hundred miles to give some advice to Moav and

Midyan? The answer is startling, but simple: Bilam the 'prophet' went home and Bilam the 'consultant' returns!

What motivates Bilam's lengthy trek back to Moav? Why is he so interested in causing Bnei Yisrael to sin?

Bilam the Rasha

Bilam's return to Moav proves that his true intention all along was to curse Bnei Yisrael. Yet as a prophet, he could not do so for 'how could he curse he whom God Himself does not curse' (see 23:8). However, even though he may be faithful to God as a prophet, he is far less faithful as a person. Overcome by his desire to cause Bnei Yisrael harm, he employs his prophetic understanding to devise an alternate plan - to create a situation where God Himself will curse Am Yisrael.

As reflected in his blessing of Bnei Yisrael, Bilam the prophet realizes the special relationship between God and His Nation. He fully understands why God does not allow him to curse them, for it is His will that Bnei Yisrael fulfill their Divine purpose to become God's special nation.

On the other hand, Bilam finds a loophole. Being a prophet, he also realizes that should Bnei Yisrael themselves fail in their obedience to God, He Himself would punish them. In other words - this special nation could not be cursed without reason. However, should they sin, God would punish them. Bilam's conclusion is shrewd: to cause Bnei Yisrael to be cursed - by causing them to sin. Bilam finally finds a method to curse Bnei Yisrael. He advises Moav and Midyan to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin.

This may be the deeper reason that Chazal consider Bilam the archetype "rasha," for he utilizes his prophetic understanding, the special trait that God gave him, to further his own desires rather than to follow God's will. Taking God-given qualities, and using them in an improper manner is the 'way of life' for a "rasha."

Between Avraham and Bilam

In the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:19), not only is Bilam called the "rasha;" he is also contrasted with Avraham Avinu:

"Whoever has the following three traits is among the 'talmidim' (disciples) of Avraham Avinu; and whoever has three other traits is among the 'talmidim' of Bilam 'ha'rasha':

Avraham

Bilam

Good Eye
Humble Spirit
Meek Soul

Evil Eye
Arrogant Spirit
Greedy Soul

Both Avraham and Bilam are men of renowned spiritual stature. However, Bilam exploits this quality for his own personal pride and gain, while Avraham Avinu utilizes this quality towards the perfection of mankind. A "rasha" according to Chazal is one who harnesses his God-given traits and abilities towards an unworthy purpose. A disciple of Avraham Avinu is one who harnesses these qualities for a Divine purpose.

In Chumash, we find several textual parallels between Bilam and Avraham Avinu that support this comparison. We will note two examples:

A) Bracha and Klalah

Avraham: "And I will bless those whom you bless, and those who curse you shall be cursed, and through you all nations on earth shall be blessed." (Breishit 12:3)

Bilam: "For it is known, that he whom you bless shall be blessed, and he whom you curse shall be cursed." (22:6)

B) Aram Naharaim - the homeland of both Avraham and Bilam is in Aram Naharaim, the center of ancient civilization:

Avraham: see Breishit 24:4 and 24:10, and Breishit 11:27-31;

Bilam: see Bamidbar 23:7 and Devarim 23:5.

These parallels point to this thematic contrast between Bilam and Avraham Avinu. As Bnei Yisrael, the chosen offspring of Avraham Avinu, are about to enter the Land that God promised him in order to become a 'blessing for all nations' (Breishit 12:3), they meet a final challenge. Just as God's prophecy concerning Avraham is about to become a reality, Bilam - the prophet with the ability to bless and curse - together with Moav (the descendants of Lot) and Midyan (the descendants of Yishmael) make a last minute attempt to thwart the fruition of this destiny.

Professional Bias

One could suggest that this confrontation may be representative of a more fundamental conflict. Unlike Moav, who's fear was motivated by a practical threat upon their national security (22:3-4), Bilam's fear of Am Yisrael may have been more ideological.

The existence of Am Yisrael posed a threat to Bilam himself! Bilam, as echoed in his three blessings, perceived the Divine purpose of Am Yisrael: a Nation destined to bring the message of God to mankind. This novel concept of a Nation of God threatened to upset the spiritual 'status quo' of ancient civilization. Up until this time, Divine messages to mankind were forwarded by inspired individuals, such as Bilam himself. The concept that this purpose could now be fulfilled by a nation, instead of by an individual, could be considered a 'professional threat' to Bilam and the society that he represents.

On a certain level, this confrontation between Bilam and Am Yisrael continues until this very day. Is it possible for a nation, a political entity, to deliver a Divine message to all mankind? While Bilam and his 'disciples' continue to endeavor to undermine this goal, it remains Am Yisrael's responsibility to constantly strive to achieve it.

Shabbat Shalom,
Menachem

For Further Iyun

A. Note the commentary of the Abrabanel where he explains that Bilam is a descendant of Lavan.

1. Does this support the basic points made in the shiur?
 2. What parallels exist between Bilam and Lavan?
 3. Did Lavan ever receive "n'vu'ah?" Did Hashem ever speak to him? If so, what was the content? Is it parallel to Bilam?
 4. Could the struggle between Lavan and Yaakov also be considered of a spiritual nature?
- B. Bilam was almost successful. Bnei Yisrael's sin with "Bnot Moav and Midyan" led to some 24 thousand casualties. The plague was stopped due to the zealous act of Pinchas (25:6-9). His act returned Bnei Yisrael to their covenantal partner. In reward, Pinchas receives the covenant of the 'kehuna' (25:10-13).
1. In what way does his reward reflect his deed?
 2. What are the responsibilities of the 'kohanim' in addition to working in the Mikdash?
 - 3/ How does this relate to the ultimate fulfillment of our national destiny?
- C. An additional textual parallel exists between Avraham and Bilam - travelling in the morning with two servants:
Avraham: "V'yashkeim Avraham ba'boker, vayachavosh et chamoro va'yikach et shnei n'arav ito..." (Breishit 22:3)
Bilam: "V'yakom Bilam ba'boker, vayachavosh et atono... u'shnei na'arav imo." (Bamidbar 22:21-22)

Could this parallel be the source of the Midrash Chazal describing the 'satan' who challenges Avraham Avinu on his journey with Yitzchak to the Akeidah? If so, explain why.

D. Who wrote "Sefer Bilam"?

Parshat Balak seems to be an integral part of Chumash; however the Gemara in Baba Batra 14b makes a very strange statement: "Moshe katav sifro (chumash - his book), parshat Bilam, and sefer Iyov (Job)."

It is understandable that we need to know that Moshe wrote Sefer Iyov, but why would there be any 'hava amina' they he didn't write Parshat Bilam?

Rashi (in Baba Batra) explains that every other parsha in Chumash is connected in some way to Moshe - either 'tzorcho,' 'torato' (mitzvot), or seder maasav (narrative). Rashi explains that everywhere else in Chumash, Moshe is in some way directly involved. In parshat Bilam, no one, including Moshe, should have known about the entire incident between Bilam and Balak.

The obvious question then arises: who wrote the story of Bilam that appears in Chumash? If not Moshe, what other navi was there, who could have?

This question is answered by Rabbeinu Gershom (al atar) that the possibility existed that this parsha was written by Bilam himself, since he was navi! His brachot and conversations are quoted directly! In order that we do not come to that conclusion, the Gemara must tell us that Moshe wrote down this entire Parsha directly from Hashem, and did not receive them via Bilam.

How does this relate to the machloket regarding: "Torah - megilah nitnah," or "sefer chatum nitnah?"

E. One could also ask how Bnei Yisrael are aware of Bilam's involvement in the sin of "bnot Moav." Why was "dvar Bilam" common knowledge among Bnei Yisrael? Who told them that it was Bilam's idea?

The answer could be quite simple. Most probably the daughters of Midyan (who sinned with Bnei Yisrael) had informed their 'patrons' as to who had sent them. [The 'word' got around.]

F. "Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov"

From the time that Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, Sefer Bamidbar has few positive events to record. The nation appears to be going from one sin to the next (mit'on'nim, mit'avim, meraglim, Korach, Mei M'riva etc.). With all the complaining, internal strife etc., it is difficult to find anything positive.

It 'davka' takes an outsider, like Bilam, looking from a distance at Am Yisroel, to perceive the greatness of this nation despite all of its problems. When Bilam recognizes that an entire nation is following Hashem through the desert, he proclaims:

"Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov..."
(24:5)

This is an important insight for today also. Sometimes we become over disillusioned with ourselves, as we see so much disagreement, lack of unity, lack of commitment etc. We become so involved with the details that we sometimes are unable to take a step out and look at the whole picture, to see our achievements. With all the problems in Israel today, there continue to be great achievements in all walks of Jewish life. It is important to periodically take a step back and assess the good as well as the bad. It gives us the motivation to continue to achieve. "Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov" - a nice attitude to start off the day!

Parshas Balak: Heroes and Villains

by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom

One of the remarkable, often overlooked features of Torah narrative is that the text rarely passes explicit judgement on the various individuals we encounter. We are familiar with heroes (e.g. Avraham, Rivkah, Mosheh), villains (Lavan, Pharaoh, Bil'am) and persons of questionable character (Lot and his daughters, Nadav and Avihu), despite the fact that at no point does the text explicitly "rate" these

people. (There are two exceptions: Noach [B'resheet 6:9,7:1 - who, as we can see from his later behavior, is either "the best of the worst" [one opinion in the Midrash] or blessed with a fleeting righteousness; and Mosheh Rabbenu, of whom the text states: Mosheh was the humblest of all men [Bamidbar 12:3])

We recognize these classifications - which have engendered a typology so ingrained that "Esav" is a Midrashic code-word for Rome (at its most despicable and terrifying), "Yitzchak" is the ultimate model of martyrdom and so on - we must admit that at no point in the text are any of these people defined as good or evil. How did each of them achieve their storied place in our tradition, in our liturgy and literature and, most significantly, in our mindset? How did Lavan become more evil than Pharaoh? How did Bil'am become "Bil'am haRasha" (the evil Bil'am - see below)?

There are contemporary writers who maintain that these descriptions are the creation of the Rabbis, chiefly through the vehicle of Midrash. They argue that painting certain characters "white" and others "black" helped to promote an ability to vilify contemporary conquerors, internalize a necessary distancing from modern-day "Pharaohs" etc.

Midrashic literature is, to be sure, the richest source for this type of "classification"; most of the characters found in Toraic narratives are drawn in very bold, nearly black & white lines in Midrashim.

As I hope to demonstrate conclusively in this brief article, these approaches not only challenge (quite unsuccessfully) the integrity of the Oral Tradition; they are also academically weak and unsophisticated.

II. WHO IS BIL'AM?

The central character in this week's Parashah is the enigmatic Bil'am. He is an enigmatic character because we are told nothing about him until he enters our stage - even though he is evidently a powerful and spiritually endowed man. We know nothing of his training or background (where did he gain his powers?); we are only told that which we need to know.

He is also a curious character because, despicable and frightening as his anti-Israelite project may be, he ends up blessing our people with blessings so rich in texture, so elevating and ennobling, that we begin our daily T'fillot with a quote from his prophecy/blessing: "Mah Tovu Ohalekha Ya'akov, Mish'k'notekha Yisra'el". (How good are your tents, Ya'akov, your dwelling places, Israel). In addition, he must be blessed with great spiritual powers in order to be called on to curse an entire people - and for God to use him as the vehicle for blessing us! (Indeed, our Rabbis maintain [Sifri, v'Zot haB'rakhah #16] that Bil'am was a greater prophet than Mosheh Rabbenu!).

Nevertheless, as pointed out above, Bil'am's reputation is unanimously and unequivocally sealed by the Rabbis: Bil'am haRasha! Not only that, but our Rabbis are quick to inform us of some of Bil'am's evil traits (see next section). From where did they get this information? If we do not accept the approach prevalent among secular scholars of the past 200 years, that the Rabbis "made up" the personality of Bil'am, then how do we explain this one-sided judgement?

Although it would be tempting to argue "Torah sheba'al Peh" (Oral Tradition; i.e. we have an oral tradition that Bil'am behaved in such-and-such a fashion) and to close the book (literally) on the discussion, it would be eminently more satisfying - not to mention persuasive - to identify a discernible bridge between the information supplied by the written Torah and the descriptions afforded us by the tradition. (For further reading on this approach to the Midrash, see the final chapter of the first volume of my series "Between the Lines of the Bible")

We will begin by examining perhaps the quintessential Rabbinic statement about Bil'am - and then work "backwards" to identify possible textual sources for this characterization.

III. BIL'AM vs. AVRAHAM - AVOT 5:19

The Mishnah in Avot teaches:

Whoever possesses these three things, he is of the disciples of Avraham Avinu; and whoever possesses three other things, he is of the disciples of Bil'am haRasha'. The disciples of Avraham Avinu possess a good eye, a humble spirit and a lowly soul; the disciples of Bil'am haRasha' possess an evil eye, a haughty spirit and an over-ambitious soul. (Avot 5:19)

We have six "detail" questions here - in short, how do we know that Avraham had "a good eye(1), a humble spirit(2) and a lowly soul(3)" and how do we know that Bil'am had "an evil eye(4), a haughty spirit(5) and an over-ambitious soul(6)"?

Before dealing with these questions, we need to ask the "key question" which will help solve the rest: Why are Avraham and Bil'am "pitted" against each other? Most of the "protagonist vs. antagonist" pairs with which we are familiar met head-on: Mosheh vs. Pharaoh, Esav vs. Ya'akov, Haman vs. Mordechai etc. How did Avraham, who was long-dead and buried, become the hero against the villainy of Bil'am?

IV. MIDRASHIC METHODOLOGY

As students of Rabbinic literature are all too aware, the methodology of Midrash has its own wisdom and its own mechanics. Specifically in the area of Midrash Halakhah (exegesis of legal texts with Halakhic implications), we are familiar with many "tools" which are (arguably) unique to this system and by which inferences are made. The famous "B'raita of R. Yishma'el" which forms the introduction of the Torat Kohanim (Halakhic Midrash on Vayyikra) and which is "recited" just before Shacharit every morning is but one of a number of Rabbinic lists of Midrashic tools: Kal vaHomer, K'lal uP'rat etc.

One of those tools is known as "Gezera Shava" and works as follows: If a [seemingly superfluous] word or phrase appears in two disconnected passages, it may indicate that these passages are to inform each other and become sources for information - filling in the gaps, as it were - for each other. For instance, regarding the daily Tamid offering, the Torah states that it be brought "in its time" ("b'Mo'ado" - Bamidbar 28:2) - an apparently extra word. Regarding the Pesah offering, the same word ("b'Mo'ado" - Bamidbar 9:2) is used. This "Gezera Shava" is one of the methods employed by Hillel (BT Pesachim 66a) to prove that the Pesah offering is brought even

on Shabbat (i.e. when the 14th of Nissan falls on Shabbat). The reasoning goes as follows: Since the daily offering (by definition) is brought on Shabbat, in spite of the many necessary activities which would otherwise constitute a violation of Shabbat (e.g. stripping the skin, burning), similarly the Pesah is brought "in its time" (Nissan 14), even if it means slaughtering the animal etc. which would otherwise be prohibited.

The methodology known as Gezera Shava is formally limited to Midrash Halakhah. In other words, the Rabbis do not refer to this tool, by name, when making non-legalistic inferences and drawing comparisons. Nevertheless, the basic methodology is quite common in - and central to - all Midrashic literature.

For example, when the Rabbis identify a connection between Lot's flight from S'dom (B'resheet 19) and the David dynasty, they do so by noting the common word "M'tzo" (find) in both stories (B'resheet Rabbah 41:4).

The underlying concept here is that, of course, the Torah tells us much more than appears on the surface. One of the ways in which it imparts information is through allusion, common phrasing etc. which help to draw two (or more) narratives, characters, locations etc. together.

Sometimes, the Torah will draw them together for purposes of comparison - in order to highlight the significant differences between them. For instance, the Midrash notes that Haman, Esav, Y'rav'am, "the fool" [T'hilim 141], Hannah, Daniel, David and even the Almighty "speak to their heart". Yet, the Midrash immediately points out the salient difference: Whereas the first four speak "baLev" ["in the heart"], implying that each of them is enfolded, encircled and enslaved to his heart; the latter four speak "el (or al) haLev" ("to the heart"), implying that each is in control of the heart.

V. BIL'AM AND AVRAHAM

The first part of this week's Parashah involves Balak's hiring of Bil'am to curse the B'nei Yisra'el. Although he first refuses, apparently on "religious grounds" (see Bamidbar 22:13), he ultimately agrees (with what seems like reluctant Divine consent - see 22:20) and sets off to meet his employer, Balak, king of Mo'av.

Much as the details of his journey to Mo'av serve to generate the (unfavorable) comparison with Avraham, we are already introduced to this association at the onset of the Parashah:

Compare Balak's message to Bil'am:

...for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed. - "et Asher T'vareikh M'vorakh va'Asher Ta'or Yu'ar" (22:6),

with God's charge to Avraham:

And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you - "va'Avarkha M'varakhekha uM'kalelkha A'or". (B'resheet 12:3).

Although the speakers are diametrical opposites (God as opposed to the Moabite king), and the theological underpinnings of the messages are similarly dissimilar (for Balak, Bil'am is the one who causes the blessing/curse; in Avraham's case, it is God who blesses and curses); nevertheless, there is a commonality both in phrasing and theme which draws these two temporally disconnected personalities together.

When we begin reading the story of Bil'am's journey to see Balak, we are immediately assaulted by a sense of dissonance and near-surrealism. Since the beginning of chapter 12 in B'resheet, the focus of the Torah has been exclusively devoted to the development of the B'nei Yisra'el and their ongoing relationship with God. Like a bolt from the blue, Parashat Balak is at once surprising and unnerving: Why is the Torah bothering to tell us this story at all? Besides the beautiful prophecies which make up the second half of the Parashah, why would the Torah concern itself with this Petorite prophet and his negotiations with our enemy - and why, above all, would the Torah outline, in painstaking detail, the story of Bil'am, his donkey and the angel?

As mentioned before, the Torah is telling us much more than a superficial reading lets on. In our case, besides the fundamental theological and socio-historical lessons about monotheism vs. pagan beliefs, the "Bil'am narrative" (as distinct from the "Bil'am prophecies" found in Chapters 23-24) also provide precious and valuable insights into another biblical character - Avraham!

VI. THE AKEDAH AND BI'LAM'S JOURNEY: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The pinnacle of Avraham's life - and the ultimate test of his greatness - is the tragi-heroic story of the Akedah (B'resheet 22:1-19). Since the Torah has already drawn these two personae dramatis together when we are introduced to each (via the "bless/curse" formula), let's see how these two journeys - Bil'am's trek to meet Balak and do his evil bidding and Avraham's pilgrimage to Mount Moriah - match up against each other:

And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Avraham, and said to him, Avraham; and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now your son, your only son Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you. And Avraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Yitzchak his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far away. And Avraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come back to you. And Avraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Yitzchak his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Avraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering; so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him; and Avraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Yitzchak his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Avraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of Hashem called to him from heaven, and said, Avraham, Avraham; and he said, Here am I. And he said,

Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me. And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Avraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son. And Avraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of Hashem it shall be seen. And the angel of Hashem called to Avraham from heaven the second time, And said, By myself have I sworn, said Hashem, for because you have done this thing, and have not withhold your son, your only son; That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice. So Avraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to B'er-Sheva; and Avraham lived at B'er-Sheva. (B'resheet 22:1-19)

And God came to Bil'am at night, and said to him, If the men come to call you, rise up, and go with them; but only that word which I shall say to you, that shall you do. And Bil'am rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Mo'av. And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of Hashem stood in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Bil'am struck the ass, to turn it to the way. But the angel of Hashem stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. And when the ass saw the angel of Hashem, it pushed itself to the wall, and crushed Bil'am's foot against the wall; and he struck her again. And the angel of Hashem went further, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of Hashem, it fell down under Bil'am; and Bil'am's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with a staff. And Hashem opened the mouth of the ass, and it said to Bil'am, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? And Bil'am said to the ass, Because you have mocked me; I wished there was a sword in my hand, for now would I kill you. And the ass said to Bil'am, Am not I your ass, upon which you have ridden ever since I was yours to this day? Was I ever wont to do so to you? And he said, No. Then Hashem opened the eyes of Bil'am, and he saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed down his head, and fell on his face. And the angel of Hashem said to him, Why did you strike your ass these three times? Behold, I went out to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times; if it had not turned aside from me, surely now also I would have slain you, and let her live. And Bil'am said to the angel of Hashem, I have sinned; for I knew not that you stood in the way against me; now therefore, if it displeases you, I will go back again. And the angel of Hashem said to Bil'am, Go with the men; but only the word that I shall speak to you, that you shall speak. So Bil'am went with the princes of Balak. (Bamidbar 22:20-35)

These two narratives are clearly associated - the "arising early in the morning", the "saddling of the donkey", the entourage, made up of two lads, the encounters with the angel of Hashem, and so on.

This is, shall we say, the first step in utilizing Midrashic tools: Identifying the association between stories/personae/events etc.

Now that the association has been identified, let's take the next step: Noting how differently these two characters act - and react - within their given set of circumstances.

Avraham responds to God's initial call - terrifying though it may be - and arises early the next day to begin his pilgrimage; Bil'am, on the other hand, "comes back" to God a second time, to ask again for permission to go with the Moabite princes.

Avraham moves towards greater levels of isolation, first taking only Yitzchak and his two servants - then leaving the servant behind; Bil'am takes his two servants and then catches up with the entourage of princes before reaching Balak.

Avraham nearly slaughters his son, following the Divine command; Bil'am threatens to slaughter his donkey, who is the one responding to the Divine presence (the angel).

Avraham is praised by the angel; Bil'am is threatened with death by the angel.

Avraham says nothing to the angel, merely following the Divine command of "staying his hand"; Bil'am is cowed by the presence of the angel and offers to return home.

Most significantly - Avraham sees everything whereas Bil'am sees nothing.

This last one requires some explanation. Parashiot of Tanakh usually feature a "Milah Manhah" - a guiding phrase or word. This is often an unusual word or phrase, or one that shows up in an inordinately high frequency. As is obvious, our own understanding of the significance of a narrative, prophecy, psalm etc. is enhanced if we can successfully identify the "Milah Manhah".

[An example of a Milah Manhah is the word "Et", meaning "time", as it appears in the prophecy of Haggai. Although the entire book of Haggai is 38 verses long, this relatively uncommon word shows up 7 times within those verses. This becomes a - or the - Milah Manhah and helps define the entire purpose and undercurrent of his message. See Haggai 1:2 against the background of Yirmiyah 29:10)]

The "guide-word" in Parashat ha'Akedah is clearly a combination of the two roots: Y*R*A and R*A*H; the first meaning "fear" and the second relating to "vision". No less than seven occurrences of these roots can be found in this brief section of 19 verses. Indeed, the two names given to the place where Avraham ascends - Moriah (see Divrei haYamim II 3:1) and "Hashem Yir'eh" (see Sh'mot 23:17)

A central part of the message of the Akedah is Avraham's vision - his ability to see the place and all it implies - and to recognize the substitution ram for his son. His vision is closely tied in to his fear of God, as it is his recognition of his place in this world that is driven by his awareness of God's grandeur and awe.

When this story is "played" against the apparently similar trek made by Bil'am, we see that Bil'am, the great visionary, the one who feels he can outfox the Ribbono shel Olam, sees absolutely nothing. His donkey sees more clearly than he and, when finally forced to face his angelic adversary, he retreats. The cowardice and blindness are as inextricably wound together, just as Avraham's vision and fear (very far, morally and spiritually, from "cowardice") are of one piece.

VII. BACK TO THE QUESTIONS

Earlier, we noted that three qualities are ascribed to students (i.e. followers of the path) of Avraham and three opposite qualities to the students of Bil'am.

We have answered the key question: Bil'am is "faced off" against Avraham by virtue of the many textual associations in these two key Parashiot. The Torah, beyond telling us about the trip a certain Petorite prophet made, in which his mission was turned upside-down by the Ribbono shel Olam, also tells us much about our beloved father Avraham. We appreciate his vision, his valor and his moral greatness much more when seen against the backdrop of the self-serving, morally blind and cowardly Bil'am.

How do we know that Avraham had a "good eye" and that Bil'am had an "evil eye"? We have already seen that clearly presented in these two Parashiot.

How do we know that Avraham had a humble spirit? "I am dust and ashes" is Avraham's stand in front of God (B'resheet 18:27); Bil'am, on the other hand, believes himself able to overrule the Divine decision of who should be blessed and who should be cursed - demonstrating his haughty spirit.

How do we know that Bil'am had an overambitious soul? Note that his willingness to challenge the Almighty grows as his potential reward - both financial and political - become greater. If Avraham is the epitome of everything that Bil'am is not - then Avraham is blessed with a "lowly soul", which is demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice everything to fulfill the Divine command.

Bil'am went to become enriched and lost everything; Avraham went to lose everything and became enriched for generations.

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