

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
Vol. 10 #36, June 30, 2023; 11 Tammuz 5783; Chukat/Balak 5783

**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 more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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Korach (the parsha last week) marks the end of the chronicles of the generation of the Exodus. The double parsha this week opens with the laws of becoming ritually pure after contact with a dead body (material that God obviously presented to Moshe at Har Sinai but which the Torah has placed as chapter 19 of Bemidbar for thematic reasons). The Torah immediately skips thirty-eight years and resumes at chapter 20 with B'Nai Yisrael arriving at the Wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies, the people bury her, and suddenly there is no water for the first time since the first few weeks after the Exodus. The people complain to Moshe and Aharon about the lack of water, so Miriam's brothers face their first crisis without her counsel. What does Chukat teach us about the role of women in Judaism?

Rabbi Moshe Wisnepsky of Chabad.org summarizes one important aspect as follows:

The contribution[s] of both parents are essential in creating the ideal home and in raising healthy children, but the wife and mother's contributions are more determinative. Women innately possess far greater power to influence their families' orientation in life and mold their families' behavior than do men.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks concurs with this opinion and summarizes as follows:

*Miriam was Moses' "trusted friend," his confidante, the source of his emotional stability, and . . . when she was no longer there, he could no longer cope with crisis as he had done until then.*

Rabbi David Fohrman teaches that the most significant lesson that Miriam teaches us is the importance of having pure faith in Hashem. Even as a six year-old child, when her mother has to place her baby brother in a teva by the Nile River, Miriam has pure faith that God will find a way to save her brother. She does not know how Hashem will save him, but she watches silently to see what miracle He will bring to save her brother. The first two times that B'Nai Yisrael have crises involving water, Miriam is there. She sings praises to Hashem when He saves the people from the Egyptian army at the Sea of Reeds, and she watches as Hashem creates the miracle of making water flow from a rock. The water from the rock river stays with the people for the remainder of Miriam's life.

At Midbar Zin, right after Miriam's death, God tells Moshe to speak to the rock. He wants Moshe to perform a Kiddush Hashem of demonstrating to the people that merely asking the rock for water is sufficient for the rock to want to and be willing to bring forth enough water to provide for more than two million people. By calling the people rebels and striking the rock, Moshe passes up the opportunity to teach the people the true faith that Miriam had and that Hashem wants the people to learn. I agree with Rabbi Fohrman and consider this explanation, which demonstrates the importance of Miriam in explaining true faith, to be the most convincing explanation of the sin that Moshe and Aharon make in striking the rock.

The role of women as religious leaders in Orthodox Judaism is a very controversial issue. I am not a Rabbi, and I refer

readers to their Rabbis for halachic opinions on the subject. There are many ways for a woman to influence the future of our religion, as Rabbis Wisnfsky, Sacks, and Fohrman have written. Regardless of a person's position on women as religious leaders, women clearly have always played a highly significant role in carrying forth our religion. Avraham and Yitzhak could not have started and continued our religious history without the substantial contributions of Sarah and Rebecca. In addition to Miriam, other significant women in Jewish history include Deborah, Esther, and several others. In our times and community, Dr. Erica Brown of Yeshiva University and the Jewish Federation of Washington is a leading author and speaker.

Will the future include a broader role of women in religious leadership within the Orthodox movement? I can sometimes make good predictions on issues in microeconomics, but predicting trends in Judaism is outside my field of expertise. Regardless of what the future will bring, we should all recognize the significant role of women throughout Jewish history.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, was proud of playing a significant role in helping the Jewish Theological Seminary open enrollment to women to become Conservative Rabbis. Since those days approximately half a century ago, many women have become Conservative Rabbis, and now at least a few Modern Orthodox institutions have starting ordaining women. The future may offer increased paths for women to influence Judaism both within synagogues and in other parts of our community.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Arye Don ben Tzivia, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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### **Chukat: There Was Water**

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5768

*HASHEM spoke to Moshe, saying, "Take the staff and gather together the assembly, you and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters. You shall bring forth for them water from the rock and give drink to the assembly and to their animals."*  
(Bamidbar 20:7-8)

Why was Moshe told to speak to the rock *"before the eyes of the assembly"*? What impression was meant to be made upon the eyes of the people? They wanted water. Why educate the eye?

The Sefas Emes cleverly connects this incident to another situation where someone was dying from thirst. When Hagar

and Yishmael were cast out they found themselves in the dessert without water and in one moment after the boy cried out the verse testifies, *“And G-d opened her eyes and she saw a spring of water, and she went and filled the skin with water and gave to the youth to drink.”* (Breishis 21:19) About this the Midrash comments, *“And G-d opened her eyes”* – Was she blind? Rabbi Binyamin says, *“Everyone has a status of being blind until The Holy One Blessed is He enlightens their eyes...”* Quoting from his grandfather and teacher the Chidushei HaRim he writes:

*“In reality that which is necessary for every creature is prepared, in every place and at all times, only it is hidden from the materialistic eye, and The Holy One Blessed is He enlightens his eyes and he sees that everything is in front of him. And so it here that the desire of The Holy One Blessed is He was that the eyes of the Children of Israel should be opened and they should see that water was prepared for them in the rock.”*

In a book entitled The Klausenberger Rebbe, *The War Years*, Judah Lifschitz records the following remarkable incident about the Klausenberger Rebbe on a Nazi death march.

The night was dark. The moon's silver light was obscured by clouds. The beaten marchers were surrounded by SS guards who had fallen asleep at their posts. A whisper quickly rustled through the prisoners surrounding the Rebbe. *“He says to try... everyone should dig beneath himself. G-d's salvation comes in the blink of an eye.”* A glimmer of hope was kindled among the downtrodden Jews. During the three days of the march the Rebbe had pleaded with the prisoners not to drink from the dirty puddles on the side of the road...the Rebbe cautioned, begging for restraint. Now the Rebbe had given a positive command about the water, the prisoners had faith in him. Everyone began to dig-some with spoons and some with pieces of wood, others with fingers and fingernails. At first there were only a few small holes. Then the holes became larger...and then, the water began to flow in small spurts. As the water appeared, joy engulfed the camp...Fresh water... prisoners hugged and kissed each other out of joy and happiness. Half-dead Jews were returned to life in a moment. Feverishly they dug more and more, deeper and deeper. The spurts grew stronger and stronger. ...Springs of water shot up everywhere...Thousands of prisoners gulped down the water until their thirst was quenched and their exhausted limbs were refreshed...

When asked if the amazing story was true the Rebbe answered, *“If anyone doubted, chas v'shalom, the Torah's stories about Avraham Avinu's ram or Miriam's well, he saw clearly on that day that the Master of the Universe truly provides for his creations precisely what they need, and exactly when they need it.”*

I had heard this same incident recounted by an eye witness. When describing how the Rebbe reached into the ground, he suddenly burst into uncontrollable tears saying, *“There was water! There was water!”*

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-chukas/>

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### Leadership for Self-Reliance

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2015, 2023

Transitions are hard. As the wandering in the desert begins to draw to a close, Bnei Yisrael encounter many changes and anticipate many more. Their leaders begin to die: Miriam and Aharon this week and Moshe a few months later. The people also face a shift in the nature of their lives. For forty years, their needs have been provided in miraculous ways by God. Soon they live in the Land of Israel, fighting wars, planting and harvesting crops, and living in a real society. Will they be ready for this change?

Perhaps the first thing needed is new leadership. Moshe and Aharon were perfect leaders to bring the people out of Egypt, but they may not be the perfect leaders to bring them into Israel. They have led with ongoing and direct communication with God and direct intervention through miraculous acts. Now, however, they need leaders who don't

have this available, who can lead without turning to God and expecting answers. The people need leaders who can be effective when forced to work out real-world solutions for themselves, who will be self-reliant and can teach the people to be self-reliant as well.

Just as Moshe and Aharon developed a reliance on God, the people grew to rely on Moshe and Aharon. This is not healthy for either side. The people spent forty years in the wilderness, yet Chukat reads like a replay of the complaints leaving Egypt in Beshalach. They lament the lack of water and food, utter words against Moshe and God, and ask to return to Egypt.

Shouldn't they know better? By now they should have learned complaining never works and that God will provide for them. Yet what do they do? They whine and repeat the line, "Why did you take us out of Egypt?" Their request for water at least is a legitimate need, even if they ask inappropriately, but grumbling about the man is nothing but ingratitude and small-mindedness. The divine response is predictably deadly. Don't they ever learn?

The truth is that it is one thing to learn intellectually and another to change dynamics of a relationship. We often revert to old patterns and roles, even when we know better. A person could be an accomplished, mature professional, but when she goes back to her family for Thanksgiving or Pesach, she returns to her old role of middle sister and interacts with parents and siblings just like when she was a teenager.

Moshe and Bnei Yisrael have been working on their relationship for forty years, and it seems those old patterns are not going to break. Bnei Yisrael fall back into child mode when facing challenges, turning to Moshe. And Moshe falls back into his familiar mode and turns to God: "*And Moshe and Aharon went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them*" (Numb. 20:6).

Moshe may not be aware of how little his behavior has changed, but he certainly sees the people as failing: "*Hear ye rebels, must we fetch water for you out of this rock?*" (20:11). The word for rebels, morim, is echoed in his valedictory address to the people in a way that makes explicit the sense that the people's wayward behavior is hopeless and unchanging: "*Rebels, mamrim, you have been against God, from the day that I have known you*" (Devarim 9:24).

What was the sin of Moshe and Aharon about? Hitting the rock rather than speaking to it? Calling the people rebels? Getting angry? Even if it is a combination, does it really justify the punishment?

The answer might be the sin is all and none, it is not the acts but what they demonstrate. Each shows Moshe is still the leader of old and unable to adapt to the changes ahead. He could have done things differently: he could have engaged the people rather than calling on God. God even told him to break old patterns and commanded him to speak, not hit the rock, but he couldn't do it. Instead, he fell back into the familiar, hitting rather than speaking.

There is a lot of symbolism in the choice to speak or hit. Does one speak, trying to engage, thinking there can be a meaningful connection with the other side and both are receptive to the change that can emerge when two sides meet in open and reflective conversation? Or does one hit, believing no true conversation can take place and behavior can only be modified by brute force? If Moshe still sees the people as incorrigible rebels who can only be beaten into submission after all this time, then it is time he step back and allow a new leader to take over.

Once Moshe and Aharon are told they will not take the people into the land, the people start acting more mature and self-reliant. When Israel suffers an attack by the king of Arad, their response is not to turn to Moshe, but take matters into their own hands: "*And Israel vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities*" (21:2). They prayed, battled, and won. This was no replay of the war with Amalek. The people were not dependent on Moshe or a miracle. This war was won by the people, skill in battle, prayers, and relationship with God

When the people complain about the man and turn to Moshe to save them from the poisonous serpents, there may be a relapse. But even with miraculous intervention, it was more empowering. Moshe made a physical object, a serpent on a flag, which they used to save themselves. This may have been too miraculous for the real world, as the serpent would be destroyed(II Kings, 18:3). But in the midbar, where miracles were taken for granted, this was how healing took place. But

now they did it themselves.

The song they sing, “Az Yashir,” echoes the song sung by Moshe and Miriam in Beshalach. But it is not “az yashir Moshe,” but “az yashir Yisrael” (21:17). When they encounter Sichon, Moshe is not sending messengers, as the case with Edom (20:14), but the people themselves: “Then Israel sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites...” (21:21).

The people are learning to be responsible; they are growing up. Sometimes to grow up and escape old behaviors and dynamics, you have to leave the parental home. Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam are left behind in the people’s childhood home, the desert where the people were raised. As they prepare for the challenges that lie ahead in the Land of Canaan, the people are ready to leave home and become adults as they learn independence and self-reliance.

Shabbat Shalom.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2023/06/leadership-for-self-reliance-2/>

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## Angel for Shabbat – Hukat/Balak

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

“Wherefore it is said in the book of the Wars of the Lord...” (Bemidbar 21:14)

This week’s Torah portion has the only mention of “the book of the Wars of the Lord” (Sefer Milhamot Hashem). Commentators and scholars speculate about what was contained in this now lost book. Was it a collection of poems in praise of God? Was it a record of the Israelites’ wars? Who had access to this book? Who wrote it?

We don’t have answers because we don’t have access to the book; nor do we know anyone in the past — beyond the generation of Moses — who had access to the book. Apparently, when the Torah was actually written, the people at that time were familiar with the book of the Wars of the Lord, so the allusion to it would have been understood.

But what about readers in all subsequent generations, including our own? What possible meaning can this book have for us who do not have access to it? Why would the Torah include reference to a book that future generations can’t possibly read?

Perhaps some insight can be gained by examining the etymology of the Hebrew word for war: *milhama*. The root of this word is the same as the root for *lehem*, a word used for bread, food, general sustenance. A connection between *milhama* and *lehem* may be that wars are/were often fought over bread i.e. one group fights to gain the possessions of another group.

Taking the meanings of these words together, we offer a suggestion. Instead of translating Sefer Milhamot Hashem as book of Wars of the Lord, a better translation might be: book of *Sustenances from the Lord*. The Israelites kept a record of how God sustained them; this was a means of expressing gratitude and remembering God’s ongoing Providence. Sometimes the sustenance was *lehem*, food. For example, the Israelites referred to the manna from heaven as *lehem*. Sometimes the sustenance was that God saved them in times of battle/war. For example, in the Song sung by Moses and the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea, God is referred to symbolically as *Ish Milhama*, Man of War.

Following this interpretation, the Torah’s inclusion of reference to Sefer Milhamot Hashem is a way of reminding all generations to be grateful for the sustenance provided to us by God. Just as the ancient Israelites were careful to keep a record of God’s sustaining deeds, so we too are to be mindful of God’s Providence over us.

In a sense, the Book of Sustenances from the Lord (my new translation of Sefer Milhamot Hashem) is an invitation to us to keep in mind the blessings we have enjoyed and do enjoy through the beneficence of God. By focusing on what we have, rather than on what we lack, we can maintain a more optimistic view of life.

Even if the original Sefer Milhamot Hashem is lost to us, its message remains very relevant to all generations. We are grateful for all the blessings we have received from God, Who has sustained us, and maintained us, and allowed us to reach this point in our lives.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

**The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3138>

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### **New Publication on Rabbi Sabato Morais**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

*Rabbi Sabato Morais — Pioneer Sephardic Rabbi of Early American Judaism*, by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Mazo Publishers, 2023, 65 pages.

Rabbi Sabato Morais (1823-1897) was one of the leading American rabbis of his time, although largely forgotten today. Born in Livorno to a prominent Italian/Sephardic family, he grew into an impressive scholar, communal leader and activist. He spent formative years serving in London before being invited to become spiritual leader of the historic Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, where he began in 1851.

Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins has published a monograph on the life and work of Rabbi Morais. The study is “designed for teenagers and young families” to spread the legacy of Rabbi Morais. It considers Morais’ early life, his work in London, and his long tenure in Philadelphia.

Rabbi Morais was a staunch traditionalist, but was also a community-minded rabbi who worked with and respected those with different religious viewpoints. He was a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln and was an outspoken critic of slavery and other injustices in American society.

Rabbi Elkins notes that Rabbi Morais does not fit neatly into the religious denominational framework of Ashkenazic Jewry. He was Orthodox in belief and observance; he was highly cultured and open to modern scholarship; his thinking was in line with the “historical school” of Judaism — but not identical with it. In short, Rabbi Morais was representative of a different religious model: a Western Sephardic traditional rabbi.

In 1886, Rabbi Morais, together with Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes of Shearith Israel in New York, spearheaded the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association. The Seminary, which originally held its classes at Shearith Israel, aimed to educate youths desirous of entering the ministry to be “thoroughly grounded in Jewish knowledge and inspired by the precept and the example of their instructors with the love of the Hebrew language and a spirit of fidelity and dedication to the Jewish Law.” Morais was the founding President and also taught classes as its Professor of Bible. After his death in November 1897, Solomon Schechter was called from England to reorganize the Seminary. He arrived in 1902. “At that point, the Jewish Theological Seminary, started by Sabato Morais, ceased to exist, and a new institution, called the Jewish Theological Seminary of America was established.” Rabbi Elkins, himself a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, notes that it is generally felt that the Conservative Movement really began with the arrival of Solomon Schechter. Rabbi Elkins notes: “While some consider Morais to be the founder of the Conservative Movement, in thought and practice he considered himself Orthodox.”

When Rabbi Morais passed away in November 1897, his funeral was attended by thousands. “Historians note that his funeral was the first such mass funeral among Jews in America.” An Orthodox newspaper eulogized him as “without

doubt...the greatest of all orthodox rabbis in the United States." He was mourned by all factions of the Jewish community, a rare testimony to his involvement with and concern for the entire community.

Rabbi Elkins has done an important service in publishing his monograph on the life and work of Rabbi Morais. This publication offers us the opportunity of reconnecting with one of the important religious leaders of American Jewry.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3132>

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### **Balak -- The Letter Man**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \* © 2017

The drama of this week's Parsha is certainly in the story of Bolok and Bilaam--how Bolok invited Bilaam to curse the Jews, but G-d switched the intended curse into a blessing. But, the Parsha also teaches us much about Bilaam as a person. Especially in giving him the title, "Pisora- The Letter-Man." )Rashi(

Bilaam was a person who was so effective at cursing people that letters poured in from solicitors begging him to curse their enemies. In fact, Bilaam prided himself that he was so needed by so many. It seems to have boosted his ego. When G-d asks Bilaam about Bolok's messengers, Bilaam replies, "Even though I am not significant to You, but kings hold me in the greatest respect." )Rashi(

I had a Rebbe in yeshiva who used to say, "There is a little bit of Bilaam's attitude within each of us." Deep in our hearts, we know that all that really matters is G-d's opinion of us. Yet, being popular seems to count for something. And, although Bilaam was way out of touch with G-d's mandate of blessing for the world, Bilaam chooses to impress upon G-d that he, Bilaam, is popular.

When I was in high school, and my Rebbe made these comments, there were no cell phones or internet. There was no temptation to demonstrate ones importance by taking a phone call or reading a text message from one person while in the middle of a conversation with another person. Still, Rebbe observed a quality in human nature, which I think is even more relevant in our time. It seems to me that our generation needs to introspect on why we get a thrill from "You've got mail" or from having our phones ring in front of other people, affirming our popularity and worthiness. That is a middah / trait of "Bilaam, the letter-man," Bilaam, the person whose sense of self was defined by the number of letters he received.

In contrast, I am reminded of a story in the life of Rabbi Avraham Pam z"l, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Torah V'Daas in New York. Rabbi Pam once sent a letter of encouragement to a Jew in his neighborhood who was confined to the hospital for an extended period of time. The man treasured the letter and showed it to many of those who visited him. Eventually the man died from the illness, and the funeral took place in the summer when many of those who knew the man were away on vacation. The Rabbi asked to officiate did not know the man personally, but he heard about Rav Pam's letter, and mentioned it in his eulogy, deducing that the man must have been quite special to have received a personal letter from the celebrated Rosh Yeshiva.

When Rav Pam heard what an impact his letter had made- that it had heartened an ill person, and been the catalyst for a more respectable funeral- he wept, realizing the magnitude of lost opportunities to bring encouragement and respect to other people. He said, "The letter took me just a few minutes to write, a stamp to mail, and look at its impact. Imagine how many lost opportunities there are in life, where we could have sent a letter and made a difference for the better in someone's life."

The Mishna in Avos tells us, "Who is honored, one who honors others." There is false sense that the more mail we receive, the more worthy and popular we are. The real mark of distinction in a letter-man is one who can send a letter of good-will, for such a letter elevates both the sender and the recipient.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.

Rabbi Rhine is on summer vacation for some weeks. During this time, with his blessing, I am posting some of his outstanding archived Devrei Torah. To find more of Rabbi Rhine's Devrei Torah, go to Teach613.org and search by parsha.

<http://www.teach613.org/the-letter-man/>

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## **Chukas – Forever Faith**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* © 2021

We read this week of the fateful incident known as Mei Merivah – the Waters of Strife, when Moshe hits the Well of Miriam to provide water for the nation. Throughout the forty years in the desert, the Well of Miriam had provided endless water. When Miriam passed away, the well stopped. The nation came to Moshe and Aharon crying out in thirst and demanding water. Hashem instructed Moshe to speak to the rock and tell it to give forth water. When Moshe and Aharon err, hitting the rock instead, G-d takes them to task saying that they did not believe in G-d to sanctify Him and therefore they will not lead the nation into the land of Israel.

At face value, Hashem's challenge to Moshe and Aharon is difficult to understand. Where did they display a lack of faith in G-d by mistakenly hitting the rock instead of speaking to it? The Yalkut Shimoni (Remez 764) brings a puzzling Medrash regarding this lack of faith. The Medrash says that Hashem was telling them that they should have learned to have faith from the story of Hagar. When Hagar was sent away from Avrohom's house with her young son Yishmael, she ran out of water and feared for his life. Hashem then miraculously provided her with a well in the desert. If Hashem provided a well for an individual in the merit of his father Avrohom, then how much more so would Hashem provide a well for the Jewish people who have the merits of all of the forefathers, the merit of their own acceptance of Torah and the merit of their mitzvos!

This Medrash seems to indicate that the lack of faith was a lack of trust in Hashem's kindness. They were concerned that Hashem would no longer provide water for the nation. This statement in and of itself is an important lesson for us. As human beings, we can always fall prey to being affected by the reality we see with our eyes, no matter what we know in our hearts. Moshe and Aharon have now been living with G-d's miraculous protection and love for His people for forty years, beginning with the plagues in Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea. G-d now tells them directly that He is going to continue to provide water. Yet, somewhere within them there was a concern that Hashem's kindness had run out.

Yet, this Medrash is still puzzling. How does this explain why they hit the rock instead of speaking to it? If they were concerned that the miracle of the well would not continue, hitting the rock would not work either.

Perhaps this Medrash is teaching us the importance of equilibrium. As they came to provide water for the nation, they harbored within their psyches a slight concern for the nation's survival. This concern left them unsettled and inhibited their ability to properly handle the pressures of the moment and determine the proper course of action. It was because of this lack of equilibrium that they erred in judgement and hit the rock.

Faith and trust in G-d's kindness is a valuable tool in life. Beyond the obvious benefit of faith in enabling one to have the strength to do what one knows is right, faith enables one to maintain calm and stay focused knowing that Hashem will provide. This enables one to better judge and handle their challenges.

This Medrash also provides us with an insight into how we can develop this faith in G-d's kindness. Even though Moshe and Aharon had lived through forty years of miraculous sustenance, they are being told that they should have studied the story of Hagar. Every story of G-d's Providence carries its own message and can add a new depth to our appreciation of the depth of G-d's love and kindness.

No matter how much we have personally experienced, or how deeply we have developed our faith and trust in G-d's kindness, we can gain from remembering and studying the stories in the Torah, and the many stories that abound throughout history. The more different examples we hear, the deeper and more complete will be our understanding of G-d's endless love and kindness. The more complete our understanding, the greater will be our ability to maintain our equilibrium and to think clearly even in difficult situations.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Note: Rabbi Singer is on vacation this week, so I selected a Dvar Torah from his archives. He is leaving our community during July to become the head of the Savannah Kollel, associated with Congregation B'Nai Brith Jacob. The Savannah Kollel is one of the treasures of the South, and Rabbi Singer will be a distinguished Chief Rabbi for the Kollel.

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### **Chukat/Balak**

By Rabbi Herzl Hefter \*

[Rabbi Hefter did not send a Devar Torah this week. Watch for future Devrei Torah from Rabbi Hefter in this spot.]

\* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see [www.har-el.org](http://www.har-el.org). To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

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### **Reflection on Parashat Hukkat**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

#### ***Heifer-therapy***

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone.  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come*

*Funeral Blues*, W.H. Auden

When death strikes, we initially experience shock, grief and disbelief. Then, as Auden describes, we are frustrated with the world which keeps moving on, functioning efficiently as if nothing happened. As if our lives have not been changed irreversibly, a gaping hole looking back at us from our mental photo album, a missing piece where our loved one should have been. The banality of death scares us, as we hear dogs barking, birds chirping and pianos playing. We want to muffle them, silence the world and focus its attention on us, but we cannot, and not always we know where to go next.

Most of us live our lives in constant fear, with the imminent shadow of death hovering menacingly above. We are afraid to love, lest we have to suffer the loss of our loved ones, and afraid of being loved, not wanting those who love us to be hurt when we are gone. We are obsessed with trying to avoid, preparing for, postponing and confronting death. Anthropologists agree that burial rituals are the first sign of a developing religion, while clergymen and mediums attend to the needs of those left behind covering the whole spectrum between true, pseudo- and abusive belief systems.

How is it possible, then, that according to Midrashic sources, the paradigm of irrational law, the law we must follow though it makes no sense to us, is the one we probably need more than all others? I am referring to the ritual of the red heifer, a

ritual meant to elevate the person who contracted the impurity of death and bring him to a state of purity. Of all the rituals a Jew has to perform throughout life, I would have expected the one accompanying death to be the most transparent, the most rational. After all, this is what the spokesmen of religion, the rabbis, do today. They attend to the mourners, visit and comfort them, impart words of wisdom to soothe their pain and try to answer their questions and reestablish a channel of communication between them and God. In the past, the priest was the person who led the mourner back into normal, communal life, so it would have been appropriate for him to lend emotional and moral support.

Alas, in regards to the sprinkling of the ashes of the red heifer on the purifying man, our sages say: *“God said, so I have decreed, and so I have established a law, and you should not try to understand it.”* And for two thousand years we acquiesced, thinking that it is possible that there is no meaning behind the odd ritual of the red heifer. But let us think for a moment, if there is no way for us to understand this ritual which comes at such an important juncture in our lives, why would its details be described by the Torah so meticulously?

Why tell us that the priest must take a young, wholesome red heifer that has never carried a burden, slaughter it and burn it, together with cedar wood, hyssop and crimson dyed wool? Why do we all have to know that after all the ingredients have been reduced to ashes, the powder is kept in a special vessel? And why is it that when purifying the impure person, the priest takes some of the powder in a vessel and pours on it fresh water and then sprinkles the water on the person, in intervals of three days, at the end of which process that person is declared pure, while the priest is rendered impure for one day?

Such intricate ritual must have some meaning for us, the mortals who populate this mundane world, apart from its obscure mystical and cosmic proportions known only to God, so here is an interpretation which might make sense, and if it does, I shall return to the original statement of the rabbis and ask why did they say that the red heifer is an irrational process.

### **The Purpose**

Knowing what we do today about the effect of death and violence on people and the need for a healthy process of grief, acknowledgement and coming to terms with tragedies, we must assume that the Torah, given to us by the Creator of the world, is aware of that need and addresses it. As described above, death can leave us emotionally paralyzed. There are those who will become apathetic and indifferent, who will feel that there is no purpose for anything and will sink into depression and despair, and yet others who will conclude that there is no law or order in this world and since everyone is going to die they could do whatever they want, including wreaking havoc and harming others physically or emotionally.

These varied reactions to death, which impair our sensibility and our will to live and to contribute to society, are viewed by the Torah as a spiritual and emotional contamination, and therefore fall under the rubric of impurity. The ritual of the red heifer was meant to help the mourner cope with the loss by first vindicating his pain and grief and then leading him on a path of acceptance and recovery, culminating in a resolution to take on life with renewed positive energy. The priest would not treat patients as numbers nor groups, but would rather take the time to talk to each candidate for purification and assist him with this biblical therapy.

### **The Process, Step 1: The Ashes**

The ritual relies heavily on symbolism and the meaning we attach to objects and concepts. An abstract concept represented by a physical object is brought closer to our senses and made easier to internalize and retain, and it is for that reason that all the elements of the red heifer ritual are deeply symbolic. So let us look again in the text and analyze the symbolism embedded in the ritual:

*“...bring a red heifer, without blemish, on which no yoke has been laid”*

The Hebrew word for heifer, נַחַר, is derived from the bi-radical root נָחַר, which represents growth and multiplication and in itself stands for vitality, strength, wealth and fertility. The red color represents blood, the liquid of life, as well as beauty, strong emotions and desire. The heifer is young, healthy and wholesome, and it has never carried a yoke. All these

elements conjure a picture of a person who died at his prime, without a chance to fulfill his dreams and realize his potential. The priest vindicates the feeling of the mourner that a great injustice has been done by letting anyone die, and especially someone who still had a whole life ahead of him, life full of energy and positivity. He does so by slaughtering the heifer and burning it to ashes, as a reenactment of the tragedy that befell the one whom the mourner is grieving for.

*“...the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop and crimson dyed wool, and throw them into the fire consuming the heifer”*

The cedar and the hyssop represent the two extremes of society, as in the famous Hebrew dictum: – *“when the cedars are burning, what hope is there for the hyssop?”* The third element, the dyed wool, symbolizes our constant efforts to climb up the social ladder by wrapping ourselves with precious garments to connote an elevated status. By burning the cedar wood and the hyssop the priest confirms the patient’s grim observation that we are all going to die, the rich and the poor, the mighty and the meek, as Job says )3:19( *“The great and the small alike are there, and the slave is free of his master.”* By adding the wool to the fire he also agrees with the mourner that death cares not how beautiful and refined were one’s garments in life, crimson dyed wool, silk and all.

### **The Process, Step II: The Tonic**

*“...the priest shall take from the dust of the burning of the heifer and place it in a vessel, and shall then pour on it live water”*

As the patient stands in front of the priest, about to be sprinkled with the red heifer’s tonic, the priest shows him how the dust is placed in a bowl and water is poured on it. This symbolizes the need to allow water, the power of life, to overcome the feeling of despair and hopelessness and to start or continue a cycle of growth and development. The physical act of sprinkling water on the person serves as a refreshing wakeup call: don’t let the sorrow pull you down! Don’t drown! For the sake of your loved ones, those who are alive and those who are not, cling on to life, climb back from the abyss and march on, honoring the memory of the departed by bring goodness to the world. This transformation might be slow and gradual, so it is only logical that it is insinuated by a minuscule change in the name of the therapeutic tonic: Aleph to Ayin )ע-א(.

### **Ashes to Ashes or to Dust**

Have you noticed that in the verse quoted above )Num. 20:17( the Torah replaces ashes with dust? *“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,”* used in the Anglican burial service, is partially based on the wordplay in the red heifer’s ritual between the word אפר – ashes, and עפר – dust, but this usage misses the whole point of the biblical service. The Torah starts the ritual with ashes but shifts to dust at the end. The message to the newly purified person is that the long process of healing and recovery starts with one small step, as small as the difference in Hebrew between Aleph and Ayin, which sound almost the same but with a slight guttural emphasis on the Ayin. This minute difference, however, is life-changing, because while nothing can grow in ashes, dust, with the aid of live water, can sprout new life. The phrase which the Torah and the priest would want the mourner to remember is not *“ashes to ashes”* which speaks of the finality of the physical world, but *“from dust you are and to dust you shall return.”* There is a cycle, people are born and people die, and while there is nothing we can do to stop death, there is a lot we can do to enhance the quality of life, enjoy it and bring joy to others.

At the end of this process, the mourner is pure and ready to go back to life, while the priest is rendered impure for one day as a result of his encounter with death’s aftermath, an encounter which depleted his reserves of spiritual energy.

### **So, Logical or Not?**

I will not assume that you accept this interpretation, but I see comfort in knowing that the Torah cared about those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death and provided them with a staff to lean on. I find solace in the realization that the green pastures, the still waters and the overflowing cup are ours to draw strength from in this world. Why then did the rabbis insist that the ritual of the red heifer makes no sense? Why, as mentioned above, they said that it is an arbitrary divine decree not to be questioned?

The answer, I believe, is that the original Midrashic statement referred not to the process of purification but to its cause. The person standing in front of the priest is there because he contracted impurity, because he faced or touched death. The spiritual impurity is the fear of death and our desire to challenge God and demand to know why He allows death to exist. To that, the rabbis say, there is no answer. This is how God chose to create His world. It is a Divine decree which we must not try to decipher, but rather continue our life empowered and emboldened by the power of the water of life.

### Why Before Pesah?

We read the description of the red heifer's ritual – Parashat Parah, before the month of Nissan, with which arrive Passover and the story of the Exodus, to remind us that we want to be redeemed, that the world is imperfect and we can make it better. However, whereas the Exodus was brought about miraculously, this time it is up to us. We should cure ourselves from our spiritual impurity of despair and apathy, and start our journey, our pilgrimage to redemption, by embarking on a path of positive actions, loving ourselves and extending this love to others.

\* Torah VeAhava. Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD( and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

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### Shavuon Chukat and Balak

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

Suppose you're in love with a woman and want to ask for her hand in marriage. However, you're too shy, lazy, or far away to do it yourself. What to do?

The Talmud tells us not to worry. You can send a "shliach" to do it on your behalf. A shliach is the Hebrew term for messenger, and the halacha is "A messenger embodies the personhood of his sender." So, your messenger can take your place and ask for your beloved's hand in marriage without you having to leave your house.

In New Zealand we have a similar issue. We love Israel like a groom loves his bride. But due to the laws of physics, we cannot be in Israel and New Zealand at the same time. What to do?

The answer is, we have shliachs/shlichim. Messengers from Israel embodying all its ideals and being a part of our community. Noam and Elisheva Fogel have been embodying Israel in New Zealand for years and giving everything they have just so we can have a little taste of our Holy land in Aotearoa.

Personally, they were among the first people I met here, and Elisheva was the one who told me to take a rest when I got off the plane right before I found out I had Covid. They showed me the ropes here and helped me get settled in this new land of sheep milk and Manuka honey. I will be forever grateful to them and wish that they should receive all that they wish for themselves and their beautiful family.

Shabbat Shalom!

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## How to Live a Long Life

by Rabbi Daniel Epstein \*

Do you want time to go fast or slow?

Time flies when you are having fun. Dunbar in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* decides he wants his life to be as boring as possible so that he will live a very long time. He engages in activities he dislikes in order to lengthen his life and make time go slower. Slow days, long years.

This week in Chukat we have a time warp. Last week we finished Korach, which according to most opinions happened in the second year after the Exodus from Egypt. In this week's Torah portion Miriam dies, which happened in the final year of the 40 year journey

The Torah skips 37 years and makes no mention of any stories during this time. There is a lot to be said about this. One thing is that The Torah is not just a history book. There is an agenda, it does not just record events that happened. Nothing is recorded from this time period because nothing noteworthy happens. So is time going fast or slow at this point?

When we say we want a long life we are referring to time in the objective manner. We want a large amount of years. But time is both objective and subjective.

An explanation of the relative nature of time comes from Einstein. He says that when you are courting a girl, one hour seems like a minute. When you are sitting on a hot coal, a minute seems like an hour. It reminds me of the refrain from Sefer Bereshit where Yaakov says that he worked seven years like seven days.

This is the lesson of the Chukat time warp: relative time is more important than objective time. Quality over quantity. Dunbar had it all wrong. The text illustrates this point by not mentioning anything for 37 years.

The Torah values quality of days over quantity of years and communicates this through who is given more space in the Torah. Those with more airtime seem to be more important and we can draw lessons from it. Methuselah has the longest life in Tanakh of 969 years, yet he is only discussed in 3 or 4 pesukim. David HaMelech lived only 70 years, much less than Methuselah, but is mentioned in over 50 chapters of the Tanakh. He lived full days.

That is the final idea I want to talk about. When describing the reward for some of the mitzvot, the Torah speaks about arichat yamim, length of days, but does not discuss arichat shanim, length of years. More important than an objectively long life, length of years, we want relatively long days, full days. Don't worry about time passing. Fill your days with wonder, with joy, with excitement. Fill them with laughter, friends and family, and you will live a long life.

More important than the years in your life is the life in your years.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Senior Jewish Educator and experienced Maggid at the George Washington University Hillel, where he serves more than 5,000 Jewish students. He sends a weekly E-mail Dvar Torah, available at [danstorah.com](http://danstorah.com).

<https://library.yctorah.org/2023/06/how-to-live-a-long-life/>

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## Rav Kook Torah

### Balak: Eliminating Idolatry

#### The Weird Worship of Peor

After failing to curse the people of Israel, Balaam devised another plan to make trouble for the Jewish people. He advised

using Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into worshipping Baal Peor.

How was this idol worshipped? The word 'Peor' means to 'open up' or 'disclose.' According to the Talmud, the worshippers would bare their backsides and defecate in honor of the idol. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 64a) illustrates the repulsive nature of this particular idolatry with the following two stories:

*"There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed: 'If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world.' She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world."*

*"When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, 'How is this one worshipped?'*

*"They told her, 'One eats greens and drinks strong drink, and then defecates before the idol.'*

*"The woman responded, 'I'd rather become ill again than worship an idol in such a [revolting] manner.'*

*"Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired out a donkey to a gentile woman. When she came to Peor, she said to him, 'Wait till I enter and come out again.'*

*"When she came out, he told her, 'Now you wait for me until I go in and come out.'*

*"'But are you not a Jew and do not worship idols[?]' she asked.*

*"'What does it concern you?' he replied. He then entered, uncovered himself before it, and wiped himself on the idol's nose.*

*"The acolytes praised him, saying, 'No one has ever served this idol so consummately!'"*

## **Exposing the True Nature of Idolatry**

What was the point of this most odious idolatrous practice?

In truth, Peor was not an aberrant form of idolatry. On the contrary, Peor was the epitome of idolatry! Other forms of idolatry are more aesthetic, but they just cover up the true ugliness of idolatry. The Golden Calf was the opposite extreme, a beautiful, elegant form of idol worship. But Peor, as its name indicates, exposes the true nature of idolatry. All other forms of idolatry are just branches of Peor, with their inner vileness concealed to various extents.

The repulsive service of Peor contains the key for abolishing idolatry. When the prophet Elijah fought against the idolatry of Baal, he taunted the people: *"If Baal is God, then follow him."* The people, in fact, were already worshippers of Baal. What was Elijah telling them?

Elijah's point was that Baal is just a sanitized version of Peor. If Baal is God, then go all the way. You should worship the source of this form of worship — Peor. Elijah's exposure of Baal as just a cleaner version of Peor convinced the people. They were truly revolted by the scatological practices of Peor, and instinctively responded, *"Hashem is God! Hashem is God!"* (1 Kings 18:39)

Historically, the uprooting of idolatry will take place in stages. The allure of Peor, the purest form of idolatry, was shattered after Moses rooted out those who worshipped Peor at Shittim. That purge gave strength to the men of the Great Assembly who subdued the temptation of idolatry in the time of Ezra (Sanhedrin 64a). The final eradication of idolatry's last vestiges will take place in the end of days, through the spiritual power of Moses, whose burial place faces Beit Peor. This obliteration will occur as idolatry's innate foulness is exposed to all.

Why is idolatry so intrinsically vile?

The source of idolatry's appeal is in fact a holy one — an impassioned yearning for closeness to God. Ignorance and moral turpitude, however, prevent this closeness, blocking the divine light from the soul. The overwhelming desire for divine closeness, despite one's moral failings, leads to idol worship. Instead of correcting one's flaws, these spiritual yearnings are distorted into cravings for idolatry. The unholy alliance of spiritual yearnings together with immoral and decadent behavior produces the intrinsic foulness of idolatry. Instead of trying to elevate humanity and refine our desires, idolatry endeavors to debase our most refined aspirations to our coarsest physical aspects. This is the ultimate message of Peor's scatological practices.

### **True Victory over Idolatry**

The Great Assembly in Ezra's time conquered the temptation of idolatry by generally diminishing spiritual yearnings in the world. They did not truly defeat idolatry; rather, they subdued its enticement. In the words of the Midrash, they cast the temptation of idolatry into a metal cauldron and sealed it with lead, "so that its call may not be heard." Thus we find that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b) records a dream of Rav Ashi, the fifth century Talmudic sage. In his dream, Rav Ashi asked the idolatrous King Menasseh, "*Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?*" To which Menasseh replied, "*Were you there, you would have lifted up the hem of your garment and sped after me.*"

The true cure for this perilous attraction, however, is through greatness of Torah. The highest goal of Torah is the appearance of inner light in the human soul, as divine wisdom is applied to all the spheres that the soul is capable of assimilating — be it in thought, emotion, desires, and character traits.

Even nowadays, poverty in Torah knowledge results in a weakness of spirit, similar to the spiritual darkness caused by idolatry. The world awaits redemption through greatness of Torah. Then idolatry will be truly defeated, and not merely subdued in a sealed metal cauldron.

)Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 271-273. Adapted from Shemonah Kevatzim VIII: 132; IV: 56.(

[https://www.ravkooktorah.org/BALAK\\_65.htm](https://www.ravkooktorah.org/BALAK_65.htm)

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### **Miriam, Moses' Friend (Chukat 5774. 5781)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

It is one of the great mysteries of the Torah. Arriving at Kadesh the people find themselves without water. They complain to Moses and Aaron. The two leaders go to the Tent of Meeting and there they are told by God to take the staff and speak to the rock, and water will emerge.

Moses' subsequent behaviour was extraordinary. He took the staff. He and Aaron gathered the people. Then Moses said: "*Listen now, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock?*" Then, "*Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff*" (Num. 20:10-11).

This was the behaviour that cost Moses and Aaron their chance of leading the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land. "*Because you did not have enough faith in Me to sanctify Me in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I have given them*" (Num. 20:12)

The commentators disagree as to which aspect of Moses' behaviour was wrong: His anger? His act of striking the rock instead of speaking to it? The implication that it was he and Aaron, not God, who were bringing water from the rock? I proposed in an earlier Covenant & Conversation that Moses neither sinned nor was punished. He merely acted as he had done almost forty years earlier when God told him to hit the rock (Ex. 17:6), and thereby showed that though he was the right leader for the people who had been slaves in Egypt, he was not the leader for their children who were born in freedom and would conquer the land.

This time, though, I want to pose a different question. Why then? Why did Moses fail this particular test? After all, he had

been in a similar situation twice before. After emerging from the Red Sea the people had travelled for three days without finding water. Then they found some, but it tasted bitter and they complained, and God showed Moses how to make the water sweet. )Ex. 15:22-26( Arriving at Rephidim, again they found no water and complained. Despairing, Moses said to God, *“What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”* God patiently instructed Moses as to what he should do, and water flowed from the rock. )Ex. 17:1-7(.

So Moses had successfully overcome two similar challenges in the past. Why now on this third occasion did he lose emotional control? What was different? The answer is stated explicitly in the text, but in so understated a way that we may fail to grasp its significance. Here it is:

*In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. )Num. 20:1(*

Immediately after this we read: *“Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron.”* A famous Talmudic passage<sup>1</sup>[ explains that it was in Miriam's merit that the Israelites had a well of water that miraculously accompanied them through their desert journeys. When Miriam died, the water ceased. This interpretation reads the sequence of events simply and supernaturally. Miriam died. Then there was no water. From this, you can infer that until then there was water because Miriam was alive. It was a miracle in her merit.

However there is another way of reading the passage, naturally and psychologically. The connection between Miriam's death and the events that followed had less to do with a miraculous well and more to do with Moses' response to the complaints of the Israelites.

This was the first trial he had to face as leader of the people without the presence of his sister. Let us recall who Miriam was, for Moses. She was his elder sister, his oldest sibling. She had watched over his fate as he floated down the Nile in a pitched basket. She had the presence of mind, and the audacity, to speak to Pharaoh's daughter and arrange for the child to be nursed by an Israelite woman, that is, by Moses' own mother Yocheved. Without Miriam, Moses would have grown up not knowing who he was and to which people he belonged.

Miriam is a background presence throughout much of the narrative. We see her leading the women in song at the Red Sea, so it is clear that she, like Aaron, had a leadership role. We gain a sense of how much she meant to Moses when, in an obscure passage, she and Aaron *“began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite”* )Num. 12:1(. We do not know exactly what the issue was, but we do know that Miriam was smitten with leprosy. Aaron turns helplessly to Moses and asks him to intervene on her behalf, which he does with simple eloquence in the shortest prayer on record – five Hebrew words – *“Please, God, heal her now.”* Moses still cares deeply for her, despite her negative talk.

It is only in this week's parsha that we begin to get a full sense of her influence, and this only by implication. For the first time Moses faces a challenge without her, and for the first time Moses loses emotional control in the presence of the people. This is one of the effects of bereavement, and those who have suffered it often say that the loss of a sibling is harder to bear than the loss of a parent. The loss of a parent is part of the natural order of life. The loss of a sibling can be less expected and more profoundly disorienting. And Miriam was no ordinary sibling. Moses owed her his entire relationship with his natural family, as well as his identity as one of the children of Israel.

It is a cliché to say that leadership is a lonely undertaking. But at the same time no leader can truly survive on their own. Yitro told Moses this many years earlier. Seeing him leading the people alone he said, *“You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone”* )Ex. 18:18(. A leader needs three kinds of support: )1( allies who will fight alongside him; )2( troops or a team to whom he can delegate; and )3( a soulmate or soulmates to whom he can confide his doubts and fears, who will listen without an agenda other than being a supportive presence, and who will give him the courage, confidence and sheer resilience to carry on.

Having known through personal friendship many leaders in many fields, I can say with certainty that it is false to suppose that people in positions of high leadership have thick skins. Most of those I have known have not. They are often intensely vulnerable. They can suffer deeply from doubt and uncertainty. They know that a leader must often make a choice

between two evils, and you never know in advance how a decision will work out. Leaders can be hurt by criticism and the betrayal of people they once considered friends. Because they are leaders, they rarely show any signs of vulnerability in public. They have to project a certainty and confidence they do not feel. But Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, the Harvard leadership experts, are right to say, *“The hard truth is that it is not possible to experience the rewards and joy of leadership without experiencing the pain as well.”*<sup>2</sup>

Leaders need confidants, people who *“will tell you what you do not want to hear and cannot hear from anyone else, people in whom you can confide without having your revelations spill back into the work arena.”* A confidant cares about you more than about the issues. They lift you when you are low, and gently bring you back to reality when you are in danger of self-congratulation or complacency. Heifetz and Linsky write, *“Almost every person we know with difficult experiences of leadership has relied on a confidant to help them get through.”*<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* counts this as one of the four kinds of friendship.<sup>4</sup> He calls it the *“friendship of trust”* ]chaver habitachon[ and describes it as having someone in whom *“you have absolute trust and with whom you are completely open and unguarded,”* hiding neither the good news nor the bad, knowing that the other person will neither take advantage of the confidences shared, nor share them with others.

A careful reading of this famous episode in the context of Moses’ early life suggests that Miriam was Moses’ *“trusted friend,”* his confidante, the source of his emotional stability, and that when she was no longer there, he could no longer cope with crisis as he had done until then.

Those who are a source of strength to others need their own source of strength. The Torah is explicit in telling us how often for Moses that source of strength was God Himself. But even Moses needed a human friend, and it seems, by implication, that this was Miriam. A leader in her own right, she was also one of her brother’s sources of strength.

Even the greatest cannot lead alone.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

]1[ Taanit 9a.

]2[ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2002, 227.

]3[ Ibid., 200.

]4[ Maimonides, *Commentary to Mishnah Avot* 1:6.

#### **AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:**

]1[ How do you prioritise your siblings and closest friends?

]2[ Does it surprise you that, in Rabbi Sacks’ experience, leaders are so sensitive?

]3[ What can we learn from Miriam?

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/miriam-moses-friend/>

Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

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## The Challenge of a Loved One's Death

By Katia Bolotin \* © Chabad 2023

Life's a winding road. There are challenging aspects of life that we must accept but don't fully understand. Death is one of them. It's an inevitable fact that each of us has an unknown expiration date. In Parshat Chukat, we're informed of the death of Miriam the Prophetess in a mere five words. We're told that she died and was buried in Kadesh.<sup>1</sup> The narrative is ambiguous in its utter brevity. In just one sentence, the beloved sister of Moses and Aaron is suddenly gone.

Immediately afterward, the people were desperately pleading for water. Herein lies a mystifying anomaly. Although unstated, there's an underlying connection between these events. It was in the merit of Miriam that the Israelites enjoyed an ample supply of water throughout their long journey.<sup>2</sup> Many years before, Miriam had stood guard along the river, waiting to see what would happen to her infant brother who had been placed in a basket among the reeds.<sup>3</sup> That act of kindness and devotion was noticed on high. Later, G d made her the Divine conduit through which the nation could quench its thirst for decades. The people weren't aware of this until Miriam's miraculous well ceased upon her death.

The Torah's every word conveys underlying meaning. Kadesh, the location of Miriam's demise and Israel's complaints of thirst, contains the same Hebrew letters as the word kadosh ("holy"). This suggests a subtle textual message. At Kadesh, upon Miriam's passing, the spiritual and physical thirst of the nation may have been expressions of the intense vacuum left by her death.

In response to their panic, Moses speaks out in bitter words: "*Listen you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?*"<sup>4</sup> In his angst, Moses calls the people morim ("rebels"), which in Hebrew is spelled exactly the same as the name Miriam. Only the pronunciation is different. Could this be a fitting reminder that they had just suffered her painful loss? Can we surmise that their emotional reactions were related to Miriam's death?

The people lost more than Miriam and her miraculous well; they lost an opportunity. Unlike the national periods of mourning that the Torah describes after the deaths of Aaron and Moses, it appears that the nation failed to console and empathize with one another after Miriam's death. The missed opportunity for solidarity soon morphed into contention.<sup>5</sup>

We each must make it a goal to respond with compassion to those who are suffering. Upon the death of a loved one, families sometimes are torn apart by unresolved issues. Anger and divisiveness can overpower love and reason. At such vulnerable times, we need to choose our every word with greater care and sensitivity. By doing so, strife will be avoided and peace can prevail.

In this week's Torah reading, we also are told of the end of Aaron's life. Just as Miriam's greatness became fully recognized after her death, so, too, the people gained a new perspective of Aaron's greatness at his passing. We are taught that upon Aaron's death that the pillar of cloud, which guided and protected the Israelites since leaving Egypt, left them.<sup>6</sup>

It was in the merits of Miriam and Aaron that the blessings of the well and the clouds were miraculously bestowed.

Their deaths represented the start of the transition from a supernatural to a more autonomous existence. The Kli Yakar explains that there were some at Kadesh who didn't want to enter the Land of Israel. They preferred their miraculous existence in the wilderness, in which all needs were provided for. Once the water abruptly ceased upon Miriam's death, they recognized how the status quo couldn't continue. With Aaron's passing and the disappearance of the Pillar of Clouds, it was clear that a transition was in process.

Living in the here and now, we may not fully appreciate the far-reaching contributions of another, nor can we completely grasp the void we'll experience after s/he is gone. The totality and true impact of someone's life gains heightened clarity once it has ended.

Like the Israelites of old, life, death and the journeys in between challenge us. The Torah's guidance illuminates our ways, especially along unexpected curves on life's winding road.

## Making It Relevant

1. How do you respond when facing uncertainty?
2. Rely on your faith in G-d to strengthen you, especially when in doubt.
3. Recognize that our reactions to grief reveal how vulnerable we are at that time.

## FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers 20:1.
2. Taanit 9a.
3. Exodus 2:4.
4. Numbers 20:10.
5. Kli Yakar.
6. Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 3a.

\* Pianist, songwriter, and composer of contemporary classical music. Her thought-provoking articles and audio talks highlight the enduring relevance of the Torah in our ever-changing world.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/5995640/jewish/The-Challenge-of-a-Loved-ones-Death.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5995640/jewish/The-Challenge-of-a-Loved-ones-Death.htm)

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## Chukat/Balak: Influential Women

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

### Molding the Family

Balak takes Balaam to a place he thought would be conducive to cursing the Jews. But G-d forced Balaam to praise and bless the Jews rather than curse them. Balaam said:

*For from the beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills. Behold a people that will dwell alone, not reckoned among the nations.* )Numbers 23:9(

Allegorically, the "mountain peaks" refer to the patriarchs, while the "hills" refer to the matriarchs.

The contribution of both parents are essential in creating the ideal home and in raising healthy children, but the wife and mother's contributions are more determinative. Women innately posses far greater power to influence their families' orientation in life and mold their families' behavior than do men.

In fact, when necessary, women can )and should( influence their husbands' desires and mold their behavior, realigning them with G-d's will if they become distracted from it.

This is why the Torah describes the patriarchs as "mountain peaks," which are further removed from ground level, and the matriarchs as "hills," which are closer to ground level, i.e., more influential on the home.

G-d therefore wants women to be both aware of their innate power and inspired to make proper use of it.

This will enable us to become a "people that will dwell alone," uninfluenced by the empty values of materialism but, instead, loyal to G-d and energized by our mission to make the world into His home.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3, p. 325

Gut Shabbos,  
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

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# Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah  
via the Internet

Volume 29, Issue 35

Shabbat Parashat Chukat-Balak - Diaspora Edition

5783 B" H

By Sheila Gaisin and Family,  
in honor of the upcoming Bas Mitzvah of her granddaughter  
Adiel Tirtza Gaisin,  
daughter of Shera and Reuven.  
Mazal Tov to all of the siblings and extended family

## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### Anger Management

There are some, say the Talmud, who acquire their world in an hour and others who lose it in an hour. No example of the latter is more arresting and bewildering than the famous episode in this week's parsha. The people have asked for water. God tells Moses to take a staff and speak to the rock and water will appear. This then follows: He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them. Num. 20:10-12

"Is this the Torah and this its reward?" we are tempted to say. What was Moses' sin that it merited such punishment? In previous years I have expressed my view that Moses did not sin, nor was he punished. It was simply that each generation needs its own leaders. Moses was the right, indeed the only, leader capable of taking the Israelites out of Egypt. They needed another kind of leader, and a different style of leadership, to take the next generation into the Promised Land.

Within the framework of this year's series, though, as we discuss the ethics of the Bible, it seems more appropriate to look at a different explanation, the one given by Maimonides in Shemoneh Perakim, the "Eight Chapters" that form the preface to his commentary to the Mishnah, Tractate Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers.

In the course of these chapters Maimonides sets out a surprisingly contemporary account of Judaism as a training in emotional intelligence.<sup>[1]</sup> Healthy emotions are essential to a good and happy life, but temperament is not something we choose. Some people just happen to be more patient or calm or generous-spirited or optimistic than others. Emotions were at one stage called the "passions," a word that comes from the same root as "passive,"

implying that they are feelings that happen to us rather than reactions we choose. Despite this, Maimonides believed that with sufficient training it is possible for us to overcome our destructive emotions and reconfigure our affective life.

In general, Maimonides, like Aristotle, believed that emotional intelligence exists in striking a balance between excess and deficiency, too much and too little. Too much fear makes me a coward, too little makes me rash and foolhardy, taking unnecessary risks. The middle way is courage. There are, however, two exceptions, says Maimonides: pride and anger. Even a little pride (some Sages suggested "an eighth of an eighth") is too much. Likewise even a little anger is wrong.

That, says Maimonides, is why Moses was punished: because he lost his temper with the people when he said, "Listen, you rebels." To be sure, there were other occasions on which he lost his temper – or at least appeared to lose it. His reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf, which included smashing the Two Tablets, was hardly irenic or relaxed. But that case was different. The Israelites had committed a sin. God Himself was threatening to destroy the people. Moses had to act decisively and with sufficient force to restore order to a people wildly out of control.

Here, though, the people had not sinned. They were thirsty. They needed water. God was not angry with them. Moses' intemperate reaction was therefore wrong, says Maimonides. To be sure, anger is something to which we are all prone. But Moses was a leader, and a leader must be a role model. That is why Moses was punished so heavily for a failure that might have been more lightly punished in someone less exalted.

In addition, says Maimonides, by losing his temper Moses failed to respect the people and might have demoralised them. Knowing that Moses was God's emissary, the people might have concluded that if Moses was angry with them, so too was God. Yet they had done no more than ask for water. Giving the people the impression that God was angry with them was a failure to sanctify God's Name. Thus one moment's anger was sufficient to deprive Moses of the reward surely most precious to him, of seeing the culmination of his work by leading the people across the Jordan and into the Promised Land.

The Sages were outspoken in their critique of anger. They would have thoroughly approved of the modern concept of anger management. They did not like anger at all, and reserved some of their sharpest language to describe it.

"The life of those who can't control their anger is not a life," they said. (Pesachim 113b)

Reish Lakish said, "When a person becomes angry, if he is a sage his wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet his prophecy departs from him." (Pesachim 66b)

Maimonides said that when someone becomes angry it is as if he has become an idolater. (Hilchot Deot 2:3)

What is dangerous about anger is that it causes us to lose control. It activates the most primitive part of the human brain that bypasses the neural circuitry we use when we reflect and choose on rational grounds. While in the grip of a hot temper, we lose the ability to step back and judge the possible consequences of our actions. The result is that in a moment of irascibility we can do or say things we may regret for the rest of our lives.

For that reason, rules Maimonides, there is no "middle way" when it comes to anger (Hilchot Deot 2:3). Instead we must avoid it under any circumstance. We must go to the opposite extreme. Even when anger is justified, we must avoid it. There may be times when it is necessary to look as if we are angry. That is what Moses did when he saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, and broke the Tablets of stone. Yet even when we outwardly display anger, says Maimonides, inwardly we should be calm.

The Orchot Tzaddikim (a 15th century commentator) notes that anger destroys personal relationships.<sup>[2]</sup> Short-tempered people scare others, who therefore avoid coming close to them. Anger drives out the positive emotions – forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and sensitivity. The result is that irascible people end up lonely, shunned, and disappointed. Bad tempered people achieve nothing but their bad temper (Kiddushin 40b). They lose all else.

By the Lichy family  
in commemoration of the yahrzeit  
of their beloved son and brother,  
David Isaac Lichy, z"l

By Moshe and Marci Wiesel  
in memory of Moshe's father,  
Joseph Wiesel, a"h.  
(Yosef Berel ben Meshulam)  
whose yahrzeit is 17 Tamuz

The classic role model of patience in the face of provocation was Hillel. The Talmud says that two people once made a wager with each other, saying, “He who makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred zuz.” One said, “I will go and provoke him.” It was Erev Shabbat and Hillel was washing his hair. The man stood by the door of his house and called, “Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?” Hillel robed himself and came out, saying, “My son, what do you seek?”

“I have a question to ask,” he said.  
“Ask, my son,” replied Hillel.

He said, “Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?”

“My son, you ask a good question,” said Hillel. “The reason is that they have no skilled midwives.”

The man left, paused, then returned, crying out, “Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?”

Again, Hillel abandoned his bathing, robed, and came out, saying, “My son, what do you seek?”

“I have another question.”

“Ask, my son.”

“Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans bleared?”

Hillel replied, “My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in sandy places.”

He left, waited, then came back a third time, calling, “Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?”

Again, Hillel dressed and came out, saying, “My son, what do you seek?”

“I have another question.”

“Ask, my son.”

“Why are the feet of Africans wide?”

“My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in watery marshes.”

“I have many questions to ask,” said the man, “but I am worried that you might become angry.”

Hillel then sat and said, “Ask all the questions you have to ask.”

“Are you the Hillel who is called the nasi [leader, prince] of Israel?”

“Yes,” said Hillel.

“In that case, said the man, “may there not be many like you in Israel.”

“Why so, my son?” he asked.

“Because I have just lost four hundred zuz because of you!”

“Be careful of your moods,” said Hillel. “You may lose four hundred zuz, and yet another four hundred zuz through Hillel, yet Hillel will not lose his temper.” Shabbat 30b-31a.

It was this quality of patience under provocation that was one of the factors, according to the Talmud (Eruvin 13b), that led the Sages to rule almost entirely according to the School of Hillel rather than of Shammai.

The best way of defeating anger is to pause, stop, reflect, refrain, count to ten, and breathe deeply. If necessary, leave the room, go for a walk, meditate, or vent your toxic feelings alone. It is said that about one of the Rebbe of Lubavitch that whenever he felt angry, he would take down the Shulchan Aruch to see whether anger was permitted under the circumstances. By the time he had finished studying, his anger had disappeared.

The moral life is one in which we grapple with anger but never let it win. The verdict of Judaism is simple: either we defeat anger or anger will defeat us.

[1] The term was introduced by Peter Salovey and John Mayer. See Peter Salovey, Marc A. Brackett, and John D. Mayer, *Emotional Intelligence: Key Readings on the Mayer and Salovey Model* (Port Chester, NY: Dude Pub., 2004), subsequently popularised by Daniel Goleman in, for instance, his book *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

[2] *Orchot Tzaddikim, Shaar Kaas*, “The Gate of Anger.”

### Balaik:

#### The Curse of Loneliness

In the course of blessing the Jewish people, Bilaam uttered words that have come to seem to many to encapsulate Jewish history:

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?  
How can I denounce the Lord has not denounced?  
From the tops of crags I see them,  
From the hills I gaze down:  
A people that dwells alone[1],  
Not reckoning itself among nations.  
Num. 23:8-9

That is how it seemed during the persecutions and pogroms in Europe. It is how it seemed during the Holocaust. It is how it sometimes seems to Israel and its defenders today. We find ourselves alone. How should we understand this fact? How should we interpret this verse?

In my book *Future Tense*[2] I describe the moment when I first became aware of how dangerous a self-definition this can be. We were having lunch in Jerusalem, on Shavuot 5761/2001. Present was one of the world’s great fighters against antisemitism, Irwin Cotler, soon to become Canada’s Minister of Justice, together with a distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were talking about the forthcoming United Nations Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001.

We all had reasons to know that it was going to be a disaster for Israel. It was there in the parallel sessions of the NGOs that Israel was accused of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and attempted genocide. The conference became, in effect, the launch-pad of a new and vicious antisemitism. In the Middle Ages, Jews were hated because of their religion. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century they

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were hated because of their race. In the twenty-first century they are hated because of their nation state. As we were speaking of the likely outcome, the diplomat heaved a sigh and said, “Twas ever thus. Am levadat yishkon: we are the nation fated to be alone.”

The man who said those words had the best of intentions. He had spent his professional life defending Israel, and he was seeking to comfort us. His intentions were the best, and it was meant no more than as a polite remark. But I suddenly saw how dangerous such an attitude is. If you believe your fate is to be alone, that is almost certainly what will happen. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why bother to make friends and allies if you know in advance that you will fail? How then are we to understand Bilaam’s words?

First, it should be clear that this is a very ambiguous blessing. Being alone, from a Torah perspective, is not a good thing. The first time the words “not good” appear in the Torah is in the verse, “It is not good for man to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18) The second time is when Moses’ father-in-law Yitro sees him leading alone and says, “What you are doing is not good.” (Ex. 18:17) We cannot live and thrive alone. We cannot lead alone. Isolation is not a blessing – quite the opposite.

The word *badad* appears in two other profoundly negative contexts. First is the case of the leper: “He shall live apart; outside the camp shall be his dwelling.” (Lev. 13:46) The second is the opening line of the book of Lamentations, “How alone is the city once thronged with people.” (Lam. 1:1) The only context in which *badad* has a positive sense is when it is applied to God (Deut. 32:12), for obvious theological reasons.

Second, Bilaam who said those words was not a lover of Israel. Hired to curse them and prevented from doing so by God, he nonetheless tried a second time, this time successfully, persuading the Moabite and Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men, as a result of which 24,000 died (Num. 25, Num. 31:16). It was this second strategy of Bilaam – after he had already said, “How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I doom whom God has not doomed?” – that marks him out as a man profoundly hostile to the Israelites. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) states that all the blessings that Balaam bestowed on the Israelites eventually turned into curses, with the sole exception of the blessing “How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel.” (Num. 24:5) So in the Rabbis’ view, “a people that dwells alone” eventually became not a blessing but a curse.

Third, nowhere in Tanach are we told that it will be the fate of Israel, or Jews, to be hated. To the contrary, the prophets foresaw that there would come a time when the nations would turn to Israel for inspiration. Isaiah envisaged a

day on which “Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Is. 2:3)

Zechariah foresaw that “in those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zech. 8:23) These are sufficient to cast doubt on the idea that antisemitism is eternal, incurable, woven into Jewish history and destiny.

Only in rabbinic literature do we find statements that seem to suggest that Israel is hated. Most famous is the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: “Halachah: it is well known that Esau hates Jacob.”[3]

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was known for his distrust of the Romans, whom the Rabbis identified with Esau/Edom. It was for this reason, says the Talmud, that he had to go into hiding for thirteen years (Shabbat 33b). His view was not shared by his contemporaries.

Those who quote this passage do so only partially and selectively. It refers to the moment at which Jacob and Esau meet after their long estrangement. Jacob has feared that Esau will try to kill him. After taking elaborate precautions and wrestling with an angel, the next morning he sees Esau. The verse then says: “Esau ran to meet him and embraced him [Jacob], and throwing his arms around his neck, he kissed him and they [both] wept.” Gen. 33:4

Over the letters of the word “kissed”, as it appears in a Sefer Torah, there are dots, signalling some special meaning. It was in this context that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: “Even though it is well known that Esau hates Jacob, at that moment he was overcome with compassion and kissed him with a full heart.” (See Rashi ad loc.) In other words, precisely the text cited to show that antisemitism is inevitable, proves the opposite: that at the crucial encounter, Esau did not feel hate toward Jacob. They met, embraced, and went their separate ways without ill-will.

There is, in short, nothing in Judaism to suggest that it is the fate of Jews to be hated. It is neither written into the texture of the universe nor encoded in the human genome. It is not the will of God. Only in moments of deep despair have Jews believed this, most notably Leo Pinsker in his 1882 tract *Auto-emancipation*, in which he said of Judeophobia, “As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable.”

Antisemitism is not mysterious, unfathomable, or inexorable. It is a complex phenomenon that has mutated over time, and it has identifiable

roots – social, economic, political, cultural, and theological. It can be fought; it can be defeated. But it will not be fought or defeated if people think that it is Jacob’s fate to be hated by “Esau” or to be “the people that dwells alone,” a pariah among peoples, a leper among nations, an outcast in the international arena.

What then does the phrase “a people that dwells alone” mean? It means a people prepared to stand alone if need be, living by its own moral code, having the courage to be different and to take the road less travelled.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offered a fine insight by focusing on the nuance between “people” (am) and “nation” (goy) – or as we might say nowadays, “society” and “state.”[4] Israel uniquely became a society before it was a state. It had laws before it had a land. It was a people – a group bound together by a common code and culture – before it was a nation, that is, a political entity. As I noted in Future Tense, the word peoplehood first appeared in 1992, and its early uses were almost entirely in reference to Jews.[5] What makes Jews different, according to Hirsch’s reading of Bilaam, is that Jews are a distinctive people, that is, a group defined by shared memories and collective responsibilities, “not reckoned among the nations” since they are capable of surviving even without nationhood, even in exile and dispersion. Israel’s strength lies not in nationalism but in building a society based on justice and human dignity.

The battle against antisemitism can be won, but it will not be if Jews believe that we are destined to be alone. That is Bilaam’s curse, not God’s blessing. [5775, 5782]

[1] A People that Dwells Alone was the title given to the collection of essays by the late Jacob Herzog. It was also the theme of the autobiography of Israeli diplomat, and brother of Israel’s former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the late Naftali Lau-Lavie (Balaam’s Prophecy: Eyewitness to History [ Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2015]).

[2] Published by New York: Schocken, 2012.

[3] Sifre, Behaalotecha, 89; Rashi to Gen. 33:4; see Kreti to Yoreh Deah ch. 88 for the halachic implications of this statement.

[4] Samson Raphael Hirsch, Commentary to Numbers 23:9.

[5] Rabbi Sacks, Future Tense, p. 25.

### Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

And Moses and Aaron assembled the assemblage [kehul] before the rock; and said to them, “Listen now, rebels, from this rock shall we extract water for you?” And Moses lifted his hand, struck the rock twice with his staff, and abundant water emerged to give drink to the community [eidah].” (Numbers 20:10–11)

Moses entered the stage of Jewish history by heroically striking an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating an Israelite slave (Exodus 2:11–12). In contrast, his unfortunate striking of a rock in this week’s Biblical portion of Chukat precipitated his exit from the stage of Jewish history. His first act of striking was

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done out of love for his people and outreach to his brethren, an act of courage and self-sacrifice that forced him to flee the house of Pharaoh.

The striking of the rock, however – which in reality was directed at the People of Israel, whom he called “rebels” – was an expression of deep frustration with a nation that had defied his teachings and fomented rebellion after rebellion to undermine his and God’s authority. What had happened to cause Moses to lash out at his beloved nation?

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Harlap (1883–1951), a close disciple and confidant of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, describes in his multi-volume *Mei Marom* the change in Moses’ mindset towards the People of Israel by distinguishing between two descriptive nouns for them, which are usually taken for synonyms: *kehul* and *eidah*, assemblage and community.

A *kehul* (“assemblage”) consists of the many individuals who gather together, the separate and disparate persons who make up a crowd.

An *eidah* (“community”) is guided by a specific purpose, which serves to unite and connotes individuals united by their commitment to historic continuity from generation to generation. Indeed, the very term *eidah* comes from the same Hebrew root as witness (*eid*) and testimony (*eidut*). The continued survival of the nation of Israel despite exile and persecution in accordance with the Divine covenant serves as eloquent testimony to the reality and truth of God’s presence and of Israel’s mission: humanity perfected in a world redeemed.

With this background, let us take a fresh look at our Biblical portion. Immediately following Miriam’s death, the desert wells dry up and the Israelites assemble as a crowd of disparate rabble (*vayikahalu*) in complaint against Moses and Aaron. In response, God addresses Moses: “Take the staff, and you and Aaron assemble the community (*hak’hel et ha’eidah*). Speak to the rock in their presence and it will give forth its water. You will thereby bring forth water from the rock and allow the community (*ha’eidah*) and their beasts to drink” (*ibid.*, v.8).

Please take note that Moses is told by God to assemble the community (*eidah*). However, “Moses and Aaron assembled the assemblage (*kahal*) in front of the rock” (*ibid.*, v.10)! They, the leaders, had lost the vision of Israel as an *eidah*, a witness-community!

What a literal reading is teaching us is that God wanted Moses to look at the motley crew of complainers and see that behind the façade of rabble were to be found witnesses (“*eidim*”) of the Divine. Moses was thereby supposed to appreciate the great potential of this people: that standing before him were the children of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and the parents of Yishai, David, and the righteous Messiah.

God expected Moses to see through the angry mob and inspiringly extract from deep within them the faith of their forebears and the glory of their descendants. But Moses, disappointed and disgruntled, personally devastated by their “ingratitude,” can only see a congregation of kvetching individuals, a mass of fearful and immature freedmen dancing before a Golden Calf; a Datan and an Aviram who refused to even meet with him; a disparate crowd of people who allowed themselves to become paralyzed in fear before the Canaanites.

He had lost sight of the community of Israel and could only see the assemblage of Israel; he spoke to what was in front of him instead of to their potential, the great moments and the noble individuals who comprised historic Israel and forged the Israelites in front of him. And so, he became incapable of speaking with love; he could only strike out in anger. Given this attitude, Moses cannot continue to lead the nation towards the fulfillment of its historical destiny.

Many years ago, I had the unique pleasure and privilege of spending an unforgettable Sabbath with one of the great scholars of the 20th century, Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel z”l. I could not resist asking him how, despite the fact that he served as a rabbi of a congregation, he nevertheless found the time to be so prolific in Jewish scholarship, producing special editions of and commentaries on Rashi and Nahmanides, as well as responses to difficult Talmudic questions asked by Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

“I always had small congregations,” he told me, “small in number and sometimes even small in soul. After a difficult board meeting with Mr. Goldberg and Mrs. Schwartz, I yearned for the company of profound minds and deep perspectives. Who could be greater antidotes to small-minded and mean-spirited individuals than Nahmanides and Rabbi Akiva Eiger?”

Rabbi Chavel understood the secret; he had the capacity to look beyond the assemblage and see the community. He realized that, in the final analysis, his “small congregations” were inspired and spawned by Nahmanides and Rabbi Akiva Eiger, by Moses and Aaron, by Abraham our Father and Sarah our Mother. This is the perspective with which we must, each of us, view our present-day Jewish communities, as well!

#### Balak:

“God said to Balaam, ‘You shall not go with them; you shall not curse this nation because it is blessed’” (Numbers 22:12)

The Balaam/Balak episode in this week’s portion naturally leads us to a discussion of the

relationship between God’s will and our own. We have free will, but what happens when our choices fly in the face of the will of God? Are we truly given the freedom to go against His will or is freedom of choice only a delusion?

Balak, King of Moab, is terrified by the strength of the Israelites. Not only has the Jewish nation been freed from Egypt, but as they proceed towards the Promised Land, they seem to vanquish every army that attacks them. For some reason, Balak deems the very survival of the Israelites to be a threat to his nation’s survival, and therefore he sets about ‘acquiring’ his weapon of choice; Balaam, the master curser of his generation. Balak sends a high-ranking delegation to this famous soothsayer, a wonder-working Gentile prophet, urging him to curse the Israelites, so that Balak will be able to overcome and banish them from the vicinity of his land.

Inviting the delegation to spend the night, Balaam, the prophet-soothsayer awaits a directive from God. The Divine response is unequivocal: “Do not go with them! You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed” (Numbers 22:12). Balaam then sends the delegation back to Balak.

Undaunted – because Balaam’s expression of refusal actually leaves the door open for a second conversation – Balak then dispatches a new, higher ranking delegation to Balaam. They are to give a blank check to Balaam; the sky’s the limit and he can have whatever his heart desires, so long as he curses Israel.

Again Balaam refuses. “Even were Balak to give me his entire house full of gold and silver, I would not be able to transgress the word of the Lord my God... And now, you too remain here now for this purpose, you too, for tonight, and I will find out what more the Lord has to say to me” (Numbers 22:18).

Hidden between the lines of this second invitation to spend the night, our Sages hear a subtle message: “I cannot transgress God’s word even if I receive Balak’s house of gold and silver – but if I also receive his storage house of gold and silver, maybe we have something to talk about! Moreover,” says Balaam, “stay the night for this purpose” – meaning, let me attempt to convince or at least “wear God down.”

That night, the Almighty visits Balaam. “If the men come to summon you, you may go with them, but only whatever words I tell you, may you do” (Numbers 22:20). The very next verse declares, “And Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his she-donkey and went with the officers of Moab” (Numbers 22:21). Balaam did not report God’s caveat; he merely took the Divine words as a carte blanche to do Balak’s bidding. Despite the permission that Balaam received to go if they ‘summoned’ him (Numbers 22:20), the text reports, “God’s

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wrath flared” because Balaam went (Numbers 22: 22).

But if God had just allowed him to go, why was He angry? Is there free will or not?

Several Biblical commentaries see these verses as expressing the fundamental freedom of choice granted to every individual, even a prophet of the Divine who presumably knows the will of God and cannot defy that will.

The Ibn Ezra suggests that God never prevents an individual from doing what he really wants to do, even if it goes against the Divine will. We see this at the time of the spies when God clearly tells the Israelites to go up and conquer the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1:21). Nevertheless, when they demur and insist upon sending out a reconnaissance commission (*ibid* 22), God tells Moses to send out such a group of spies (Numbers 13:1). God may not desire such a commission, but He will always acquiesce to the will of the people.

Here in our portion, God acquiesces to the evil and venal will of Balaam. The Midrash Rabbah succinctly expresses the great principle of human freedom with the words: “From this text, we learn that ultimately God leads an individual to walk on the path that he wishes to travel”.

In other words, God lets people decide which way they want to go, even if He disagrees! (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:12; see Ramban ad loc for a slightly different interpretation).

However, the dynamics of human will vs. Divine will don’t end here; neither in the case of Baalam nor in terms of Rabbinic theology. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 85), in an obvious reference to Balaam, makes the following pronouncement:

“Shmu’el bar Nahman opened [quoting the prophet Jeremiah]: ‘For thus said the Lord, Master of Legions, God of Israel: Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your magicians delude you, do not listen to your dreamers whom you appoint to dream. It is falsehood that they prophesy to you in My Name... For thus said the Lord: I will remember and appoint you and I will establish for you My good word to restore you to this place. For I know the thoughts, which I think about you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give to you a future and a hope’” (Jeremiah 29:8-11).

The Midrash elaborates: “The tribes were engaged in the sale of Joseph. Joseph was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, and Judah was engaged in taking a wife. And the Holy One Blessed be He was engaged in creating the light of the Messiah.”

This fascinating Midrash teaches us that we must look at life and history through two perspectives: the earthly dimension, predicated

upon human choice, and the Divine dimension, in which God ensures that whatever mistakes we may make, the final result will be messianic redemption and a world of peace.

Hence, although Balaam may have desired to curse and destroy Israel, and offers practical expression to this at the end of our portion when he advises Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into idolatry and assimilation, God will turn all of these disasters into ultimate redemption.

Our Rabbis teach that Balaam's donkey was the same animal as that which Abraham rode to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac and that this is the donkey that will eventually carry the Messiah. They explain that the sexual immorality that we read of in the Bible, between Lot and his daughters, between Yehudah and Tamar, between Mahlon son of Elimelech and Ruth the Moabite, will ultimately be manipulated by God to lead to the marriage between Ruth and Boaz, which will bring forth David, progenitor of the Messiah. God will see to it that His designs will ultimately prevail, turning the bitter into the sweet, sadness into joy, and curses into blessings, immorality into Messianism.

Our daily prayers open with Balaam's words, "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5), a subtle reminder that no matter how strongly individuals may want us cursed, God's blessings will prevail.

#### **The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

#### **Discovering Our Mortality**

It was at a house of mourning, and she was saying something that I had heard many times before. In fact, I had said it myself when I was sitting shiva for my own mother.

She is a friend of long-standing, and a member of my former congregation. I hope that I am not being unchivalrous by describing her as late middle-aged. She had just lost her own mother, having lost her father several years ago.

"It is not just that I feel orphaned," she said. "It is that I feel vulnerable. As long as even one of my parents was alive, it was as if there was a kind of buffer between me and death. Now that they are both gone, it begins to feel that it is my turn. No one to protect me. I face the malach hamavet (angel of death) directly, face to face, head on."

We all deny our mortality, and as long as the older generation is around we feel that they, and not we, are the ones on death's frontlines. We are insulated from death's claws by them. It is their turn and not yet ours. But once we lose our own parents, we can no longer deny our mortality. It is our turn.

There is an excellent book by my esteemed colleague, Rabbi Marc Angel, entitled *The Orphaned Adult*. I often recommend this book to mourners, particularly those who are fortunate to have entered adulthood, even late middle age, with both parents alive, and experience their deaths only after having long ago reached adulthood. Their feelings are unique and very different from those who experienced the trauma of a parent's death at an earlier stage of life. Rabbi Angel also describes this sudden sense of mortality, of vulnerability. With the death of parents, these older people finally must surrender their comfortable denial of their own inevitable demise.

In this week's portion, Chukat, we read of the death of two beloved leaders of the Jewish people, Miriam and Aaron. Both of them were parent figures, albeit not actual parents, of the Jews in the years of their wandering in the wilderness. Instructively, a period of vulnerability ensues immediately upon their respective deaths.

We read first of Miriam's death. "The Israelites arrived at the wilderness of Zin... Miriam died there and was buried there." And then, immediately, "The community was without water." (Numbers 20:1-2)

As long as Miriam was alive, she was a source of water, a source of life. While she was alive, the be'er Miriam (well of Miriam) provided water for the people. With her death, and in her case, the well immediately dried up, the water ceased, and the people were vulnerable. Without "mother" Miriam, death by thirst threatened the people.

Soon afterwards, we read, "...and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain." And then, this time not immediately but after thirty days of mourning, "When the Canaanite king of Arad heard... he engaged Israel in battle and took some of them captive..." (Numbers 20:28-29 and 21:1) "Father" Aaron died, and peace and security were shattered. War and that worst of fates, captivity, reared their ugly heads.

It seems that it is more than mere psychological reality that with the passing of its leaders, a nation faces calamity. With the death of ones parents, one's own well being is threatened. No wonder that when the young sister-in-law of the 18th century sage Rabbi Yonasan Eibshitz lost her husband, the Rabbi cautioned her, in a letter which has come down to us, to take special care of her own physical well being and the health of her young children. As our sages put it in the Talmud, "When one member of a group perishes, the entire group needs to be anxious."

How apt are the words of the Psalmist, "When my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in" (Psalms 27:10). When our parents "abandon" us and leave this world, we

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are bereft in many ways, and our positions in life become precarious. We need God at those moments, and turn to Him, confident that He will "take us in".

#### **The Ancient Near East: Its Relevance Today Ugaritic. Sumerian. Akkadian. Hittite.**

These are words that I never heard in all the years of my traditional Jewish education. They are the names of four important cultures and languages in the Ancient Near East. All of these cultures were contemporaneous with the stories of the Bible which most of us have been familiar with since our early childhood.

There are many serious students of the history of the Jewish people who insist that we cannot ignore cultures of the kind listed above if we are to really understand the Torah and its teachings. They find many parallels between our language, and customs—and even our religion—and those of these ancient societies. Yet there is no doubt (at least in the yeshivot with which I am familiar) that these cultures have no place in the curriculum.

For me, there is at least one important reason to know a bit about these now extinct societies. This is because, as I see it, one aspect of all of our Torah, from the Ten Commandments given at Sinai to the sermons of rabbis alive today, is that the Torah is a protest against the many of the major tenets and practices of the cultures with which we co-exist.

For this reason, it is helpful to know what the Torah is saying in protest to ancient Ugarit and Sumer, just as it is important to know what the Torah is saying about faults of our own age of instant gratification, electronic communication, and globalization.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9), the Torah itself provides us with information about two Ancient Near East cultures with which our ancestors were confronted in the very opening stages of our history. I refer, of course, to Moab and Midian.

It also introduces us to a "culture hero," possibly the most prominent "public intellectual of his time," "Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates." I think that the Torah does this in order to impress upon us the fact that the Jewish people, even while still in the desert, lived in a cultural context and not in isolation. Moreover, the Torah teaches us a bit about the nature of those cultures, all to which its own teachings stand in stark contrast.

The Torah reserves a description of the nature of Moabite and Midianite cultures for the end of this week's parsha. There we will see how those cultures incorporated sensual practices into their religious rites and used temptations of the flesh as their way of both overcoming the Israelites militarily and of undermining the Torah's spiritual teachings.

But by far, the larger section of this week's Torah portion is devoted to Balaam: to his personal character, his eloquence, and surprisingly, even to his theology.

That Balaam was a "major player" in the Ancient Near East is attested to not only in the Torah text we read this Shabbat, but in the texts of the remnants of other ancient cultures. Hence, we read on a fragmentary inscription on wall plaster (dated to the late 9th to 8th century B.C.E.) from a temple at Deir Alla in what is Jordan today, which records the night vision of a certain Balaam! The seer described in this precious relic bears the same name and patronymic as the Balaam in our Parsha. Pethor is identified by archeologists as a site on the Sajur River in Aram (today, Syria) some 400 miles from Moab. All of this is important context for the message of our parsha.

What is that message? It is that even in the Ancient Near East, there were forces antagonistic to our people, our belief system, and our morality. Furthermore, these forces were, in many ways, amazingly similar to some of the forces which we face this very day.

What are some aspects of Balaam's mindset that may typify a philosophy prevalent in the Ancient Near East but which are equally common nowadays? Let's begin with his willingness to sell himself and his services for the right price.

Balaam, we have seen, lived hundreds of miles from Moab. He himself was not at all endangered by the Israelites as they marched towards the Promised Land and posed a threat to trespass Moab's territory. Indeed, his first response to Balak's emissaries was a negative one.

But soon we see that he was really just playing "hard to get." I rephrase what he said so that it sounds more like the language of so many contemporary politicians: "I have principles that I will not compromise. That is, I will not compromise except for the right price." Once the client ups the ante, the principles are abandoned and off he marches hand in hand with his new client, ready to comply with the client's wishes.

Our sages, in Ethics of the Fathers (5:23), impress us with their ability to reduce Balaam's entire character into three concise phrases: "Whoever possesses these three qualities is a disciple of the wicked Balaam: an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and mighty desires."

In other words, Balaam's special "assets" were envy, arrogance and lust; certainly not an uncommon triad of attributes among the politicians of our time.

Even more insightful is the observation made in the Talmud, which discovers the secret of Balaam's ability to place a curse upon others.

The Talmud tells us that he was somehow able to calculate the one precise moment in the day when the Almighty, compassionate at all other times, was wrathful. I have often understood this to mean that Balaam was able to separate out the aspects of the deity that, taken out of the context of God's mercy, looked very much like violent anger. Balaam was able to use religion as an excuse for violence.

In this regard, he could easily find company in modern times, when so many are able to ignore the abundant religious teachings of peace and tolerance, and instead use religion as an excuse for hatred and harmful acts. The correlation between religion and violence is one that critics of religion use well on behalf of their cause. That correlation, to the extent that it is true, is directly attributable to the ability of some religious extremists to "calculate the fleeting moment of God's wrath," to ignore the 99.9% of the Lord's day and dwell upon the microsecond in which His anger flares.

To fully appreciate the Torah's important messages, one must come to know against whom and against what they are aimed. The Torah elaborates at great length upon the figure of Balaam because he represents what was most objectionable in the Ancient Near East.

But the Torah is eternal, and all that it teaches in opposition to the prevalent culture of ancient times is equally relevant in modern times.

Man's dark side has not changed. Neither have the Torah's lessons of light.

#### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand**

#### **Seeking Honest Advice is Key to Avoiding Monumental Mistakes; Using "We" Was Anything But a "Wee" Mistake**

One of the major topics in Parshas Chukas is the incident of Mei Meriyah. It begins with the death of Miriam: "And the Children of Israel, the entire congregation, came to Midbar Tzin in the first month, and the nation resided in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there." (Bamidbar 20:1) Chazal say that the miraculous "Well" (Be'er) which provided water for the Jewish people during their forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness was present in the merit of the righteous Miriam. When Miriam died, the Be'er ceased, the people didn't have water, and they complained to Moshe Rabbeinu.

Moshe's response to this request somehow contained within it an aveyra (sin), which—based on Moshe's high level of righteousness—triggered Divine Punishment that prevented him from going into Eretz Yisrael. The exact nature of the "Sin of Mei Meriyah" is the subject of a tremendous dispute among the classic Chumash commentaries. The most widely-quoted interpretation is that Moshe Rabbeinu hit the Rock rather than speaking to

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it. There are a wide variety of other interpretations as well.

The Ramban, in his Chumash commentary, quotes an interpretation from Rabbeinu Chananel, one of the earliest commentaries, who says that Moshe's aveyra was that he said "...Do you think we will extract for you water from this Rock?" (Bamidbar 20:10). The aveyra was basically one word (or in Hebrew a single letter prefix) – "we". Rabbeinu Chananel says that Moshe's rhetorical question should have been "Do you think Hashem will extract for you water from this Rock?" By using the first-person plural, Moshe gave the impression that "we are going to be the water givers." This minor grammatical slip might cause the people to mistakenly think that Moshe and Aharon would be able to extract water from the Rock through their own wisdom. According to Rabbeinu Chananel, this carelessness, in this crucial theological matter, was the aveyra which caused Moshe and Aharon to die before reaching Eretz Yisrael. The pasuk alludes to this when writing "... Since you did not sanctify My Name in the midst of Bnei Yisrael" (Devorim 32:51). They could have made a kiddush Hashem by attributing the miracle to G-d, but they forfeited that opportunity by implying that they would be responsible for extracting the water from the Rock.

Rabbeinu Chananel's interpretation is quite shocking. Remember, this event took place forty years post the Exodus from Egypt. The Jewish people witnessed Moshe's leadership style for forty years, during which he always attributed their miraculous emergence from slavery and survival in the Wilderness to the direct intervention of the Ribono shel Olam. Not only that, even within this particular pasuk, the Torah begins by stating: "Moshe and Aharon gathered the Congregation in front of the Rock..." (Bamidbar 20:10). Rashi here notes that this is one of the places in Chumash where a small area miraculously held a huge number of people. There were a couple of million people, and Chazal say that everyone was right in front of the Rock. Obviously, such a thing is not physically possible under normal circumstances. There was no denying that this was a miracle, and that the Ribono shel Olam was 100% responsible for all that was transpiring at this moment.

If that is the case, how could it be that Moshe's use of the expression "Notzi lachem mayim" (we will extract water) would cause anyone to think that he was referring to his own skill and knowledge? No one would have thought that!

Rav Simcha Zissel Brody (the Head of the Chevron Yeshiva) says that we see from here that a person can always make a mistake, regardless of the circumstances. Something can be as clear as the nose on my face, but if I want to make a mistake, indeed, I can make a mistake. Someone who wants to deny the Almighty's intervention in his life, as obvious

at that may be, can deny it. This is what the Navi says: "...for the ways of Hashem are straight, and the righteous will walk on them, and the sinners will stumble on them." (Hoshea 14:10). Hashem placed in creation something called "Bechira" (Freedom of Choice). A person always has the ability to make choices. He can make the right choice or he can make a choice which is irrational, but the option to choose belongs to man. Moshe Rabbeinu, by using the word "Notzee" (We will bring forth), opened the door for them to this opportunity to think the wrong thing.

This can help explain an interesting Rashi. Rashi quotes the words in this very pasuk "... Hear ye, you rebellious ones..." (Shim'u nah ha'morim) and interprets the word "morim" to be "sarbonim" (stubborn ones), people who refuse. Then Rashi brings a second interpretation, based on Greek etymology: "Shotim" (Fools), those who are "morim es moreihem" (try to teach their own teachers).

It is not clear whether Rashi is offering three interpretations, or only two. Rashi mentions Sarbonim, shotim, and morim es moreihem. This could be three different interpretations. However, the Imrei Emes writes that there are only two interpretations here. "Morim es moreihem" is an elaboration of "Shotim". A person who does not listen to the advice and guidance of his teachers and elders, but rather tries to teach them a thing or two—such a person is a fool!

Since it is always possible for a person to make a mistake, how can he ever be sure that what he is doing is correct? The answer is "Aseh lecha Rav" – Make for yourself a teacher (Avos 1:6). Everyone needs a Rebbe, a mentor, a guide—someone who can give him frank and honest advice and tell him, when necessary, "You are making a mistake here."

The people Moshe gathered by the Rock did not fully accept upon themselves such a teacher. As a result, they were vulnerable to making such a colossal mistake as to think that it was Moshe and Aharon who were giving them the water.

### The Best Things in Life Are Different When They Come for Free

This week's double parsha contains the remarkable story involving Bilaam and his donkey. "The donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; then Bilaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. The angel of Hashem stood in the footpath of the vineyards, a fence on this side and a fence on this side." [Bamidbar 22:23-24]

The Medrash writes in Bamidbar Rabbah that this scenario of "a fence on this side and a fence on this side" was a message to Bilaam: You will never be able to have any effect on these people, for these people are protected by

the Two Tablets of Stone (Luchos) written by the "Finger of G-d" about which it is said that they are "written from this side and from this side". Obviously, this is a play on words. However, there must be something deeper here as well. There must be something about the Luchos concerning which it is written "mi'zeh u mi'zeh hem kesuvim" that is the antithesis and the antidote for the very essence of Bilaam. What is the interpretation of this Medrash?

I saw an interesting explanation from the Tolner Rebbe shlita (Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg of Yerushalayim), in his Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni. Chaza"l say on the pasuk "There never again arose in Israel one like Moshe" [Devarim 34:10] that in Israel there never arose one like Moshe, but amongst the nations of the world there was such an individual. Who was that? It was Bilaam, the son of Beor. The Almighty anticipated the argument from the nations of the world, "If we had for ourselves a prophet of the stature of Moshe, we would have turned out better." Hashem did not want the nations to argue, "It was not fair. It was not a level playing field." Therefore, the Almighty made Bilaam – the prophet of the nations – equal to Moshe in prophecy.

The problem is that Bilaam is one of the most despicable characters in all of Tanach. He is the paradigm of the person who has rotten midos. Tractate Avos catalogues his evil character traits. He was arrogant, he was lustful, he was jealous, and he was greedy. Name a bad trait – he had it! In addition to having all these bad traits, he was an immoral person. The Gemara infers [Sanhedrin 105] that the donkey he rode on by day was also the creature that serviced him at night as well.

How could it be that a person who was gifted with such prophecy and with such understanding of the Almighty could remain the most despicable amoral and immoral person in existence? The answer is, because it was a gift on the part of the Ribono shel Olam that he should have this prophecy. Prophecy under normal circumstances is earned and achieved after years and years of work and self-improvement. Prophecy received "for free" is of a different nature.

The Mesilas Yesharim (Pathways of the Just) discusses the various human traits (based on the Beraisa regarding Rav Pinchas ben Yair) that must be acquired in order to ultimately reach the top of the spiritual pyramid – ruach haKodesh (Divine inspiration). A person must work his way through all the other attributes in Mesilas Yesharim in order to reach Divine Inspiration, let alone prophecy. A Jew who takes the life-long process spelled out by the Ramchal in Mesilas Yesharim reaches the ultimate destiny of ruach haKodesh and then nevuah (prophecy).

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Bilaam, on the other hand, received it all one day as a gift. There was no self-improvement. There was no working on himself. The Master of the Universe gave it to him "for free" for the reason we mentioned – so that the nations would not have a "complaint" against Him. But Bilaam remained the same horrible person he had always been, who had just received the gift of prophecy without working for it. Therefore, there was no contradiction.

We can understand this dichotomy by considering the following scenario. One person works hard at his business, putting in long hard hours and effort to build it up from scratch. Little by little, he is successful. The business expands, and then later it expands even further following additional successes. Finally, it becomes a public corporation and the entrepreneur winds up becoming a multi-millionaire. That kind of person can usually handle wealth because he knows what it was to be poor, and he knows how hard it is to make a dollar. He knows that it is not "easy come; easy go".

However, another person, who only has an eighth-grade education, wins the Power Ball lottery, and suddenly receives 250 million dollars. Often, such people do not know how to handle their wealth. There are stories galore of these types of people who had such wealth ruin their lives because they did not know how to handle money. They are taking all this money into a "vessel" that is not worthy of that money.

This was the scenario with Bilaam. "You, Bilaam, will never have an effect on the Jewish people because the Jewish people have the luchos that are written on this side and this side, engraved on the tablets". When a person wants to describe something as being permanent, the expression used is "carved in stone". By saying that Klal Yisrael have the luchos which are written "from this side and from this side," the Medrash is alluding to the Jewish people accomplishing through hard work, such that it becomes a permanent part of their being, etched in stone, as it were. Bilaam, however, you are just a flash in the pan. What you have been given in prophecy is not part of your essence. You will never be able to have an effect on them.

### Being an Ingrate is the "Worst of the Worst"

The following insight is from the Alter of Slabodka. According to the Medrash, Bilaam said to Balak: Both of us are ingrates. Were it not for Avraham Avinu, there would never have been a Balak King of Moab in the world. For if not for Avraham's merit, Lot would never have escaped the destruction of Sodom. "How can you – a descendant of Lot – hire me to curse the descendants of Avraham? I, too, am an ingrate", Bilaam told Balak, "because if not for their father Yaakov, I would not be around either. Lavan only merited having sons – from whom I descended – by virtue of the

fact that Yaakov lived in his house. How can I curse Yaakov's descendants? I too must be an ingrate."

This is a strange Medrash. It is as if Bilaam the wicked is giving a mussar schmooze (a lecture in personal ethics). Since when was Bilaam into "midos tovos"? Why is this person, who has all the evil human traits in the world, expressing remorse, as it were, that he was an ingrate?

The Alter of Slabodka says we see from here that the worst character trait of all is to be an ingrate. Even a Bilaam, who was the prototype of evil character traits, felt bad about being an ingrate.

Rav Ruderman, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel, was a disciple of the Alter of Slabodka and this idea is very typical of the themes about which he would frequently speak. There were basically three topics to which he returned over and over when emphasizing proper behavior to his students: Torah; Kindness (Chesed); and HaKaras HaTov (recognizing a debt of gratitude). Rav Ruderman felt that if a person did not recognize those who did him favors, it called into question the person's entire humanity. We all have our failings and our foibles, but to be an ingrate is the worst of the worst.

#### Dvar Torah

#### Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

**Taking lessons in Emunah...from a donkey...** If animals could talk to us, what would they say? We actually know the answer to this question – because parashat Balak presents to us a situation in which an animal spoke to a human being. The 'aton' – 'the donkey of Bilaam addressed him' and said "meh-asiti l'cha ki hikitani ze shalosh regalim – what have I done to you to deserve the fact that you have struck me these three times". On this single occasion on which an animal has spoken, the one thing that the animal addressed was the cruelty dealt by a human being to it. This is such an important message because it's not the donkey that wanted us to hear it, it is Hashem via the mouth of the donkey, who wanted to give us this message for all time.

But there is a further, deeper message incorporated in what the animal said. Rashi highlights the fact that the term 'shalosh regalim' is used – 'these three occasions on which you struck me'. Of course, we associate the phrase 'shalosh regalim' with the three pilgrim festivals – Pesach, Shavuot and Succot – on which the nation would descend during temple times to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the festivals there. Therefore, Rashi said that the donkey's hidden message to Bilaam was: 'you are intending to destroy a nation – you have no chance whatsoever because they observe the three pilgrim festivals'.

The message that is being conveyed here is

that these three pilgrim festivals represent 'Emunah'. On these three occasions in the year, farmers would leave their fields behind them, place their trust in God and go to Yerushalayim for a festival. I believe that the donkey was providing an essential message to the Bilaam's of this world who seek to destroy Am Yisrael'.

There are many things which preserve us as a nation. There are many true and authentic keys to our continuity, for example, Chinuch – Jewish education, Jewish cultural activity, Jewish food, socialising with Jewish people, a connection with Jewish history, a connection with Jewish suffering, a connection with the state of Israel. All are great keys to the continuity of our faith. But there is one particular key which transcends them all. It is 'Emunah'.

The 'shalosh regalim', the three pilgrim festivals represent faith in Hashem. And the message for us is that the enemies of our people will never prevail for as long as we have Emunah. When we put our trust in Hashem, when we are dedicated to him, when we fulfil the commandments of the Torah which He has given to us – that, more than anything, will preserve the Jewish people.

You can have countless kiddushes, cultural activities, history lessons, visits to places of Jewish interest around the world, but nothing will preserve us in the way that genuine and deeply-rooted faith in Hashem will. This is something which even a donkey realised – how much more so, therefore, should we all.

#### Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel Encyclopedia of Jewish Values\*

#### Death & Mourning

The death of two of the three great leaders (and siblings), Miriam and then Aaron, is recorded in our Torah portion. Both these events were undoubtedly traumatic for the Jewish people. Yet, little is written in the Torah narrative about specifics. What exactly occurred before death, death itself, and after death? The Torah devotes exactly one verse to Miriam's death (Numbers 20:1), without describing the reaction of the people. With her brother Aaron, eight verses (Numbers 20:22-29) describe the process in greater detail. God commands Moses, Aaron, and his son Eleazar to ascend the mountain, Hor HaHar, and there, Aaron gives over the vestments of the Kohen Gadol-High priest to his son, to transfer this task and responsibility. Then Aaron dies, and is buried by Moses and (possibly) Elazar. As they descend the mountain without Aaron, the people realize what happened, and, because Aaron was beloved by the people as a man of peace, they mourn him and cry for him for thirty full days. Even though death occurs to us all, and the process of mourning in Judaism is distinct and displays many inherent Jewish values, the Torah itself gives us few clues about this process and the laws connected to it. What are

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the laws, customs, and values of death and mourning in Judaism, and how should traditional Jews behave before, during, and after death? This chapter will fill in many details lacking in the Torah itself.

Death is a difficult subject for everyone to read about or merely think about, even if one has not recently experienced the death of a loved one or a close friend. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests, in an innovative approach, suggests that the sin of Moses by the rock and water, later in the Parsha, is as a result of Moses suffering the emotional pain of the deaths of his sister and brother. The Talmud says that we all fear our death, not knowing when or how it will occur, even though that's the way nature and the cycle of life are supposed to be (Pesachim 54b). The fear of the unknown beyond is very powerful, yet very normal. The Talmud (Moed Katan 28a) acknowledges this with a story of a Rabbi who died and was offered to return to this world. He refused because although death itself was painless, he says, the great anguish he suffered not knowing when or how his death would occur made him refuse to go through it again. Nevertheless, it is still very important to learn about death and understand it, since it is an event that will happen to each of us, and, in most cases, we will ultimately suffer the tragedy of mourning someone close to us.

**While We Are Alive** - Since people do not like to think about death, many human beings live their lives as if death will not inevitably come. Judaism exhorts Jews to realize that death must come. This is not a charge to be morbid and constantly be in fear of death's finality, but, rather, an attempt to be realistic, which will help guide the Jew to appreciate every day of life. Since we cannot know for certain when death will occur, and since it could come tomorrow, the Jew must be grateful each day he or she wakes up alive and has received from God the gift of life another day. The first feeling a Jew should have each morning and the first utterance a traditional Jew says each morning is an appreciation for having lived another day (*Modeh Ani* prayer found at the beginning of the Siddur). It is very natural and logical for man to appreciate something as soon as it is no longer around or is lost (by a person or a friend). One of Judaism's goals is to learn to appreciate the good things while people still have them. This sensitivity applies to everything in life and even includes that which is most precious, life itself.

We are supposed to live each day as if it were our last. Since the Mishna (Avot 2:10) tells the Jew to repent one day before death, and since no one can know the day of death, one should, therefore, repent each day. Living each day as if it's our last day does *not* signify that one should refrain from making any plans, since this is the last day of life. Rather, it means that we should treat people *as if* we will never see them again. Thus, we will not end the day in a state of conflict with others or do nothing after

making some hurtful remark. It also signifies that we should behave in a manner that tomorrow we could be judged for today's actions and come before God to explain and justify our deeds. This knowledge will inevitably affect the quality of nearly all of our conduct and behavior.

**Feelings Immediately Following Death -** Jewish laws and customs reflect an uncanny sensitivity to the mood and nature of a person as he or she goes through the mourning process of a close relative. People usually react similarly regarding the death of a close relative, whether it occurs after an extended illness or suddenly. Judaism understands that reaction and deals with it both in law and custom.

Modern psychologists have analyzed the overall experience of death, and have concluded, led by Dr. Kubler-Ross, that all human beings go through five specific stages of grief. The first stage of mourning, according to psychologists, is usually a denial of the event itself - it didn't happen, or it could not have happened. Then, a short time later, the emotion of anger usually sets in: anger at the person for leaving you and anger at God for taking away this person from you. At this stage, even a believing Jew cannot easily relate to God in the same way as he or she did before the death. Although one is directed to react to the death of a relative by acknowledging God's wisdom and justice is the form of a blessing (Berachot 54a, codified in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 223:3), Judaism calls this stage from death until burial *Aninut*. The significant changes in the traditional Jew's behavior during this period (which should usually last hours since Judaism demands burial as soon as possible) reflect this mood. Since anger at God is a "normal" reaction at this time, Judaism does not demand (and even forbids) any ritual performance of positive Mitzvot, which would belie the anger a person is feeling inside (Maimonides, Hilchot Evel 4:6). This includes refraining from reciting blessings, refraining from reciting the Shema, men do not put on Tefillin and no other positive Mitzvah at all is performed. The feeling of anger can also be seen in a Mishna (Avot 4:18) that tells a friend *not* to comfort a person during this stage. The anger is usually too great during this period, and any attempt at comforting will usually have little or no impact. The Talmud also indicates that at this point a mourner cannot articulate any response to the death through action or words, as in the period before burial the mourning is internal, in the heart only (Sanhedrin 46b).

**Reaction At the Funeral and In Days Following -** The funeral process itself and the seven-day *Shiva* period following burial helps a person face the death of the loved one and accept it as a fact of life. While this seems like a minor accomplishment, many non-Jews psychologically avoid confronting the fact of death and the loss of the person. Some will no

longer sleep in the same room where the person slept, will never move the deceased's clothing, etc. Meeting the reality and dealing with the fact of death is a very important step in returning to the psychological well-being of the individual.

How does Judaism force a person to confront the fact of death and the loss of a loved one? The funeral itself compels the relatives to face the finality and reality that death has occurred. Often, however, people can later "forget" this reality, and avoid dealing with the entire subject - if they immediately get back into their daily routine, which many people do. *Shiva*, the seven-day mourning period mandated in Judaism, forces a Jew to deal not only with the death of the person but also the life of that individual. While "sitting *Shiva*," the daily routine must be broken as the mourner changes his or her lifestyle drastically (Maimonides, Hilchot Evel 5:1). He or she cannot go to work and cannot do anything that is part of his or her daily routine. Signs of mourning are all over the house in the way one sits, the way one dresses, and in the physical signs of the house (covering the mirrors, for example). More importantly, no activity is permitted by the mourner, which will normally divert his or her attention from thinking about the deceased person. One may not even learn Torah (Maimonides Hilchot Evel 5:16, and Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 384:1). On the other hand, a Jew may learn the books of Job, Lamentations, the laws of mourning, and any Jewish text that is connected to death (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 384:4). These are permitted Torah learnings because they all deal with death and suffering, which will still direct the mourner to contemplate aspects of life and death of the deceased. The mourner's time will inevitably be taken up with contemplating the meaning of the person's life and the meaning of the death, since *there is nothing else permitted to be done during Shiva*. The visitors will remind the mourner of the deceased and the discussion will inevitably center on the life of the deceased. This is the right time for a person to deal with his or her emotions and not hold back feelings. As the Midrash says, it is appropriate to cry during this period (Kohelet Rabbah 3:6).

Jewish law is also sensitive to the reality that everyone reacts a little differently to death. Some people can speak openly about personal feelings even with strangers. Others keep everything inside and do not feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings. The mood at the *Shiva* may differ from person to person. Jewish law responds to this by ruling that the mourner himself or herself must begin the conversation and set the mood (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 376:1). If the mourner wishes to keep it light, those that arrive to comfort should also keep it light. They take their cue from the mood that the mourner sets. Sometimes, the mourner does not wish to speak at all, and the *Shiva* is one of silence. That is also acceptable since even when no

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speaking is going on, the mourner is still thinking about the deceased.

**Readjusting To Society After Shiva** - After confronting death during *Shiva*, the difficulty now is to prevent the mourner from thinking about the deceased constantly. That should have happened during *Shiva* and was proper then. Now, the goal is to gradually help the person readjust to daily life and become a member of the community once again, as the last psychological stage of mourning is acceptance, i.e., returning to normal living. The Talmud (Moed Katan 21b) describes this gradual reentry into society in terms of how the mourner greets people. During the first three days, a mourner cannot greet or answer a greeting. During the next four days until the end of *Shiva*, he can return a greeting but not greet himself. After *Shiva*, he can greet and return the greeting. Although the generally accepted custom does not follow this practice precisely, we can see the gradual process regarding the relationship with others.

Shulchan Aruch (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 394:1) codifies this idea of a gradual reentry process, allowing three days for crying, seven for a eulogy, and thirty days for a haircut. Most have the custom that during *Shiva* the torn garment is worn outside. During the thirty days, it is worn inside (indicating the person is in mourning to himself but appears outwardly as part of society once again). After thirty days, there is no mourning except for a parent whose mourning period lasts an entire year. Numerous other customs are demonstrating this gradual reentry period. At each succeeding stage, the outward signs of mourning are fewer, and the readjustment once again into the community is more.

**After The Mourning Period** - After the mourning period is complete (thirty days for a sibling, child, or spouse, one year for a parent), Judaism tells the person that it is simply wrong to continue to mourn. Psychologists also say it is unhealthy to continue mourning the dead indefinitely. The Talmud (Moed Katan 21b) says that after twelve months it is inappropriate to even try to comfort a person who suffered a loss. Once the mourning period is over, it is over. The same Midrash that advised that it is appropriate to cry during the mourning period continues and says after the mourning period, it is appropriate to laugh (Kohelet Rabbah 3:6). The Code of Jewish Law (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 394:1) states that one is not permitted to mourn too much. One of the greatest gifts God has given to man is the ability to help us forget over a certain period of time. If time did not reduce the pain, and we constantly remembered all things in life with the same intensity as first felt, then we could not bear it. This is the intention of the mourning process. Life must go on. A mourner must let go.

Thus, all the stages of death that a person naturally experiences, according to modern psychologists (denial, isolation, anger,

depression, and acceptance) are already acknowledged in Jewish law, which helps a person deal with his or her feelings during this difficult time. The writings of psychologists who deal with death mirror almost perfectly what the Torah and Rabbis legislated thousands of years ago in helping a person to deal with and cope with the loss.

\* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at [nachum@jewishdestiny.com](mailto:nachum@jewishdestiny.com)

### Ohr Torah Dvar Torah

#### Learning to Recognize Hidden Miracles Shoshana Winter Magid

Throughout the books of Shmot and Bamidbar there are numerous stories of Bnei Yisrael complaining about a lack of food or water in the desert.

These stories, for the most part, follow a set formula. Bnei Yisrael complain, Moshe prays to Hashem and Hashem performs a miracle. Some examples of these miracles are Moshe throwing a log into bitter water to make it sweet (Shmot 15:25), God sending the manna (Shmot 17:4), Moshe striking a rock with his staff in order for water to come out (Shmot 17:6), and God sending a strong wind which brings quail to feed the nation (Bamidbar 11:30).

One such story, found in Parshat Chukat, strays from the expected formula:

"And the people spoke out against God and against Moshe, 'Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water and we have come to loathe this miserable food.'" (Bamidbar 21:5)

This time, before Moshe has a chance to pray, Hashem sends fiery serpents that bite and kill a large number of Bnei Yisrael.

In her commentary on the parsha, Nechama Leibowitz points out a grammatical nuance which gives great insight into the story of the serpents. She notes that the verb used to describe Hashem sending the fiery serpents is "va-yih-shalach", the active intensive (לע"ש) form of the verb נ-ל-שׁ and not "va-yeeshlach", the active simple (ל) form of the verb.

She explains that the active simple form of נלשׁ means to actively send, while the active intensive form means to release or no longer constrain.

The same active intensive verb is used when Moshe tells Pharaoh "לְשַׁלֵּחַ אֶת עַם מִצְרַיִם"- let My people go (Shmot 5:1) – i.e. release them from captivity. This seemingly small grammatical lesson is crucial to understanding the story of the serpents.

The Torah is teaching us that snakes did not miraculously appear, but rather Hashem had been continuously protecting Bnei Yisrael from being harmed by snakes during their many years of travel in the desert, and now removed His protection and released the snakes to roam free and bite, as they would naturally do without God's intervention.

According to many commentators, Parshat Chukat takes place in Bnei Yisrael's fortieth year in the desert, when the nation is on the brink of entering the Land of Israel. Earlier in the parsha, Moshe is informed by God that he will not be leading Bnei Yisrael into the Promised Land.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar, says that the main theme of this sefer is the shift from a supernatural existence to a natural existence. It is the start of a new era.

With this in mind, Hashem is teaching Bnei Yisrael that they should no longer expect Moshe to show up with his staff and make food and water miraculously appear in response to their complaints. Bnei Yisrael have to learn to adapt to their new reality and prepare for their lives in Israel in which Hashem will most often work through nature.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that what prompted Bnei Yisrael's complaints in Parshat Chukat was their lack of recognition of Hashem's presence and involvement in their everyday lives.

Therefore, as Nechama Leibowitz explains, God responded by releasing the snakes which He had been protecting them from for forty years in the desert, in hope that Bnei Yisrael would learn to recognize the ways in which Hashem works through nature. It is of course most difficult to notice and appreciate Godly action, which is hidden and not an open miracle, and Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to master this.

Unlike in similar stories, here the Torah does not tell us if or how Bnei Yisrael received food and water, demonstrating further that the supernatural miracles of the past forty years in the desert are no longer the focal point. The important message is Bnei Yisrael's shift to a natural existence.

Bnei Yisrael understood that they sinned and turned to Moshe for help –

"We sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the snakes from us." (Bamidbar 21:7)

Moshe prayed to Hashem as per Bnei Yisrael's request, but Hashem did not remove the snakes; there was still an additional lesson that Bnei Yisrael had to learn. Hashem told Moshe to build a giant copper snake and place it on top of a pillar. Anyone who looked up at the

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copper snake after being bitten by a serpent would be cured.

Rashi interprets this to mean that Bnei Yisrael looked up toward the copper snake in the direction of heaven which reminded them to direct their hearts to God. When entering the Land of Israel, Bnei Yisrael would need to pray directly to God and not rely on an intermediary for their prayers to be answered as they had in the desert.

The Jewish people have long since learned to pray directly to God and this has become a central part of Jewish practice. However, the lesson of recognizing God's subtle hand in everyday life is something that requires constant attention to incorporate into our lives.

For example, during the recent Hamas attacks against Israel, a single rocket landed in a parking lot, which is the only spot in my neighborhood that is not within thirty meters of a house or building, and this was clearly recognized as a tremendous miracle.

On the other hand, in times of peace, it is easy to overlook the miracle of being able to live quiet, ordinary lives while God continuously protects us from our surrounding enemies. This is but one example of God's discrete intervention in this world. It is up to us to work on recognizing all that God does through the guise of nature and to appreciate His hand in our day-to-day lives.

### OU Dvar Torah

#### 17 Tammuz: Seeking God by Erica Brown

Do we achieve holiness, kedusha, through seeking God or through finding God? To answer this question, we turn to one of our sacred texts. The haftara for Minha, the afternoon service, on a fast day is an excerpt from Isaiah 55. It begins mid-chapter, at verse six and closes in the next chapter, verse eight. It contains some of the most religiously inspiring language in all of prophetic literature. "Seek God where He can be found. Call to Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). Isaiah offers wise, spiritual advice that is no less applicable to God than it is to all of our relationships. Reach out to God in a place where holiness can be found, when God feels near. Use the fast day as a mechanism for the contraction of the material and physical to create a greater space for the Shekhina, the Divine Presence. The tone of the day invites greater awareness of God. But Isaiah did not utter these words for a fast day; its incorporation into the service was a later adaptation of a text to enhance the day's emotional demands.

What did the prophet mean when he pronounced these words? Perhaps Isaiah spoke from his awareness that God's presence was not always apparent during the average working day of an Israelite. Busy with harvesting fields, winnowing on the threshing

floor or finding a fertile place to graze sheep, our ancestors could have spent their days preoccupied with the demands of family and making a living, not making a place for God. If this was a challenge for those who worked outside in nature every day, imagine how much greater an obstacle today's work environment presents to those of us who sit in offices all day. Without creating a clearing for God, a time and place for thinking above and beyond life's prosaic cares, how can we expect to find Him? If we are not searching, then that which we do not look for can hardly be expected to make itself known. It is like playing hide-and-seek and then not looking. The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern (1787-1859) once poignantly remarked, "God is where you let Him in."

#### Kavana for the Day:

Seeking is about discovery. Isaiah tells us to seek God where God is to be found. Think about where you might find God. People have a custom to pray and study in a "makom kavua," a fixed location or place, every day. The idea is that we create spaces that are receptive to spiritual activities, where we have all that we need: the right light, the right balance of privacy and companionship, the right amount of noise or silence to induce spiritual behaviors. Think hard. Where does God seem most apparent in your life? What times and places seem more open and receptive to spiritual seeking and finding? Recreate those times and spaces and make your own makom kavua.

*[Excerpted from In the Narrow Places: Daily Inspiration for the Three Weeks, by Erica Brown]*

#### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

##### Rabbi Daniel Stein

###### Snakebit

In response to their incessant complaining about the inferior quality of the manna the Jewish people were attacked by snakes, as the pasuk states, "the people spoke against Hashem and against Moshe, 'why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this desert for there is no bread and no water and we are disgusted with this rotten bread', Hashem sent against the people the venomous snakes and they bit the people and many died" (Bamidbar 21:5 - 6). Rashi explains that the Jewish people's slanderous speech about the manna warranted the punishment of snakes because the original nachash was the first one to speak slanderously when he falsely claimed that Adam and Chava were only prohibited from partaking of the Tree of Knowledge "for Hashem knows that on the day that you eat thereof, your eyes will be opened, and you will become like divine beings, knowing good and evil" (Breishis 3:5).

The relationship between lashon hara and snakes is confirmed by the pasuk, "one who breaks a fence, a snake shall bite him" (Kohelet 10, 8), referring to one who breaches the barriers of the teeth and the lips to

spew negative speech about someone else. The libelous individual deserves to be bitten by a snake because the original snake first opened the door to lashon hara. For this reason, Yosef's life was also threatened by snakes. The pit where Yosef was cast by his brothers "was empty there was no water in it" (Breishis 37:24), but Rashi comments, "water indeed it did not contain but there were snakes and scorpions in it". The Kli Yakar submits that Yosef was trapped together with snakes as a punishment for speaking lashon hara about his brothers, as the Torah tells us, "and Yosef brought bad reports of them to their father" (Breishis 37:2).

However, Rav Pinchas Freidman (Shvilei Pinchas) suggests that the Jewish people were stricken with snakes after their disparaging comments about the manna for an additional reason. The Gemara (Yoma 76a) records that the students of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai once asked him: Why did the manna come down every day in small portions instead of one large shipment that would sustain them for the entire year? He replied with the parable of a king who accepted to provide support for his son. The king knew that if he granted his son a substantial annual gift the son would only visit once a year when it was time to receive his allowance. Therefore, the king elected to give his son food in daily installments thereby forcing the son, who he loved and wanted to see, to visit every day. Similarly, Hashem chose to limit the Jewish people to daily helpings of manna instead of handing them one lump sum for the entire year, so that they would be compelled to interact with Him more often and daven every day for their needs.

The exercise of collecting the manna daily was intended to communicate Hashem's desire to have a relationship with the Jewish people and strengthen their awareness of Hashem's constant involvement in their lives. Perhaps this is alluded to in the language of the pasuk which describes Bnei Yisrael's initial reaction to the appearance of the manna when they declared "to one another 'man hu' - it is manna" (Shemos 16:15). Rav Yisroel of Modzhitz (Divrei Yisroel) notes that the letters of the words "man hu" can be rearranged to spell emunah - faith, because the purpose of the manna was to enrich and reinforce the emunah of the Jewish people in the providence of Hashem.

Rabbeinu Bachya (Parshas Chukas) claims that the primary grievance of the Jewish people regarding the manna was not in relation to its flavor or the manner in which it was digested, but rather to the size of the deliveries. They resented the need to trek out each and every day in order to gather their meager rations. Why couldn't they be given enough all at once to last the entire year so that collecting their panassah would not be a constant and daily struggle?

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The answer to their complaint was provided by the emergence of the snakes, because the snake actually possesses an extreme version of the lifestyle the people requested. In the wake of the sin of Adam and Chava the snake was cursed, "and you shall eat dust all the days of your life" (Breishis 3, 14). On the surface the ability of the snake to consume dirt seems like a great blessing, since there is a constant and endless supply of food available. Indeed, the Gemara (Berachos 57a) relates that one who sees a snake in a dream is a sign that his livelihood is accessible to him, just as dust is readily accessible to a snake. What then was the nature of the snake's punishment? Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa explains that by giving the snake a perpetual stream of uninterrupted parnassah Hashem was in effect banishing the snake. Since the snake is not concerned about his livelihood, he has no reason to bother and interact with Hashem in the future. By striking the Jewish people with snakes, Hashem was contrasting the delivery schedule of the manna with the treatment of the snake. The work of gathering the manna every day, and the labor of earning a parnassah, while admittedly a nuisance and a bother, should ultimately be interpreted as a signal of Hashem's love for the Jewish people and His desire to continuously be involved in our daily lives.

##### Rabbi Michael Rosensweig

###### "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov

###### **Mishkenotecha Yisrael": The Enduring and Irrevocable Impact of Core Halachic Institutions**

Of the blessings conferred by Bilaam in his ill-fated effort to curse Klal Yisrael none is more stirring, evocative, or resonant than "mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael" (Bamidbar 24:5). It is unsurprising that Chazal applied this laudatory, though initially ambiguous depiction, to core institutions of halachic life. While one passage (Bava Basra 60a) perceives a reference to structural requirements of domestic privacy and tzeniut - the foundation of refinement and of family life - another (Sanhedrin 105b) accentuates the indispensable central role of the twin pillars of communal life: the beit haknesset and the beit midrash. The Talmud notes that Bilaam specifically targeted these crucial institutions - "mibirchato shel oto rasha atah lameid mah hayah be-libo...bikesh she-lo yiyeh la-hem batei kenesiyot u-batei midrashot..." Undoubtedly this initial plan reflects his acute awareness that these constitute the Achilles' heel of Klal Yisrael, that they are existentially indispensable to a flourishing Jewish life in all eras. Moreover, the Talmud proceeds to further accentuate the enduring quality and impact of these essential foundations of Torah life when it declares that even as other foci of Bilaam's pernicious intentions eventually - at some point in Jewish history - were vulnerable to Bilaam's curses, the beit haknesset and beit midrash remained impervious to any undermining effort - "kulam chazru le-kelalah chutz mi-batei kenesiyot u-

batei midrashot"! Rashi adds that these institutions will endure under all circumstances ("she-lo yifseku mi-Yisrael le-olam").

The special status of batei midrash and batei knesset certainly derive from the central and inimitable role that tefillah and talmud Torah occupy in Jewish life. Torah study is the premier mitzvah and the basis for the knowledge, principles, and values that underpin all mitzvot ("ve-talmud Torah keneged kulam"- Peah 1:1). Tefillah, avodah she-belev (Rambam, Sefer Hamitzvos, number 5), is foundational for man's direct, daily bond with Hashem ("amidah lifnei Hashem"). It is noteworthy that Rambam formulates the mitzvah that is exemplified by prayer as the imperative of avodat Hashem (Divine service). In that context, he cites the view of the midrash halachah that avodah is manifest both through tefillah and Torah! It is no coincidence that these two mainstays of halachic life constitute two of the three world pillars (Avot 1:2 - "al sheloshah devarim ha-olam omed-Torah, avodah, gemilut chasadim"; see R' Yonah and other mefarshim). The timeless and enduring quality of Torah and tefillah is axiomatic.

However, the focus on the institutional venues of these twin "avodot" in Bilaam's blessing implies a significant additional dimension. The halachic principle and the normative details of the sanctity of batei knesiyot and batei midrash, possibly also alluded to in the phrase "mah tovu", attests to the transcendent impact of Torah and tefillah. The capacity to transform eitzim ve-avanim, brick and mortar, into a spiritually suffused framework endowed with independent value, a "mikdash me'at" (Megillah 29a), patterned after the beit ha-mikdash, underscores that these avodot are not merely informative, reflective, instrumental, and meritorious, but also spiritually transformative. Thus, even the venues in which halachic personalities are cultivated become infused with halachic stature and integrated into the experience and process of spiritual growth. [Thus, destruction of the eitzim ve-avanim of the mikdash constitutes an appropriate punishment, but also kapparah for Klal Yisrael. See also Rashi on this very verse.] Bilaam targeted shuls and yeshivot because he well understood that neutralizing the venues, and especially the very notion and implications of transcendent sanctity they embodied, endangered the nation, by subtly but effectively undercutting the wider impact and extensive aspirations of Torah and tefillah, the spiritual life-blood of Klal Yisrael.

The Seforno develops a further facet of the importance of batei midrash and batei keneisiyot. He first allusively reinforces the theme that these institutions-venues facilitate the forming and shaping of halachic personalities by connecting "ohalecha Yaakov" ("ish tam yoshev ohelim") and "mishkenotecha Yisrael" ("ki sarita im ha-

Elokim ve-im ha-anashim va-tuchal") to the various phases of Yaakov-Yisrael's paradigmatic personal development. He subsequently asserts that the impact of these institutions transcends those who frequent them, as it imprints itself upon the entire character and soul of Am Yisrael: "ki lo bilvad heim metivim le-oskim bam, aval metivim le-kol ha-umah." This remarkable insight highlights the fundamental collective-national character of both talmud Torah and tefillah that is consistent with the status of each and both as a prime manifestation of avodat Hashem. Each relates to, incorporates, and integrates both individual and collective expression, insight, and experience.

The synagogue and the yeshiva are, by definition, community and national institutions that embody constancy, consistency, idealistic aspirations, maximalist standards, and an appropriate range in avodat Hashem. They link and unite diverse individuals and populations, and they connect the present generation and its challenges and opportunities with the vast mesorah of Klal Yisrael in the realm of avodat Hashem. The halachah recognizes the importance and special status of talmud Torah de-rabim u-detzibur, and, of course, the singular stature of tefillat hatzibur, that enables but is much more than simply the basis for devarim she-bikdushah. In this respect, both beit hakeneset and beit ha-midrash truly qualify as "mikdash me'at", the locus for avodat ha-yachid and avodat ha-am, as well as their convergence (and beyond, "ki beiti beit tefillah yikarei lekol ha-amim"). The presence of shuls and yeshivot is a sine qua non for Jewish communal life that should garner comprehensive support and the identification of the entire tzibur. Small wonder that Bilaam sought to render Klal Yisrael vulnerable by eliminating the fortresses of an expansive and enduring avodat Hashem. That he was thwarted, that the intended kelalah was converted into a berachah that also hinted at the timeless, and irrevocable status of batei keneisiyot and batei midrashot, was an abundant blessing, indeed.

As we emerge from a very challenging year and a quarter in which our access to the central institutions that define avodat Hashem has been significantly curtailed, we should revisit the principle of "mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov" with ever greater appreciation and commitment. Typically, the most essential and ubiquitous institutions in our lives are also under-appreciated; they come over time to be perceived more narrowly and more pragmatically, and often are just taken for granted. Ironically, though understandably, separation acutely underscores their indispensability and multidimensional impact. The fact that batei keneisiyot and batei midrashot provided the leadership and infrastructure that creatively sustained and nurtured tefillah and talmud Torah during this challenging period by an array of mechanisms reaffirms their central and essential role, even

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as these very efforts also conclusively confirmed that maximal avodat Hashem in all of its dimensions is and will remain anchored in fully functional, accessible, and irreplaceable mikdeshei me'at. The havtachah that these core and essential pillars of avodat Hashem are a protected permanent part of Jewish life is a stirring berachah for all generations that should engender confidence and joy: "mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael."

### Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

#### Chukat: The Gravity of Gravity

HASHEM spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying: "This is the statute (CHOK) of the Torah which HASHEM commanded, saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow, upon which no yoke was laid..." (Bamidbar 19:1-2)

This is the statute of the Torah: 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 -CHOK" I have decreed it; You have no right to challenge it. — [Yoma 67b] -Rashi

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being Who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being. — Rambam

At the very beginning of his giant compendium the Yad HaChazaka the Rambam spells out the first Mitzvah, "the foundation of foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being Who brought into being all existence." He uses the term "know". He does not say believe or understand but rather to know.

What is this knowledge based on? The Rambam writes shortly after this, "The knowledge of this concept is a positive commandment, as it says (Shemos 20:2): "I am HASHEM your G-d...""

When HASHEM introduced Himself to the entire Jewish People at Mount Sinai 3333 years ago these are His introductory words. It is the first of the Ten Commandments. However, it is not expressed at all as a Commandment. It's a statement of fact! I AM HASHEM! How can there be a Commandment, a Mitzvah before establishing the reality of the COMMANDER!? Therefore this first Commandment is not a mandate to believe or understand with your own mind that there is a Creator, but rather an establishment of the first and primary fact of life that the is HASHEM!

The Kuzari is troubled by the notion that the Creator should make such a small claim for

## 13

Himself, "I AM HASHEM your G-d Who took you out of Egypt..." HASHEM could have declared I made heaven and earth. He answers that it is impossible to make up a public event saying, this is what happened to you.

Any talented actor can say "this happened to me" I came here on a magic carpet, but no one can say and convince the masses, "you came here on a magic carpet.

Also, claiming to be the Creator of heaven and earth is weaker, because no one was cognizant, aware, or present at that event. Like a father who says "I am your father I conceived you!" The child could have no memory of such an event.

The exodus from Egypt, however, was a public event that the Jewish People experienced. HASHEM then could declare, "I Am HASHEM Who took you out of Egypt. You experienced this! "You have been shown to know!" (Devarim 32)

Since that time, we have not passed a day where the memory of exiting Egypt is not memorialized in some action like putting on Tefillin, or reciting the third paragraph of SHEMA. Every year at the Pesach Seder we go deep into the subject and each week we make Kiddush in memory of having left Egypt. Many things we do daily, weekly and yearly carry the echo of that public event to our hearts and minds.

It is an established fact of historical record. There is HASHEM and we are required to KNOW it. It is an established fact of life, a given, a CHOK, like any law of nature, like for example gravity. Gravity is a reality! It's a Chok! It is not negotiable. It is immutable. It's a reality to which we must yield. It matters little to gravity if you vehemently disagree with it, whether you never thought about it, or you are trying to avoid it, or if it is not something you are currently so interested in. If someone were to take a giant step off of the balcony of a tall building, within a short period of time he will be introduced to the gravity of gravity.

### Balak: We Dwell Alone... (With HASHEM)

How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if HASHEM has not been angered? For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills; it is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations." (Bamidbar 23:7-9)

Since we already have a talking donkey in the Parsha and Bilaam the Rasha is quoted extensively, perhaps it is not so sacrilegious to quote here Samuel Clemens aka Mark Twain. His observation and question continue to echo through the cosmos and haunt secular historians till this very day.

This is a small part of a larger article from Harper's Magazine in 1898, "If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor; then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and the Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

What is the secret of our immortality? Bilaam may have given us a big hint. In one brief line he prophetically portrays the Jewish People, "It is a nation that will dwell alone". Does that mean we live in complete isolation from the world?!

Mark Twain's words would indicate otherwise. We are heard from? We are not isolated from the peoples of the planet. We intersect with the world every day. What does it mean then to "dwell alone"? We are distinct wherever we go. How and where does this distinction show up? There are many areas but let's focus on one in particular.

One of my Rebbeim told us that his father was a big businessman and he employed many gentile workers and they adored him, but never did they come to his home. This is in step with our ancestor Avraham who made his life's mission to reach out to the world, to all types of people, but he had "an office".

The Holy Torah narrates the event as follows, "And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing beside him, and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground. And he said, "My lords, if only I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass on from beside your servant. Please let a little water be taken, and bathe your feet, and recline under the tree. And I will take a morsel of bread, and sustain your hearts; after[wards] you shall pass on, because you have passed by

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your servant." (Breishis 18:2-5) With all of his extreme kindness Avraham parked his guests outside his tent under the shade of a tree. He bathed their feet so as to wash away even the dust of idolatry that they might be carrying with them. See how extra careful Avraham was about coming into contact with even a germ of idolatrous influence and protecting his house.

The verse then testifies, "And they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "Behold, in the tent." Sarah maintained the integrity of that distinctive place which is free from the influences of the general culture, the home. We had a frequent guest who would come with Ninjas and Mickey Mouse stuff for our kids. We were not too pleased. But then one day she showed up wearing swim wear. I asked her where her clothing was and she told me, "This is America!". I pointed to the street and declared firmly, "There is America! In here is our home!" She left and she never came back. I feel bad but our home remained that distinctive place where we dwell alone...with HASHEM.

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Fw From Hamelaket@gmail.com

from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org> to: [ravfrand@torah.org](mailto:ravfrand@torah.org) date: Jun 29, 2023, 9:20 AM subject: Rav Frand - Two Interpretations of Why Bilaam Could Not Curse ("Mah Ekov Lo Kabo Kel")

Rabbi Yissocher Frand Parshas Balak Two Interpretations of Why Bilaam Could Not Curse ("Mah Ekov Lo Kabo Kel") These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: ##1300 – Having Coffee in Starbucks: Is It Mutar? Good Shabbos!

Balak hired Bilaam to curse the Jews. However, as much as Bilaam tried, he just could not get the curses to come out of his mouth. The pasuk says: "And Hashem placed words into the mouth of Bilaam and He said 'return to Balak and thus you shall say'". (Bamidbar 23:5) Bilaam indeed tells Balak what he does not want to hear: "...From Aram, Balak, king of Moav led me, from the mountains of the east, 'Come invoke curse upon Yaakov for me, come bring anger upon Israel.' How can I curse? G-d has not cursed. How can I anger, when Hashem has not been angry?" (Bamidbar 23:7-8) Rashi writes regarding the words "Mah Ekov Lo Kabo Kel" (How can I curse? G-d has not cursed): Even when the Jews were

deserving Divine curses, we see that they couldn't be cursed. Rashi cites three examples of this: (1) On Yaakov Avinu's deathbed, when he addressed Shimon and Levi, telling them that in their anger they killed someone, he only cursed their anger – Arur Apam ki oz – (Bereshis 49:7) but he did not curse them; (2) When Yaakov went to Yitzchak, trying to deceive his father and deceitfully take the blessing intended for his brother, he was himself worthy of being cursed. Nevertheless, Yitzchak could not do so. "He too will be blessed." (Bereshis 27:33); (3) By Har Gerizim and Har Eival, the pasuk says "these will stand to bless the people" (Devorim 27:12) in connection with the recitations on Har Gerizim, but does not use the parallel "these will stand to curse the people" when talking about the recitations on Har Eival. Rashi explains Bilaam's statement "How can I curse? G-d has not cursed" to mean that this is not a curse-able people, even when it seems that they should be cursed. The Kli Yakar however, has a different interpretation. He interprets Bilaam's words: "How can I curse the Jewish people who never curse G-d." (In other words, the Jews are the subject rather than the object in the expression "Lo Kabo Kel"). The Kli Yakar says that when troubles befall the nations of the world, they curse their gods. "Why are you doing this to me? This is not fair!" But even if the Almighty comes upon Bnei Yisroel with strength and with fierce attack – as indicated by the Divine Name 'Kel' (indicating Hashem's attribute of justice) – and they suffer, nevertheless they do not curse Him, but on the contrary, they bless Him even upon receiving bad tidings. (They say 'Baruch Dayan haEmes'.) Betting the Ranch on the Divine Promise In the famous story of Bilaam riding his donkey to Moav, the pasuk says, "And Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey, and the donkey asked Bilaam 'What have I done to you that you have smitten me three times (shalosh regalim)?" (Bamidbar 22:28) This last expression jumps out at us because the more conventional way to express 'three times' is 'shalosh pe'amim'. What is meant by 'shalosh regalim'? Rashi says the allusion here is that the donkey (so to speak) is critiquing Bilaam for attempting to wipe out a nation who celebrates the three annual pilgrimage festivals (known as 'regalim'). There are 613 mitzvos in the Torah, including 248 positive commands. If I would issue a challenge: Name the top three or top five mitzvos that grant Klal Yisrael the greatest source of merit and protection, I doubt anyone would suggest that the fact they ascend three times a year to Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) would make this list. It does not seem like this is the hardest mitzvah to fulfill. And yet, it seems that this is the zechus for which Bilaam's curse should not have an effect. This Rashi demands explanation. The other strange thing about this is a pasuk later on in the parsha: "For there is no nachash (divination) in Yaakov and no kesem (sorcery) in Yisroel. (There will be another time) like this time (when) it will be said to Yaakov and Yisroel: 'What has G-d done?'" (Bamidbar

23:23) Rashi interjects: They are worthy of blessing because there is not to be found among them diviners or sorcerers. Bilaam was a sorcerer who based himself on the stars and times, etc. The Jews don't believe in any of that. This is difficult to understand for two reasons. First, Rashi says in the beginning of the parsha that the merit of Klal Yisrael was the three pilgrimage festivals. However, Rashi now says that their merit is that they have no sorcerers amongst them. Secondly, the same question exists – is this indeed the greatest merit of Klal Yisrael that they do not have in their midst diviners and sorcerers? The Ateres Dudaim (from the Rosh Kollel in Chicago) quotes a beautiful vort from Rav Yaakov Yosef (1840-1902, the first and only Chief Rabbi of New York City). The pasuk says in Shir HaShirim (7:2) "Mah yafu p'amayich b'neanim bas nadiv..." (How beautiful are your steps with shoes Klal Yisrael...) (Bas Nadiv refers to Klal Yisrael.) The Gemara (Chagiga 3a) says that this pasuk in Shir HaShirim is saying "How beautiful are the footsteps of the Jewish people at the time they ascend to the Beis Hamikdash three times a year for the pilgrimage holidays." Consider the following: The Beis HaMikdash should be speedily rebuilt in our day and we will all ascend to Yerushalayim for the regalim. We will climb up to the Har HaBayis (Temple Mount). Are we going to be wearing shoes? No! The Gemara says explicitly (Berachos 62b) that a person may not enter the Har Habayis with his walking stick or with shoes. So how can the pasuk in Shir HaShirim that says "Mah Yafu p'amayich b'neanim..." – How beautiful are your steps wearing shoes... – be referring to Aliyah l'regel? Rav Yaakov Yosef gives a beautiful interpretation: This is not referring to once they are already in Yerushalayim. Rather, this pasuk in Shir HaShirim is praising the trip up from wherever they lived to the Har HaBayis. The trip up to the Har HaBayis was an act of tremendous faith. As the Torah itself mentions, the Jews left the borders open when everyone travelled up to Yerushalayim for the Yom Tov. Men, women, and children all ascended. Who is home watching the ranch? It is open season. If the enemy knows everyone is in Yerushalayim, they can just walk in and have a field day. Yet the Torah says: Don't worry. "No man will covet your land." (Shemos 34:24) We have a Divine guarantee: You go up and no one will want your land. No person will come in, because that is what it says in the Torah. If we wonder if going up to Yerushalayim is really such a big mitzvah, the answer is that it is an incredible act of faith. I leave everything behind, open, unguarded – all on the basis of a pasuk in Chumash, a promise from G-d: "No man will covet your land." The praise "How beautiful are your footsteps" is not referring to walking on the Har HaBayis. When I am on the Har HaBayis, I feel the Divine Presence. That is not a matter of faith. A person can intensely feel the holiness there. The pasuk in Shir HaShirim is praising the long and arduous travel from Dan or from Be'er Sheva to Yerushalayim. That is the amazing praiseworthy attribute of

Klal Yisrael: How beautiful are your steps IN SHOES, Bas Nadiv. You, Klal Yisrael, are walking with your shoes up to Yerushalayim. That is a source of great merit. It is an act of great faith to confidently leave all your possessions at home, unguarded for days on end, relying on the Torah's Divine promise. I literally and figuratively "bet the ranch" on Hashem's promise. I leave no one watching the ranch. Now we can understand the donkey's exclamation to Bilaam: You want to uproot the nation that goes up to Yerushalayim for Shalosh Regalim? Shalosh Regalim is all about Emunah. Now we also understand the pasuk "There is no Nachash in Yaakov or Kesem in Yisroel." Rashi explains that their merit is that they don't believe in sorcerers. The reason they don't believe in sorcerers is because they believe in the Ribono shel Olam. As Rashi quotes (Devarim 18:13) "Tamim tiheyeh im Hashem Elokecha." Just believe in the Ribono shel Olam. Don't ask any questions. "How is it going to happen?" Don't worry! The Ribono shel Olam says so, you can believe it. We should not try to figure out the future. A person only tries to figure out the future because he has doubts as to what will be in the future. The true believer that the Almighty is really in charge does not need to consult sorcerers and diviners or any such people to discern what will happen in the future. Therefore, these two things: The Shalosh Regalim and "Lo Nachash b'Yaakov" are really one and the same. They are both about Emunah. The message to Bilaam the sorcerer is that you will never be able to curse a nation that believes and puts their faith in the Ribono shel Olam. You will never be able to lay a finger on them because they are believers, as we see by the Shalosh Regalim and from the fact that there are no sorcerers in Yisroel!

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from: **Ira Zlotowitz** <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> date: Jun 29, 2023, 6:01 PM subject: **Tidbits for Parashas Chukas - Balak** Shiva Asar B'Tamuz The fast of Shiva Asar B'Tamuz is next Thursday, July 6th. Five tragedies occurred on Shiva Asar B'Tamuz: 1) The first Luchos were broken, 2) In the waning days of the First Bais Hamikdash, the daily tamid offering ceased being brought, 3) In the waning days of the Second Bais Hamikdash, the walls of Yerushalayim were breached, ultimately leading to its destruction, 4) Apostimos burned a Sefer Torah, and 5) An avodah zarah was placed in the Bais Hamikdash.

During chazaras hashatz of Shacharis, the sheliach tzibbur adds Aneinu as a stand-alone berachah (between Go'el Yisrael and Refa'einu). Selichos, Avinu Malkeinu, Tachanun, and Kerias haTorah follow chazaras hashatz. Tefillas Minchah includes Kerias haTorah with the haftarah of Dirshu Hashem. Those fasting add Aneinu (as part of Shema Koleinu). Bircas Kohanim is recited in chazaras hashatz. Even Nusach Ashkenaz says Sim Shalom (instead of Shalom Rav). Chazaras hashatz is followed by Avinu Malkeinu.

**The Three Weeks** The Y'mei Bein Hametzarim, the Three Weeks, begin at shekiya (sunset) on Wednesday evening, July 5th. The Three Weeks between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av, is a national period of mourning over the Churban of both Batei Mikdash. One should give focus to the churban and galus during this period. Activities restricted during this period include:

**Music and Dancing:** Children of chinuch age are included. Many poskim are lenient when the music is secondary in nature (e.g. background music on a story CD) or when the listening is not for enjoyment (e.g. to help one stay awake while driving). Many poskim are stringent regarding acappella "sefirah music". Playing and practicing music are permitted for the purpose of earning a livelihood (e.g. professional musician). Playing music to develop one's skill is a matter of dispute amongst the poskim. **Haircuts and Shaving:** Men, women and children are included in the prohibition. In cases of discomfort many permit women to tweeze and remove hair from areas other than the head. One should consult with a Rav in regards to a father, sandek and mohel at a bris, and in regard to an avel who finishes the sheloshim mourning period during this time. **Weddings:** Weddings are not held during this period. An engagement may be celebrated, although without dancing or music. A Sheva Berachos may be held without music, although dancing (and singing) is permitted. **Shehecheyanu:** We avoid situations that would necessitate reciting the berachah of shehecheyanu (e.g. eating new fruits, etc.).

**Miscellaneous:** One should consult with a Rav regarding signing a contract on a new home, moving into a new home, house decorating and elective surgery.

#### Reminders

Eretz Yisrael will lein only Parashas Balak this week, having previously leined Parashas Chukas last week. From this point onward, Eretz Yisrael and Chutz La'aretz will be on the same schedule.

The final opportunity for Kiddush Levana is late Sunday night, July 2nd at 3:37 AM EDT (Monday morning).

#### Pirkei Avos: Chapter 5.

Daf Yomi - Friday: Bavli: Gittin 45 • Yerushalmi: Demai 62 • Mishnah Yomis: Succah 2:2-3.

Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rebbi to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn't speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!

#### Summary

**CHUKAS:** Laws of the Parah Adumah • Miriam dies, the be'er (well) stops producing water, and the people complain • Moshe and Aharon are told to bring water by speaking to the rock; Moshe eventually hits the rock instead • Moshe and Aharon are told of the punishment for their sin • Bnei Yisrael ask for passage through Edom and are rebuffed • Aharon passes away at Har Hahar • The Canaanites (really Amaleik) attack and are defeated at Chorma • The people complain about the Mon and

are attacked by snakes • The 'healing' copper snake • The great miracle of Nachal Arnon • Shiras Habe'er • The defeats of Sichon and Og

**BALAK:** Balak sends messengers to Bilaam • Bilaam refuses to come • Balak sends more distinguished messengers, Bilaam again refuses • Hashem appears to Bilaam and 'permits' him to go • An angel deters his donkey three times • After striking his donkey, the donkey speaks and Bilaam is forced to admit that he wronged her • Bilaam tells Balak that he will speak only that which Hashem will put in his mouth • Bilaam and Balak prepare sacrifices three times • Bilaam blesses the Bnei Yisrael three times • An angry Balak sends Bilaam on his way • Bilaam predicts future events • Bnei Yisrael sin with the daughters of Moav • 24,000 perish in a plague • The plague ceases when Pinchas kills Zimri and Kozbi

**Haftarah:** The haftarah of Parashas Balak is leined. Michah (5:6-6:8) encourages Klal Yisrael to remember Hashem's many great chasadim, among them that He prevented Bilaam from cursing them.

#### Taryag Weekly

Parashas Chukas: 87 Pesukim • 3 Obligations

1) Kohanim should oversee the preparation of the ashes of the parah adumah. 2) Observe the laws of tumas meis. 3) A Kohen shall purify someone who is tamei using the ashes of the parah adumah.

**Mitzvah Highlight:** Zos Chukas HaTorah - Parah adumah is the prime example of a mitzvah (chok) that we perform solely to fulfill Hashem's command, even though we do not understand it.

Parashas Balak: 104 Pesukim • No Mitzvos Listed

For the Shabbos Table

“זֶה אֲתִתְהַפֵּל עַבְמַה... יְעַן לֹא־אָמַתָּם בַּיְתַּכְּלִי שְׁנִי” “And he hit the rock with his stick...because you had not trusted in Me to sanctify Me” (Bamidbar 20:10-11)

Moshe Rabbeinu performed a great miracle of bringing forth water from the rock. However, Moshe was punished and barred from entering Eretz Yisrael because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l states that this was a neis no matter what means was used to bring forth this supernatural occurrence. What was lacking by Moshe's failure to speak to the rock?

Rav Moshe explains that this event was intended to demonstrate the importance of delivering words of instruction even to one who may not be able to fully grasp the concept. For example, a young child who appears to a parent as not quite ready to understand a certain message. Hashem demonstrated that just as a Divine message can penetrate even a rock and compel it to serve Hashem, we must speak to and be mechaneich even someone with limited understanding, as eventually the lessons will penetrate.

from: Esplanade Capital <jeisenstadt@esplanadecap.com>  
date: Jun 30, 2023, 1:10 AM subject: **Rabbi Reisman's**

### **Weekly Chumash Shiur**

Rabbi Reisman - Parshas Chukas - Balak 5783

#### 1 – Topic – Preparing to go to Eretz Yisrael and leaving behind Chutz L'aretz

As we prepare for Shabbos Parshas Chukas – Balak catching up so to speak to Eretz Yisrael. Speaking of Eretz Yisrael, I was in Eretz Yisrael at the beginning of the week and I would like to share with you a brief thought. In the Aderes Eliyahu, the GR”A in Parshas Eikev 8:1, the Gaon writes (צְרִיךְ ג' דָּבָרִים) that to come to Eretz Yisrael you need three things. 1) The first thing you need is that you have to prepare yourself to leave Chutz L'aretz. (2.) You have to know the road which you are traveling. (3.) You have to come to Eretz Yisrael. (ג' הַבִּיאָה לְאַיִלָּה) So you have leaving, traveling and coming.

It is not really so. All you need is 2 and 3. You need a road to go and you need to arrive in Eretz Yisrael. If you have a road to go Mimeila you are leaving Chutz L'aretz. What does it mean # 1 that you need a Hachana La'tzeis L'chutz L'aretz? The GR”A here is Megaleh to us a Sod. He is telling us the secret of being Matzlaich in a trip to Eretz Yisrael. There are some who come to Eretz Yisrael and they never left Chutz L'aretz, they are taking Chutz L'aretz along with them. Do me a favor, leave it behind. You want to be able to come and be Nichnas L'eretz Yisrael, then you need # 1 Hachana Latzeis Chutz L'aretz. You got to understand that you are leaving Chutz L'aretz and you are going out of Chutz L'aretz.

I came to Ohr Sameach this week and I met somebody who I met for the first time last summer. Yoel from Norway. He had just come and I met him with his father and they had a Shabbos Seuda together with us. I asked his father to please tell us what brought him and his son here. He said essentially that he wants his son to know something about Judaism.

Therefore, he came with him there. A wonderful young man. Yoel was in the Mechina, the beginners program and made his first Siyum this week on Maseches Megillah and he is moving up to the Beis Medrash program. A one year jumping up to the regular Beis Medrash program. It is just absolutely incredible. Incredible what the Ruach of Eretz Yisrael could do. Why did he go to Eretz Yisrael? To know something about Judaism. We think we know all that there is to know about Yiddishkeit. We have much to learn. If we left Chutz L'aretz to go to Eretz Yisrael to know more about Yiddishkeit then we would do very well.

It is said that Rav Hutner once observed a Beis Medrash of Bochurim learning on Shavuos. He admired them. He commented to somebody, their faces are towards Har Sinai just like by Mattan Torah. I am just not sure if their backs are to the rest of the world. You need two things. You have to face Har

Sinai and you have to have your back towards the rest of the world.

Yaakov when he left Lavan's house he said, as is found in Rashi to Beraishis 32:5 (עַמְּלָנְךָ גָּרְתִּי וְתַּקְרִיבְנִי גַּמְּצֹוֹת שְׁמָרְתִּי), that he kept (or at least learned about) all 613 Mitzvos. (וְלֹא לְמַקְתִּיבָנִי) I didn't learn from his evil deeds. Ribbono Shel Olam! Once you say (תַּקְרִיבְנִי גַּמְּצֹוֹת שְׁמָרְתִּי) that he kept every single Mitzvah, what do you have to add (וְלֹא לְמַקְתִּיבָנִי מְפַעַּשְׂיו) (מְפַעַּשְׂיו הָרָעִים)? You see from here that for some people it is not a contradiction. You can do everything good and still have yourself totally in Chutz L'aretz, totally in Beis Lavan. Get involved in the pleasures and the overindulgences of Chutz L'aretz.

When we go into a Sukkah we say a beautiful Tefillah. It says (וּבְזָכָרְתָּ אֶתְמִימְנִי מִבֵּיתְךָ וְזָרְךָ מְצֹוֹתְךָ אֲרִיךְ). We ask for a Zechus for the fact that we go out of the house. Really the Ikkur is the Zechus that we go into the Sukkah and not so much that we go out of the house. No! Some people go into the Sukkah without leaving their normal homes. They don't leave it at all. They are sitting in their homes just now there is Schach on top of them. It is the same thing with going to Eretz Yisrael. What a waste. People go to Eretz Yisrael and they bring Chutz L'aretz with them. They bring everything with them. They were once Bnei Torah and now they are working people. They go to Eretz Yisrael, you would think they would come to Eretz Yisrael that you should dress like Bnei Torah, you should talk and walk like Bnei Torah. Your interests should be in jeeping? That is why you go to Eretz Yisrael to go jeeping? Imagine, someone comes into a Beis Medrash and he is sitting in the Beis Medrash and what is he doing in the Beis Medrash? He has the ingredients and he is making himself some fancy desert sitting in middle of the Beis Medrash. Nothing Treif, it is a Kosher desert. In middle of the Beis Medrash? That is what you do, you go jeeping in middle of the Ribbono Shel Olam's Eretz Yisrael? Rachmana Litzlon! It is not what Eretz Yisrael is for.

#### 2 – Topic – The Chida's message about Tumah

In Parshas Chukas we learn of course about the Parah Aduma. There is an incredible Chida in Nachal Kiddumim on Koheles Perek Zayin. The Chida says Si'ba, the reason, She'ainenu B'madreigas Hatorah, that we are not on the same Madreiga of Torah is because Ain Lanu Parah Adumah, it is because we are Tamei. Tamei is not just a ritual Tumah, something that is a side Halacha. It affects the person. A person who is Tamei is not the same as a person who is Tahor. His heart is not opened the same way for Limud Hatorah. He says that that is why the Posuk in Tehillim 12:7 says (אָמְרוּתָה יְרוּרָה, אָמְרוֹתָה טְהָרוֹתָה) when are the Imros Hashem fully Imros Hashem? It is when they are Tehoros. When people are saying it in a Tahor'dika Oifen. That is what is says in the Chida. We have to realize, that Inyanei Tumah are not just a side Halacha of Tumah, they are B'etzem Devarim that are Tamei because they are Tamei.

The Rambam writes in the end of Hilchos Mikvaos 11:12 that (הטבילה תלוי בכוונת הלב). Toveling to become Tahor is Talui in the Kavana of the heart. (ולפיכך אמרו חכמים טבל ולא הווזק כאילו). You have to be thinking when you are Toveling. That means becoming Tahor is more than just a ritual thing. It is something which has to do with the person himself. Which has to do with the person who is Toveling and he is doing it for a reason to be an Ish Tahor.

Now we understand why Ezra was Misakein that even though today we are not Tahor and we can't eat Terumah and we can't Challah even if we are Kohanim, we can't go in the Beis Hamikdash. So if you are a Baal Keri and you have a certain type of Tumah, why go to the Mikvah, you are Tamei Meis anyway so it is not going to help you for other things?

The answer is because Tumah is something that affects the person. Tumah is something that is B'etzem. It is a Shod that people are not careful in Tevillas Ezra. Many people are careful, more people should be. To be careful to Tovel Tevillas Ezra. When someone is a Baal Keri to go to the Mikvah. Rav Pam did not go to the Mikvah necessarily on Erev Shabbos. He didn't have a Minhag to go. He was a Litvishe. But Tevillas Ezra he told me he was always Zahir in.

It is very similar, there was a Chashuve Yid who had the Zechus of driving Rav Moshe to Shul every morning. His son was learning in Torah Vodaath and somebody asked his son does Rav Moshe go to the Mikvah before Shacharis? It is a funny thing, he goes Sundays and he doesn't go Fridays. He couldn't understand why. This is because Onah of a Talmid Chochom is Erev Shabbos to Erev Shabbos so Tevillas Ezra came up to him on Sunday. That is the important idea that we need to understand.

3 – Topic – A beautiful Maharal at the end of Parshas Chukas I want to mention to you the last Rashi in Chukas. He brings there the Medrash about Sichon Melech Og who picked up a mountain to throw it on Klal Yisrael and a worm made a hole in the mountain and it fell over his head and became like a necklace and he wanted to pull it off and his teeth grew long and it got stuck in the mountain and he couldn't pull it off. An incredible Medrash. It is a Gemara in Berachos Nun Daled and Rashi alludes to it and tells you to look it up in the last Rashi in the Parsha 21:35 (וְיִפְאֵת אָתָּה).

I mention it because of the Maharal. There is a long Maharal on that last Rashi. That one Maharal is probably as long as all of the Maharsals on the whole Parshas Chukas or nearly as long. I told you many times that there is a Machlokes Maharsha and Maharal. The Maharal Teitches Aggadata Gemaras B'derech Mashul and not literally. Maharsha says Ain Medrash Yotzei Midei Peshuto generally. There are some exceptions but generally. But the Maharal he Teitches it B'derech Remez.

There is a beautiful Maharal at the end of the Parsha and if you want to see it in the Gur Aryeh which just shows you the She'efes HaMaharal that I have mentioned on other occasions. And so, three thoughts. 1) Preparing to go to Eretz Yisrael and leaving behind Chutz L'aretz. When you go into a Shul you have to leave behind Chutz L'aretz. I wish people would use the lockers and leave their phones and especially their smartphones behind. 2) The Chida's message about Tumah. Tumah Biz'man Hazeh is also M'akeiv a person's understanding of Torah. 3) This last Nekudah of the beautiful Maharal at the end of the Parsha. With that I want to wish everyone an absolutely wonderful Shabbos Kodesh!

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from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org> date: Jun 29, 2023, 7:39 PM subject: Rabbi Daniel Stein - Partners in Chinuch

### Rabbi Daniel Stein

### Partners in Chinuch

In a stifled attempt to curse the Jewish people, Bilam was compelled instead to confer blessings upon them, He begrudgingly acknowledged their admirable tents and dwellings, when he proclaimed, "How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Yisrael" (Bamidbar 24:5). In one place (Sanhedrin 105b), Chazal interpret the "tents" and "dwellings" as a reference to the beis hamedrash and beis haknesses. The Gemara states, "from the blessing of Bilam, you can ascertain what was in his heart, for Hashem transformed the curses that he planned into blessings. He intended to say that they should not have synagogues and study halls, and he said instead, 'How good are your tents, Yaakov' - a blessing on their synagogues ... He sought to say that the kingdom of Yisrael would not continue, and he said instead that it would continue." Bilam deliberately targeted the communal citadels of Torah and tefillah because he rightly understood that these institutional pillars are essential to the prospect of Jewish continuity.

However, on another occasion (Bava Basra 60a), Chazal attribute Bilam's coerced admiration of the Jewish "tents" and "dwellings" to their individual homes, whose entrance was obscured and uniquely designed in order to avoid attention and maximize privacy. Are these two perspectives proposed by Chazal at odds or perhaps related?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Drash Moshe) suggests that Bilam sought to undermine the bedrock of Jewish survival by severing the connection between the Jewish home and the formal educational establishment, represented by the study hall and synagogue. Bilam maliciously accentuated the intensity and beauty of the Jewish home in an attempt to render the communal infrastructure superfluous. In thwarting this assault against the academy, and converting Bilam's aggression against the study hall and synagogue into a resentful approbation, Hashem was teaching that successful and lasting

chinuch demands a partnership between the home and the school. The individual Jewish home and the communal institutions of Torah learning are synonymous in the eyes of Chazal, because only when the two loci of education are aligned and operating in unison can Jewish continuity be ensured.

Similarly, prior to descending to Egypt, Yaakov dispatched Yehudah to prepare for their arrival in Goshen (Breishis 46:28). The Medrash offers two versions of the specific instructions given to Yehudah. Either he was charged with securing a neighborhood of private homes for domestic dwelling, or alternatively, he was tasked with consecrating a central location for communal learning and teaching Torah. Rav Mordechai Gifter (Pirkei Torah) proposes that these two objectives are in fact intertwined. Proper chinuch, which is the backbone of the community, requires that every individual home echo and reinforce the messages articulated by its educational system. The home must be a satellite and reflection of the house of study, as the Mishnah (Avos 1:4) advises, "your house should be a meeting place for the sages," and therefore, the obligation to establish one is dependent and bound up with the other.

Learning and teaching Torah, should not be an activity that is reserved for the beis hamedrash or local yeshiva. Rather the voice of Torah, and all that it implies, must reverberate in every Jewish home. The lasting impression created by regular Torah study in the home is irreplaceable and indispensable. All too often, we have grown accustomed to delegating and outsourcing critical aspects of chinuch to our communal institutions. Sometimes, we rely on the yeshivos to teach certain values and set difficult boundaries without taking the responsibility to embody and instill those same standards ourselves. Let us take the opportunity during the summer, when many children are not in school, to dispel any dissonance in the education of our precious children, because it is only through working in tandem with our yeshivos that we can safeguard the Jewish future.

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From: Shabbat Shalom <[shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org](mailto:shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org)>  
OU Torah *תורת חיים: Torah as a Way of Life Chukas Three*

Lessons from Mei Meriva

By **Rabbi Moshe Hauer**

There is an enormous amount of debate and commentary regarding the incident recorded in our Parsha that resulted in Moshe and Aaron being prevented from entering Eretz Yisrael, the story of the Mei Merivah, the Waters of Strife. Rambam's commentary – presented in the fourth chapter of his Shemona Perakim - focuses on the negative consequences of Moshe's display of anger. Every aspect of his commentary is richly instructive.

First, Moshe's demonstration of anger was a grievous failure of character given who he was. A lapse of this kind for

someone of Moshe's caliber – whose every action was watched and learned from as the standard which others sought to emulate – served, in Rambam's words, as a Chilul Hashem, a desecration of G-d's name, as defined by the Talmud (Yoma 86a) and codified in the Rambam's Mishneh Torah (Yesodei Hatorah 5:11):

"There are other things included in Chilul Hashem, although they are not of themselves either among the mandatory or prohibitive commandments, for example, when a great man, famed for his learning and piety, will do something that the public will suspect him of, even though such deeds are not transgressions, yet he has committed a Chilul Hashem. For example: if he makes a purchase and does not pay for it at once although he has the money and the vendors are claiming it and he delays them; or if he indulges in frivolity, or eats and drinks with and among the ignorant, or if his speech with his fellow men is not polite, or if he does not receive them pleasantly, but acts as one looking for strife and shows anger. In such and like matters, all measured by the standard of the greatness of such scholar, he must take particular care, and act exceedingly better than the law requires."

Second, as Rambam notes, G-d was not in fact angry with the Jewish people. Yes, when we were thirsty we became cranky and complained, but G-d did not indicate any real anger or frustration in response; He simply told Moshe to give us what we had asked for. Clearly, G-d understood that we truly needed water, and as the need was real and the request was reasonable G-d did not take us to task for expressing it in an irritating or obnoxious manner.

This is profoundly instructive. We often field complaints. Our response to those complaints should consider the issue itself more than the way it is expressed. And while when we are the ones doing the complaining we must take care to express ourselves carefully and respectfully, when we are on the receiving end, we should only focus on the issue raised rather than the way it is raised.

Finally, G-d describes Moshe as "merisem pi," which Rambam renders as altering G-d's word and message. Given Moshe's stature, the Jewish people – who were themselves mature and spiritually sophisticated - assumed that whatever he expressed to them was an accurate reflection of G-d's feelings towards them. If Moshe displayed anger to the people, they assumed that it was because G-d was angry with them, when in fact in this case – as noted above - He was not. As such Moshe was misrepresenting G-d to His people.

The ramifications of this are exceptionally profound and practical as they are reenacted constantly in religious life. Any one of us – rabbi or rebbetzin, educator or parent - who stands as a religious figure or as one who encourages faith within his or her family, is seen to represent G-d. When we project love and encouragement, that is the way those around us visualize G-d. And if we instead project fury and frustration, that too is

attributed to G-d. We must represent G-d accurately, and we can only do that by doing our best to reflect His qualities – His attributes of mercy – to all for whom we serve as His representatives.

Each of these elements of Rambam's understanding of the story is a profound lesson unto itself, guiding us towards greater personal refinement and worthiness as G-d's representatives to those around us.

Previous Rabbi Moshe Hauer Rabbi Moshe Hauer joined the Orthodox Union (OU) as its Executive Vice President on May 1, 2020. In this role he serves as the organization's rabbinic leader, heading its communal-oriented efforts and serving as its professional religious/policy leader and primary spokesman.

Prior to joining the OU, Rabbi Hauer served as the senior Rabbi of the Bnai Jacob Shaarei Zion Congregation in Baltimore, MD for 26 years, where he was active in local communal leadership in many areas, with an emphasis on education, children-at-risk, and social service organizations serving the Jewish community. Rabbi Hauer is an active teacher of Torah who led a leadership training program for rabbis and communal leaders, and was a founding editor of the online journal Klal Perspectives. Rabbi Hauer received his rabbinic ordination and doctor of Talmudic law from Ner Israel. He received his master's of science from John Hopkins University.

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fw from hamelaket@gmail.com www.matzav.com or www.torah.org/learning/drasha Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

### **Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky**

Parshas Balak When you are hit in the face, it is hard to help but notice. Unless, of course, you wear your ego as a face-guard. This week, the gentile prophet Bilaam, a man whom our sages say had prophetic vision equal to if not greater than Moshe, is hired by the Nation of Moav to curse the Jewish Nation. At first he is reluctant. Upon hearing the tremendous reward of storehouses filled with gold and silver, however, he acquiesces and sets out on his dastardly mission. Then a miracle occurs. An angel, who is seen only by Billam's donkey, blocks the path. His ordinarily faithful she-donkey tries to squeeze by the Angel and inadvertently presses Bilaam's foot against the wall. During this time, Bilaam, unaware of the metaphysical circumstances that brought about the shift in his donkey's behavior, is incensed. He strikes the animal three times. Another miracle occurs! The donkey begins to talk. He carries on a brief conversation with his Master. "Why did you hit me three times?" asks the donkey "Because you mocked me! If only there were a sword in my hand I would kill you!" replies Bilaam. The donkey continues to plead her case. "Am I not your faithful donkey that you have ridden on all your life? Have I been accustomed to do this type

of thing to you?" Bilaam replies meekly in the negative. Hashem opens his eyes and he finally realizes that an Angel blocked the way. The human aspect of the incident is perhaps more astonishing than the miracle itself. How is it possible that the great seer who hears his donkey speak begins to threaten it with death? Doesn't he realize that a supernatural event is occurring? Second, why would he threaten to kill the animal? By doing so he would never get to his destination. Wasn't that a totally irrational threat? The episode reminds me of an old yarn by the writer Leo Rosten. Irving, a wealthy man, walked into a pet shop and inquired about a pet for his lonely grandmother. "I have the perfect gift," exclaimed the proprietor. "It's a myna bird that talks Yiddish. It can say up to fifty different phrases! It will keep you grandmother company and cheer her when she is lonely." A week after the gift arrived, Irving, called his grandmother. "Bubbie, How did you like the bird?" "Delicious, Irving. I had the butcher fillet it." "But, Bubbie, that bird spoke Yiddish!" Irving shrieked in horror. "So why didn't it say something?" Billam was experiencing the event of a lifetime. He had an angel directly in his path, and his donkey was actually speaking to him. But he did not notice. He had his eye focused on one thing. His heart was set on cursing the Jew's and collecting a handsome fee. Miracles were occurring all around him but he lost all rational control. He did not notice. He was only interested in his honor. He would have slaughtered his donkey on the spot. Often, events occur that should jar us into rethinking our current situations. But our minds are set, our hearts are pre-determined, and our conclusions are foregone. A talking donkey or even a bird for that matter could not get us to stop and think. The world around us is filled with miraculous events, some, perhaps, greater than a talking donkey. All we have to do is listen. Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller in Memory of Yoel Nossen Ben Reb Chaim HaLevi O'H

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from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>  
date: Jun 29, 2023, 3:27 AM subject: Rav Kook on Balak: An Eternal People

### Balak: An Eternal People

Together with Shema In the parashah of Balak, we find prophetic verses of exquisite beauty and an inspiring story of God's vigilant watch over the Jewish people. But to truly appreciate this Torah portion, consider this remarkable teaching of the Sages.

The Talmud (Berachot 12b) relates that at one time the rabbis contemplated incorporating the parashah of Balak into the daily prayers, alongside the recitation of the Shema. This is truly astounding. What lesson is contained in the words of Balaam - a villainous prophet, steeped in blind hatred for the Jewish people — that could possibly compare to the Torah's most fundamental beliefs, as delineated in the Shema, the centerpiece of Jewish prayer?

Fortunately, the Talmud clues us in to what makes this parashah so special. Its unique message may be found in the following verse, comparing the Jewish people to a fearsome lion:

“[Israel] crouches; he lies like a lion and a lioness. Who dares rouse him?” (Num. 24:9)

Yes, it is a beautiful metaphor describing the timeless strength and vitality of the Jewish people. But does this verse justify reading the entire portion of Balak twice a day, together with the Shema?

**The Missing Link** Clearly, the Sages saw an inner link between Balak and the Shema. In order to understand this connection, we must first analyze the principal themes of the Shema. The Sages taught (Berachot 13a) that the first passage of the Shema expresses God’s unity and our acceptance of His rule; and that the theme of the second passage is our acceptance of the mitzvot.

However, these two axioms of Judaism — accepting God’s reign and accepting His mitzvot — are missing a common link. What is it that combines them, leading to universal acceptance of God through the performance of mitzvot?

The missing link is the Jewish people.

The lofty aspirations expressed in the Shema necessitate the existence of a nation who, throughout the generations, observes the mitzvot and introduces the concept of God’s unity to the world. This is the mission of the Jewish people. In fact, they were created specifically for this purpose: “This people I created for Me, [so that] they will proclaim My praise” (Isaiah 43:21).

Now we can understand why the Sages wanted to add this particular verse to the recital of the Shema. Balaam poetically compared the Jewish people to a sleeping lion that none dare disturb. Everyone fears the formidable powers of this majestic creature, even when it sleeps. The latent power of the Jewish people is such that, even when ‘sleeping’ — even when they are exiled from their land and many of their unique national institutions (the Temple, Sanhedrin, kohanim, prophets, etc.) are dormant — nonetheless, their eternal nature is legendary.

[1]

The survival of the Jewish people throughout the generations, despite all odds, and in violation of all laws of history, enables them to persist in their mission of proclaiming God’s unity. Their indestructible nature is in itself a sanctification of God’s Name.

**Jewish Nationalism** If the significance of the parashah of Balak can be reduced to this single verse, then why not just add that verse to the daily prayers? Why add the entire section?

The Talmud explains that we may not add the verse by itself, since the Torah should not be broken up arbitrarily. “Any section that Moses did not divide, we may not divide.”

This explanation is difficult to understand. We find many individual verses incorporated in the liturgy. Why not this one?

It appears that detaching this particular verse from the rest of Balaam’s prophecy poses a special danger. By itself, the verse could be construed as extolling nationalism for its own sake. The unique strength of the Jewish people is not meant to serve the goals of self-centered nationalism, military conquest, or national aggrandizement. The eternal nature of Israel must be understood within the context of their unique mission: to promulgate God’s Name in the world. Therefore we must take care not to separate this verse from the rest of the portion.

**Appreciating the Message of Balak** In the end, the Sages did not add the parashah of Balak to the daily prayers. They felt that such a lengthy addition would be too great a burden for the people.

Reading this portion would be a burden, since its message is not applicable to every generation. Not every generation is able to appreciate the role that Israel’s timeless vitality plays in achieving its spiritual goals. Yet the very fact that the Sages wanted to incorporate it in the prayers indicates that a time will come when this message will be accepted and internalized by the nation as a whole.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, pp. 67-68)

[1] Mark Twain wrote in 1898: “[The Jew] has made a marvelous fight in the world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?” (Concerning The Jews, Harper’s Magazine, March 1898).

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from: **The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust**

<info@rabbisacks.org> subject: Covenant and Conversation COVENANT & CONVERSATION Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l

**Healing the Trauma of Loss CHUKAT** Rabbi Jonathan Sacks It took me two years to recover from the death of my father, of blessed memory. To this day, almost twenty years later, I am not sure why. He did not die suddenly or young. He was well into his eighties. In his last years he had to undergo five operations, each of which sapped his strength a little more. Besides which, as a Rabbi, I had to officiate at funerals and comfort the bereaved. I knew what grief looked like.

The Rabbis were critical of one who mourns too much too long.[1] They said that God Himself says of such a person, “Are you more compassionate than I am?” Maimonides rules, “A person should not become excessively broken-hearted because of a person’s death, as it says, ‘Do not weep for the dead nor bemoan him’ (Jer. 22:10). This means, ‘Do not weep excessively.’ For death is the way of the world, and one who grieves excessively at the way of the world is a fool.”[2] With rare exceptions, the outer limit of grief in Jewish law is a year, not more.

Yet knowing these things did not help. We are not always masters of our emotions. Nor does comforting others prepare you for your own experience of loss. Jewish law regulates outward conduct not inward feeling, and when it speaks of feelings, like the commands to love and not to hate, halachah generally translates this into behavioural terms, assuming, in the language of the *Sefer haChinuch*, that “the heart follows the deed.”[3]

I felt an existential black hole, an emptiness at the core of being. It deadened my sensations, leaving me unable to sleep or focus, as if life was happening at a great distance and as if I were a spectator watching a film out of focus with the sound turned off. The mood eventually passed but while it lasted I made some of the worst mistakes of my life.

I mention these things because they are the connecting thread of *parshat Chukat*. The most striking episode is the moment when the people complain about the lack of water. Moses does something wrong, and though God sends water from a rock, he also sentences Moses to an almost unbearable punishment: “Because you did not have sufficient faith in Me to sanctify Me before the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land I have given you.”

The commentators debate exactly what he did wrong. Was it that he lost his temper with the people (“Listen now, you rebels”)? That he hit the rock instead of speaking to it? That he made it seem as if it was not God but he and Aaron who were responsible for the water (“Shall we bring water out of this rock for you”)?

What is more puzzling still is why he lost control at that moment. He had faced the same problem before, but he had never lost his temper before. In Exodus 15 the Israelites at Marah complained that the water was undrinkable because it was bitter. In Exodus 17 at Massa-and-Meriva they complained that there was no water. God then told Moses to take his staff and hit the rock, and water flowed from it. So when in our *parsha* God tells Moses, “Take the staff … and speak to the rock,” it was surely a forgivable mistake to assume that God meant him also to hit it. That is what He had said last time. Moses was following precedent. And if God did not mean him to hit the rock, why did He command him to take his staff?

What is even harder to understand is the order of events. God had already told Moses exactly what to do. Gather the people. Speak to the rock, and water will flow. This was before Moses made his ill-tempered speech, beginning, “Listen, now you rebels.” It is understandable if you lose your composure when you are faced with a problem that seems insoluble. This had happened to Moses earlier when the people complained about the lack of meat. But it makes no sense at all to do so when God has already told you, “Speak to the rock … It will pour forth its water, and you will bring water out of the rock for them, and so you will give the community and their livestock water to drink.” Moses had received the solution. Why then was he so agitated about the problem?

Only after I lost my father did I understand the passage. What had happened immediately before? The first verse of the chapter states: “The people stopped at Kadesh. There, Miriam died and was buried.” Only then does it state that the people had no water. An ancient tradition explains that the people had hitherto been blessed by a miraculous source of water in the merit of Miriam. When she died, the water ceased.

However it seems to me that the deeper connection lies not between the death of Miriam and the lack of water but between her death and Moses’ loss of emotional equilibrium. Miriam was his elder sister. She had watched over his fate when, as a baby, he had been placed in a basket and floated down the Nile. She had had the courage and enterprise to speak to Pharaoh’s daughter and suggest that he be nursed by a Hebrew, thus reuniting Moses and his mother and ensuring that he grew up knowing who he was and to which people he belonged. He owed his sense of identity to her. Without Miriam, he could never have become the human face of God to the Israelites, law-giver, liberator and prophet. Losing her, he not only lost his sister. He lost the human foundation of his life.

Bereaved, you lose control of your emotions. You find yourself angry when the situation calls for calm. You hit when you should speak, and you speak when you should be silent. Even when God has told you what to do, you are only half-listening. You hear the words but they do not fully enter your mind. Maimonides asks the question, how was it that Jacob, a prophet, did not know that his son Joseph was still alive. He answers, because he was in a state of grief, and the Shechinah does not enter us when we are in a state of grief.[4] Moses at the rock was not so much a prophet as a man who had just lost his sister. He was inconsolable and not in control. He was the greatest of the prophets. But he was also human, rarely more so than here.

Our *parsha* is about mortality. That is the point. God is eternal, we are ephemeral. As we say in the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are “a fragment of pottery, a blade of grass, a flower that fades, a shadow, a cloud, a breath of wind.” We are dust and to dust we return, but God is life forever.

At one level, Moses-at-the-rock is a story about sin and punishment: “Because you did not have sufficient faith in me to sanctify Me … therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land I have given you.” We may not be sure what the sin exactly was, or why it merited so severe a punishment, but at least we know the ball-park, the territory to which the story belongs.

Nonetheless it seems to me that – here as in so many other places in the Torah – there is a story beneath the story, and it is a different one altogether. Chukat is about death, loss and bereavement. Miriam dies. Aaron and Moses are told they will not live to enter the Promised Land. Aaron dies, and the people mourn for him for thirty days. Together they constituted the greatest leadership team the Jewish people has ever known, Moses the supreme prophet, Aaron the first High Priest, and Miriam perhaps the greatest of them all.<sup>[5]</sup> What the parsha is telling us is that for each of us there is a Jordan we will not cross, a promised land we will not enter. “It is not for you to complete the task.” Even the greatest are mortal.

That is why the parsha begins with the ritual of the Red Heifer, whose ashes, mixed with the ash of cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and dissolved in “living water,” are sprinkled over one who has been in contact with the dead so that they may enter the Sanctuary.

This is one of the most fundamental principles of Judaism. Death defiles. For most religions throughout history, life-after-death has proved more real than life itself. That is where the gods live, thought the Egyptians. That is where our ancestors are alive, believed the Greeks and Romans and many primitive tribes. That is where you find justice, thought many Christians. That is where you find paradise, thought many Muslims. Life after death and the resurrection of the dead are fundamental, non-negotiable principles of Jewish faith, but Tanach is conspicuously quiet about them. It is focused on finding God in this life, on this planet, notwithstanding our mortality. “The dead do not praise God,” says the Psalm. God is to be found in life itself with all its hazards and dangers, bereavements and grief. We may be no more than “dust and ashes”, as Abraham said, but life itself is a never-ending stream, “living water”, and it is this that the rite of the Red Heifer symbolises.

With great subtlety the Torah mixes law and narrative together – the law before the narrative because God provides the cure before the disease. Miriam dies. Moses and Aaron are overwhelmed with grief. Moses, for a moment, loses control, and he and Aaron are reminded that they too are mortal and will die before entering the land. Yet this is, as Maimonides said, “the way of the world”. We are embodied souls. We are flesh and blood. We grow old. We lose those we love. Outwardly we struggle to maintain our composure but inwardly we weep. Yet life goes on, and what we began, others will continue.

Those we loved and lost live on in us, as we will live on in those we love. For love is as strong as death,<sup>[6]</sup> and the good we do never dies.<sup>[7]</sup>

[1] Moed Katan 27b. [2] Maimonides, Hilchot Avel 13:11. [3] Sefer ha-Hinnuch, command 16. [4] Maimonides, Eight Chapters, ch. 7, based on Pesachim 117a. [5] There are many midrashim on this theme about Miriam’s faith, courage and foresight. [6] Shir ha-Shirim 8:6. [7] See Mishlei 10:2, 11:4.

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from: Destiny Foundation/**Rabbi Berel Wein**  
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subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein  
Home Sabbath/ Holidays **CHUKAT** Rabbi Wein’s Weekly Blog

The series of disasters that befell the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai, as recorded for us in the previous parshiot of the book of Bamidbar, reaches its climax in this week’s parsha. Heaven decrees that neither Moshe nor Aharon or Miriam – the entire leadership team of the Jewish people – will be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. The treatment of Moshe individually seems rather harsh to our limited human understanding of these matters, in light of his seemingly minor transgression of smiting the rock instead of speaking to it. Because of this problem, some of the commentators and scholars – Rambam and Abarbanel for example – claim that the punishment was for an accumulation of previous minor transgressions that culminated with Moshe’s striking the rock – a straw that broke the camel’s back type of scenario. Most commentators however concentrate on attempting to explain the matter in light of the statement in the Torah itself, that Moshe’s punishment was due to the sole incident of his striking the rock instead of following God’s instruction to speak to it.

Be this matter as it is in all of its wondrous complexity and difficulty, the bottom line is that the Jewish people will not enjoy Moshe’s presence and leadership when they embark on their task of nation building upon entering the Land of Israel. All of Jewish history, in fact all of world history, would have been different had Moshe led Israel into its promised land. But it was not to be.

I think that among the many lessons and nuances present in this Torah lesson there is one that bears great relevance to understanding the pattern of Jewish history itself. And that lesson is that a leader, no matter how great he is individually – even if he is Moshe who is able, so to speak, to relate to God directly and at will – is still only a product of his time and circumstances. If Moshe’s generation, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai to receive the Torah is not going to enter the Land of Israel, then Moshe himself will also not enter it. The leader is bound to the fate and occurrences of his

generation and times. A great leader of one time is not necessarily the great leader of another period.

The Talmud points this out in many different ways: "Yiftach is the great leader for his generation just as Shmuel was the great leader for his time." Individually speaking, the two may not be on the same plane and level of spiritual greatness, but Shmuel is not the suited for leadership of Yiftach's generation just as Yiftach is not the right person to lead the generation of Shmuel. Moshe is inextricably bound to his generation and cannot enter the Land of Israel. The rabbis also taught us: "The rule over the people of one time cannot impinge for even a hair's breadth over the rule over the people of the next generation." These ideas and axioms bound Moshe as well and they precluded him from entering the Land of Israel no matter his spiritual greatness and quality.

Shabat shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein

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fw from hamelaket@gmail.com from: Rabbi Yochanan Zweig <genesis@torah.org> to: rabbizweig@torah.org subject: Rabbi Zweig

**Rabbi 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, which 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 wanted 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 would have very likely killed this person and probably wouldn't 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.

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### **Tarshish, Canals and Divrei Hayamim**

**By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff**

Question #1: Where was Tarshish? Was Tarshish west or east of Eretz Yisrael?

Question #2: Route Canal Was the ancient spice route accessible via canal?

Question #3: Ezra's Error Could Ezra have made a mistake that crept into Divrei Hayamim?

Foreword We will soon discover that attempting to identify “Tarshish,” mentioned numerous times in Tanach, will lead us to a fascinating search! Let us start with the most basic of questions: Was Tarshish a person, place, or thing? The answer is “yes.” The word appears in Tanach dozens of times, sometimes as someone's name (Bereishis 10:4; Esther 1:14; Divrei Hayamim I 7:10), often as the name of a place (Yonah 1:3; Yechezkel 38:13; Tehillim 72:10) and, occasionally, as the name of a precious stone (Shemos 28:20; 39:13; Yechezkel 10:9, 28:13; Shir Hashirim 5:14),

Introduction Since we know that Yonah went to Yafo, on the Mediterranean Sea, to hire a ship to go to Tarshish, it would appear that this ancient city was located along the Mediterranean basin, or perhaps somewhere along the Atlantic coast of either northern Africa or Western Europe. Yet, from other sources in Tanach, we have evidence that Tarshish was accessible from the Red Sea, an inlet of the Indian Ocean. How could this ancient port have been accessible to both the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian ocean, in an era when rounding Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tips of Africa was unknown? The Suez Canal, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, was not constructed until the 19th century!

Let me begin from the basics, so that we can see whether our question is because we overlooked some fundamental information. Yonah has a prophetic vision to go to Nineveh, which we know is in Mesopotamia, an overland trip from where Yonah is in Eretz Yisrael. Although the sefer bearing his name never tells us why, Yonah resists carrying out the word of Hashem, certainly knowing that this jeopardizes his hard-earned reward in olam haba, and instead decides to leave Eretz Yisrael, presumably so that he can no longer receive Hashem's prophecy. He travels to the major port servicing Eretz Yisrael, Yafo, and leaves by ship to Tarshish.

I know of numerous suggestions as to the identity of Tarshish, including places in Asia Minor, North Africa or Iberia whose name might have been Hebraized to Tarshish, various locations in Italy or on the island of Sardinia, and even suggestions that it might be in Britain, which is also accessible from Eretz Yisrael via the Mediterranean Sea. We will soon see that some commentaries suggest that Tarshish might be cognate to Carthage, on the northern coast of Africa not far from where Tunis is today, which was, at one point, the most powerful port city on the Mediterranean. The word Tarshish may be related to the Hebrew root שׁשֶׁ, to crush, break into bits or impoverish, and thus might be a play on words referring to the city which was home to a sea-based empire and crushed its opposition.

From the words of the prophet Yechezkel (27:12), we know that Tarshish was a source of many valuable metals, although

Yirmiyahu Hanavi (10:9) singles out silver as its valuable export. Assuming that Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel are describing the same place, we can assume that it was located either near an area where many metals, but particularly silver, could be mined, or as a distribution point for them. Having established from the pasuk in Yonah that Tarshish was a port somewhere in, or accessible from, the Mediterranean basin, we then discover that Shelomoh Hamelech conquered Etzyon Gever, which is a port on the Red Sea (Melachim I, 9, 26; Divrei Hayamim II, 8, 17), an inlet of the Indian Ocean. There (Melachim I, 9, 28), it describes how the merchant ships of Shelomoh Hamelech's fleet travelled to Ophir to acquire massive amounts of gold, and, later, it describes how Shelomoh Hamelech's fleet returned from their three years' journey to Tarshish laden with gold, silver, ivory, and other valuables (Melachim I, 10, 22, see Abarbanel; Divrei Hayamim II, 9, 21). It is easy to understand the commercial, political and military value of Shelomoh Hamelech establishing a port with access to the Indian Ocean. Eretz Yisrael is located where the massive Eurasian land mass touches slightly on the continent of Africa. This small touch, which we refer to as the Sinai Peninsula, is what preempts Africa from being the largest island on the planet, and, instead, it forms the southern border of the Mediterranean Sea and the western border of the Indian Ocean. Even in ancient times, spices and other valuable goods were shipped from the Far East, especially from India and the Spice Islands, today part of Indonesia, either via ship to Arabian ports, or overland through the Silk Road. Shelomoh Hamelech, with his ally, Hiram, sought to cut out the middlemen along this shipping route and, thus, be able to import these valuables directly from the source. For this reason, he established a port so that he could do business directly with the sources of these valuables on the Indian Ocean and beyond, and control this massive import-export business himself.

By the way, it is curious to note that the early stages of the empire-building and colony- seizing of the European powers in the 15th to 19th centuries were essentially for the same purpose -- to import directly from the Far East and to establish a monopoly over these trade routes. This is why de Gama, Cabral, Columbus, Magellan and Hudson wanted to discover a sea route to Asia, and why Spain, Portugal, England, Holland and France sought and fought to create worldwide empires and trading posts.

Returning to the topic of Tarshish: Ships left from the new port of Etzyon Gever that Shelomoh Hamelech conquered and established, with access to the Indian Ocean, and traveled to Tarshish, as is also implied by a pasuk later in Melachim (I, 22:49). This leaves us with a major predicament: Where was Tarshish? Was it in or near the Mediterranean Basin, as implied by the pasuk in Yonah, or was it somewhere in the Indian Ocean or beyond, since it took three years to travel by

ship from Etzyon Gever there and back, including the time used for trading at its various ports of call?

There are several ways to attempt to resolve this conundrum. I will first share with you those suggested by the Abarbanel and the Malbim. The Abarbanel explains that Tarshish ships, mentioned in the book of Melachim, are not ships traveling to Tarshish, but describe the large, deep-sea vessels capable of making an extensive voyage. These ships left Eretz Yisrael's western ports, on the Mediterranean, for Tarshish, which he identifies as Carthage, which is what gave these ships their name, but they also left from Etzyon Gever for journeys to the Far East, which was called Ophir. This is the way Abarbanel explains the pasuk that uses Tarshish as a pronoun, "Yehoshofat made ten Tarshish ships to travel to Ophir...that were smashed in Etzyon Gever" (Melachim I, 22:49); Yehoshofat had his shipbuilders manufacture ten large oceangoing vessels to travel to the Far East, but they never made it out of port.

The difficulty that Abarbanel then faces is the verse in Divrei Hayamim (20:36) that recounts this same event, and says that Yehoshofat had manufactured ships in Etzyon Gever to ship to Tarshish, which, according to Abarbanel's opinion that Tarshish is Carthage, was seemingly impossible at the time. The problem is that the pasuk in Divrei Hayamim is not describing a type of large merchant ship, but a destination. To answer this question, the Abarbanel presents an approach that most of us, and also the Malbim, find unacceptable: "Perhaps Ezra (the author of Divrei Hayamim, see Bava Basra 15a) erred -- he found it written that Yehoshofat manufactured Tarshish ships, and he thought that this meant ships to sail to Tarshish, but this is not accurate." Abarbanel then suggests that, because of a war with Phoenicia, perhaps Yehoshofat was unable to manufacture ships at his Mediterranean coast ports, but had to manufacture them in Etzyon Gever. He then planned to have them travel to the Mediterranean, probably via some canal that connected the Red Sea with the Nile River, but the ships were destroyed en route (as to be expected for an ocean going vessel attempted such a route). I researched and discovered that there had been an ancient canal dug to connect the Nile with the Red Sea, but its purpose was to import and export into Egypt, not to provide a method of transporting goods from Asia to Europe. I presume that, similar to the Erie Canal, it was basically a ditch, suitable for barges and other small craft, but certainly not deep enough for oceangoing vessels.

Let me explain how the Abarbanel can say that Ezra erred, which we consider to be an unacceptable, and perhaps sacrilegious, approach. The Abarbanel wrote extensive annotations to the Rambam's Moreh Nevuchim, which some consider its most vital commentary. In his remarks, he is in the forefront of explaining the Rambam's philosophic positions,

whenever the Ramban (in his commentary on the Torah) or other rishonim take issue with the Rambam's approaches. Abarbanel, clearly, is following the Rambam's position that the works of Kesuvim (as opposed to those of Nevi'im) are written with ruach hakodesh (Moreh Nevuchim 2:45), but not with prophecy. In the Rambam's opinion, ruach hakodesh is Divine inspiration allowing someone to understand and accomplish more than he otherwise would be able (Moreh Nevuchim 2:45); however, there is no reason to assume that it precludes an error in decision making, fact gathering, or even in interpretation of halacha. For example, Rambam includes David Hamelech, Shelomoh Hamelech and Shimshon as having ruach hakodesh, although we know that each of them made severe errors of judgment and that both Shelomoh Hamelech and his father David made halachic errors, notwithstanding their ruach hakodesh.

Malbim (Commentary to Melachim I 10, 22) finds Abarbanel's approach to be unacceptable. Instead, he suggests that Yehoshofat's ships left Etzyon Gever for Tarshish, which he identifies with a port city on the Atlantic coast of Spain. This approach has the advantage that there was only one Tarshish and it was accessible from the Mediterranean. The Malbim understands that ships from any of Eretz Yisrael's ports could access Tarshish by way of the open ocean, implying that ships left Etzyon Gever for Tarshish by circumnavigating the African continent.

However, this approach does not satisfy me. Eretz Yisrael had ports, at the time, in both Yafo and Akko, which have easy access to the Mediterranean. The vitality of a port at Etzyon Gever was that it has easy access, via the Gulf of Eilat, to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

I am surprised that neither Abarbanel or Malbim even mention what I consider the obvious answer, one that the Gemara and the rishonim mention in several other contexts regarding place names – that there are two places with the same name (Arachin 32b; Tosafos, Gittin 2a s.v. VeAshkelon). It is obvious, for example, that Har Hahar describes two different places in chumash; the place where Aharon is buried is somewhere on the eastern side of the Jordan River (Bamidbar, Chapters 20 and 33), and the Har Hahar mentioned as the northwest border of Eretz Yisrael (Bamidbar 34:7,8) is, obviously, along the Mediterranean coast, somewhere to the north of contemporary Israel. I am aware of at least six opinions exactly which seaside mountain should be identified with Har Hahar on the Mediterranean, but none of them is the burial place of Aharon. Thus, the obvious answer to the question is that more than one place was called Tarshish. Since the word tarshish is also the name of a precious stone, as in one of the stones that the kohein gadol wore on his breastplate, it could be that Tarshish, the port, was a name given to any place where this precious stone could be acquired, similar to the diamond exchanges in New York, Antwerp or Ramat Gan.

Another possibility, which I suggested above, is that the word Tarshish, based on the root טְשִׁישׁ, came to mean any power that impoverishes and dispossesses those that oppose it, or that the place name was borrowed to refer to another maritime superpower that vanquished and subjugated its enemies and established control of its trade routes. Certainly, there were sea powers along the Indian Ocean route, between Shelomoh and Hiram's Levant and the far distant Spice Islands, that met this description. Thus, either of our approaches explains why the name Tarshish applied to two trade powers, one in the days of Yonah in the Mediterranean Basin, and the other in the days of Shelomoh. Since Shelomoh was earlier, it could be that the original Tarshish was off the Indian Ocean and Carthage's name was borrowed from the original Tarshish. And, of course, none of these approaches is mutually exclusive: One Tarshish may have been named for its power, another for its valuable stone or precious metals trade, and a third borrowed its name from the original source.

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from: **Michael Hoenig** <MHoenig@herzfeld-rubin.com>  
The following is a Mitzvah Connection from Parshas Balak ( 25:7 ) and Parshas Pinchas ( 25:11 ) regarding the extraordinary Kano'ii ( zealot ) who slew Kozbi and Zimri while they engaged in an act of blatant debauchery . This act of impulsive justice was fraught with danger for Pinchas since Zimri was an elite member of Shevet Shimon . The slaying had remedial consequences far beyond terminating the fornication . The deviant behavior of the pair was part of a broader picture in which large numbers of Yisrael were seduced by the B'nos Midian using sexual promiscuity to get the Jews TO WORSHIP BAAL IDOLS and, notably, involved the decadent practices of worshipping BAAL PEOR . Indeed, Kozbi's assignment was to seduce Moshe himself but, eventually settled on Zimri when he persuaded her of his leadership status and the preeminence ( according to ancestral order of birth ) of his tribe, Shimon, over Moshe's tribe, Laivi. Hashem's anger flared at the Jews' en-masse-misbehavior and a horrible plague broke out infecting tens of thousands -- many from Shevet Shimon . The bravery and zealotry of PINCHAS brought a halt to the devastating plague and spared Yisrael even deeper losses. Hashem rewards Pinchas with deep spiritual qualities and the Kehuna ( priesthood ) as the Torah describes .

The Small Yud ---

PINCHAS is written with a smaller letter Yud that draws Chazal's attention . For example, Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch ( at Balak 25:11 ) comments : " Pinchas -- the Yud has to be written ze'rah, small. It is not impossible that his name was originally Pinchas ( without yud ) but that the Yud was added after his energetic stepping forward to make it sound as Pi Nechas; Nechas being the same as nechatz, to urge on, to say thereby " my mouth, the mouth of God urged me to it . "

Also of interest, R' Munk's Commentary ( Kol HaTorah, Pinchas, 25:11 ) explains that the Gematria of his name, PINCHAS -- 208 -- is the same as the Patriarch YITZCHAK . Says Rav Munk : " The numerical values of their names are equal ( 208 ) and they were alike not only physically but spiritually . Like Yitzchak, Pinchas had the same predilection for Midas HaDin, the principle of strict justice . "

Rav Munk adds, " Pinchas, like Yitzchak was a zealot but he went further than his predecessor, and filled a void that Yitzchak had left. To be sure, Pinchas too was ready to be sacrificed on the holy altar, but what is more, he did not hesitate to kill out of love for Hashem . " ( 25:11 ).

Rav Munk also notes that some of the Sages declare PINCHAS to be ELIYAHU HaNAVI ( " Pinchas Hu Eliyahu " ) -- the meaning of which is a deep topic beyond the scope of this essay . Suffice to say, both PINCHAS and ELIYAHU exhibited zealotry ( Kano'us ) in the love of Hashem .

Pinchas and Yitzchak -- A Kesher ---

In an earlier Mitzvah Connection on the name YITZCHAK , which equals 208, it was observed that Mitzvah Number 208 forbids giving over one's offspring to pass through the fire of SACRIFICE TO THE IDOL MOLOCH , a barbaric form of idol worship . In the case of Yitzchak's name ( equaling 208 ), the Mitzvah Connection was a strong Kesher ( link ) and a " direct hit " since YITZCHAK was the designated Korban Temimah in the Akeidah episode, initially and ostensibly a command to sacrifice Avraham's offspring .

The Mitzvah's Remez and Connection to YITZCHAK heightens the devotional love and reverence for Hashem that Avraham possessed in order to be willing to perform the sacrifice of his beloved son despite the odiousness of child sacrifice .

Now that the name PINCHAS has the very same numerical value as YITZCHAK and Mitzvah Number 208 is the very same prohibition of worship of the IDOL MOLOCH , in what way does the Mitzvah Connection clue help to explain the link to PINCHAS ?

Well, one has to look at the broader picture of the events of which the Kozbi/Zimri episode was a part . The Midianites were seducing B'nai Yisrael TO IDOL WORSHIP through sexual enticement. This was the sordid episode of BAAL PEOR , a disgusting form of BAAL IDOL WORSHIP , for which the plague ensued and ravaged the Shevet of Shimon plus others .

PINCHAS' zealotry stopped the plague and ended the headlong rush of many towards IDOLATRY . Mitzvah Number 208, AN ANTI-IDOLATRY STATUTE , is connected to PINCHAS because he was Hashem's forceful instrument against IDOLATRY .

Pinchas and Eliyahu ---

When Chazal say " Pinchas Hu Eliyahu " ( Pinchas is Eliyahu ), the Mitzvah Connection also seems to resonate as a Remez,

clue, against IDOL WORSHIP once again -- since one of the transcendent acts of Eliyahu HaNavi occurred when the Prophet challenged the Priests of BAAL on Har ( Mount ) Carmel . Eliyahu's sensational victory over the BAAL priests caused a temporary return of Yisrael to the worship of Hashem . This, in general respects , is akin to PINCHAS' causing a halt to the headlong rush of many towards BAAL PEOR worship induced by the Midianite women .

Above, we noted that the letter Yud in PINCHAS is written smaller . Rav Hirsch , in his expert parsing of word meanings sees it as a letter added after the zealotry to give further explanation of the hero's act . Others see deeper meaning in the later addition of the Yud since that letter " represents the essence of who we are, the spiritual force that makes each and every one of us unique, and which drives us to accomplish in life . " ( See Rabbi Pinchas Winston, " The ' Leftover ' Yud, Parshas Pinchas ", July 10, 2009 ( 5769 ), in Perceptions, available at Torah.org ) .

The Yud had been audible , phonetically-speaking, but not visible . As a result of Pinchas' heroic act of zealousness, it became revealed as well . R' Winston cites a number of sources explaining the depth and meaning of the letters Yud and Heh ( e.g., Menachos 29b, the Maharal, , etc.) and the " four levels " that were in Pinchas ( citing, e.g., the Zohar, Sha'ar HaGilgulim, etc. ) . As these deep but intriguing discussions are beyond the scope of this Connection , interested readers can refer to the entire essay by R' Winston and his cited sources .

The fact that the smaller Yud was added to Pinchas' name after his act of Kano'us, does, however, seem to have some impact from the Mitzvah Connection standpoint . Why ? Because , while the numerical value of PINCHAS with the Yud is 208, the name WITHOUT THE YUD equals 198 .

Mitzvah Number 198 forbids an " Ervah " ( prohibited sexual acts with women forbidden in marriage ) , specifically with one's mother's sister . Mitzvah Number 198 sits amidst a cluster of Prohibitive Commandments -- from Mitzvah Number 189 to Mitzvah Number 207 -- all dealing with prohibited sexual and marital relationships .

Note that the Mitzvah immediately following the cluster of anti-Ervah statutes is Mitzvah Number 208 -- the one linked to the names Yitzchak and Pinchas !

The significance of Pinchas' name value without the Yud -- and hence a Mitzvah Connection regarding Ervah practices -- would seem to be a Remez, clue, to his status before the Kozbi/Zimri travesty ( AN ERVAH of gargantuan proportions given the location of the sinners, their public debacle, and its intimate link to the goal of leading Yisrael into IDOL WORSHIP ) .

Because of PINCHAS' heroic act of zealousness, seemingly, a Yud was added to his name reflecting that his bravery not only

halted Ervah misdeeds but also stopped Avodah Zarah -- BAAL IDOL WORSHIP -- in its tracks ! PINCHAS, YITZCHAK, Eliyahu are names that amply reflect Mitzvah Connection Kesharim or Remozim that enhance the Gadlus and complex aura of PINCHAS -- as well as the reasons a Yud was " added " to his name M.H.

from: **Usher Smith** <osherhachaim@gmail.com> date: Jun 28, 2023, 9:50 AM subject: Osher Hachaim for this week

אוֹשֵׁר הַחַיִם לְעֵגֶן רִ' חִיִּם יוֹסֵף לֵיבֶן רִ' שָׁאוֹל יִצְחָק זֶל בְּסֶ"ד

Dear reader, this paper is not intended to be used during davening. Please feel free to take it with you!

שבועה עשר בתמוז, תשפ"ג

Living to Honor Hashem The Chachomim teach us (Taanis 26a) that on Shiva Asar BiTamuz, five great misfortunes occurred. The first of those mentioned, is that the luchos were broken.<sup>1</sup> We might wish to understand, what lesson could we derive from the shivrei haluchos? The gemara (Shekalim 6:1) tells us in the name of Rabbi Yehudah ben Lakish, that there were two arks that accompanied Klal Yisroel in the midbar. One held the Torah which stayed in the Ohel Moed. The other, held the shivrei luchos and accompanied B'nei Yisroel wherever they went – even in war.<sup>2</sup> One might wonder, if the luchos represented such a catastrophic event amongst our people, why would they be chosen to accompany the yidden throughout their journeys? In what way could this be considered a merit for them, through which they would be protected? If anything, it would seem only to be an accusation against them?! We may understand this better through the following account. The Chidushei HaRim would often review his writings, while making any necessary corrections or improvements to them. Once, his grandson saw him going through his kesavim, while from time to time throwing some of them into a fire! His grandson asked: "Why is the zaide burning some of his Torah writings, of which so much effort went into being mechaber them?!" The Chidushei HaRim answered, "You should always remember that the most integral point of one's learning and being mechadesh, is to bring about a greater honor to Hashem, thereby bringing Him a greater nachas ruach. Therefore, if it appears to me while I am going through my writings of Torah, that some of them were not written, or even learned over, in the way that I have just described, I will destroy them in the fire." (Ma'or Hagolah, chapter 13, Sar HaTorah)

The gemara (Brachos 8b) states regarding the shivrei luchos, "Be careful with the honor of an elderly Talmid Chochom that forgot what he had learned due to compulsory reasons (i.e., he became ill, or overburdened with making a living – Rashi), since we have learned, that both the luchos and the shivrei luchos were put in the Aron."<sup>4</sup> Thus, it may be inferred from here that when Moshe Rabeinu threw down the luchos, it was clearly done in a compulsory manner; he did not have any

other choice but to break them. This was so, because when Moshe saw the immense cheit that was done, he possibly realized that this must have been caused because of some degree of a lack of l'sheim Shomayim in their keeping of the initial Torah which they accepted. Therefore, it was necessary for him to break those luchos, so that they would receive the Torah once again, this time in as pure unadulterated a fashion as possible. This may now explain why Klal Yisroel took the shivrei luchos with them throughout their journeys. This was because they needed a constant reminder of the importance of serving Hashem with absolute sincerity - with no other purpose than to bring honor to His Name. It was specifically this orientation of Klal Yisroel, to remember to always act completely for the sake of Hashem, which would give them the zechus needed to protect them wherever they went, even in war.

## Parshas Chukat: Revisiting Mei Merivah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

### I. The Text: Bamidbar 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 B 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) B 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 B they only mention Au-mayim ayin lish=tot@ (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought B 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 Agood, wide land@ should have any of those resources?

In numerous essays, I=ve underscored that a successful reader of Tanakh must become Apart of the story@ B 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 B and we know that Moses will never enter the Land. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do B either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are B 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 Aflowing 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 and 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* (Asham), we must have arrived at the Land!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis and the people believe that they've arrived but the *A*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 *A*unexpected use of Elokim followed, in ch. 2 [v. 4 ff.] by Hashem Elokim indicates a change in *A*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 *A*what=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): *A*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 God 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 B as confirmed by v. 2
- 2) A disenchantment with the ALand@ 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 Ave-dibbar tem 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 (Abekiu@) 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 Areal@ concordance; there are dozens of examples in the canon where the two are interchanged) and read, rather, Aspeak 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 Asin@**

What do we expect Moses to say at this point? (more Aanticipatory reading@) Al will bring water from the rock, something no human can accomplish B therefore, you all see that it is God Almighty who is protecting and leading us@Y.or something to that effect.

Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point Aha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?@ B but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen=s mother declares ADo you call this a clean room@ B her son understands that she is calling it a mess B but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing B 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 B 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 Awizard@ 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 Alo tavo=u@ B you shall not come B rather Alo tavi=u@ B 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 Awaters 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 Abetween 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 Aanticipatory 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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## Parshat Chukat

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

Parashat Hukkat 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, malingeringers, 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 Cana'an 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 Avraham, 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'ilah," 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 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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**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 take 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 "girsas" in Torat Chaim's Ramban is "u'mikraot mfurashim HEYM" while Chavel's edition has: "u'mikraot mfurashim 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'aplilim" 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 Bamidbar 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'meraglim 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 KADEXH 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, KADEXH in 1:46 must be KADEXH 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 KADEXH in 1:46 must be KADEXH 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 Eilot & 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 KADEXH 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 KADEXH Midbar Tzin:

"And Moshe sent messengers from KADEXH 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 ("derek Yam Suf" and "as God commanded")- and KADEXH in 1:46 can still be KADEXH 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 KADEXH 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 "l'mai nafka minah" - what difference does it make when Bnei Yisrael first arrived in KADEXH.

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

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#### 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'emanem 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 contain 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.]

#### 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.]

#### 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).

#### 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.

"...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.

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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'dbar tem 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

#### COMMAND #5 - Give drink to the people and their animals.

##### (20:8)

##### MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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 "chillul 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 have 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 takes 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 Chovav; 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'leydut" - [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 shoresh.]

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 - "matelyhu").

[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 shoresh 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 (Il 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 "kvivot ha'taaveh" Moshe himself claims that he can 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 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 Sfat 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

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#### 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, Imei 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 "Imei 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 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 explicit "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 villify 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 Pesahim 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'hillim 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'kalekha 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 withheld 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 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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## 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 care 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":

**Avaraham**

Good Eye  
Humble Spirit  
Meek Soul

**Bilam**

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

Virtual ClassRoom enhancements by Reuven Weiser.

**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 Tovu 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!

## 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 prefacing 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 prefacing 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