

Potomac Torah Study Center

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Next Thursday, July 2, is the fast of 17 Tammuz

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.

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

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We mourn those of our people who have perished since attacks have resumed. May the IDF and the U.S. soon force Iran to seek peace, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

Chukat opens with the Torah of the Red Heifer – the procedure required to become tahor (ritually pure) again after contact with a dead body (ch. 19). God almost certainly gave this law to Moshe at Har Sinai, but the Torah presents the law here, at the end of the discussion of the generation of the Exodus, after the sins from the Korach rebellion and the Meraglim lead to many deaths among the people. Without further discussion, the Torah continues in chapter 20 with the story of the next generation, after a gap of 38 years.

Miriam dies at Kadesh, and the well that had accompanied her since three days after the Exodus stops giving water. The people complain of thirst:

Why did you have us ascend from Egypt to bring us to this evil place. . . not a place of seed, or fig, or grape, or pomegranate; and there is no water to drink" (20:5).

Moshe and Aharon fall on their faces and believe that they are hearing the same complaints several times over the past forty years. However, the complaints this time are very different. Instead of wanting to appoint a leader to return to Egypt, the people are complaining that they are impatient to enter the land of "grains, figs, grapes, and pomegranates" – Israel. That is the main complaint. The lack of water comes second. If the people had sinned in their request, God would have been angry. Instead, Hashem tells Moshe to speak to the rock (Miriam's well) and it would provide water. Moshe instead calls the people rebels, treats them with anger, and strikes the rock twice. As Rabbi Hayyim Angel recognizes, Moshe and Aharon, without Miriam to advise them, do not recognize that the source of the upset is thirst and impatience to arrive and enter Israel. The new generation needs a leader who can recognize the needs of the new generation and how these needs differ from those of their parents.

Why must Aharon and Moshe die at this point, before entering the land that Hashem had promised to our Avot? Suppose Moshe and Aharon had stepped aside to let Yehoshua and Eleazar take their positions? Would the people who had looked to these leaders for forty years accept the new leadership without looking back to Moshe and Aharon? Would Yehoshua and Eleazar be comfortable as leaders if their predecessors were still around?

Chukat shows that the new generation still has problems looking to Hashem for all their needs. When the people again face hunger and thirst, and they show signs of depression, God releases the snakes and serpents to bite the people. Instead of praying directly to Hashem, they ask Moshe to do something. God tells Moshe to make a fiery serpent, place it on a pole, and tell the people to look up to it. When they look toward heaven, they recover from the poison (20:6-9). While

the serpent incident shows a relapse, the people also initiate contact with Sihon, and when its king refuses permission for B'Nai Yisrael to pass through and engages the Jews in war, the new generation meets the challenge and defeats Sihon and then Ammon (21:21 ff.).

Many years we read Balak with Chukat outside Israel. Balak is unique as the only parsha since the time of Noach to take place entirely from the perspective of non-Jews. None of the Jews are aware of the interactions between Balak and Bilaam or the efforts of Moab and Midian to protect their countries from Israel. The king of Moab hires Bilaam, a noted sorcerer, to curse B'Nai Yisrael. Bilaam asks Hashem for permission, and God tells him not to curse the people. Bilaam proceeds anyway, and Hashem turns his curses into blessings of great beauty.

From this story, we learn that non-Jewish nations surrounding Canaan fear B'Nai Yisrael, and God protects our people even when we are unaware of the threat. We should remember this episode whenever Israel faces a threat from neighboring countries. Mordechai understood that when Haman threatened the Jews of Persia, God would find a way to save the Jews. Esther could be Hashem's agent, or she could refuse – then God would find another agent to save our people. We had the same issue at the time of Chanukah. In multiple wars between Israel and the Arab countries, military historians could not explain how Israel defeated the combined Arab forces – but we understand that Hashem behind the scenes finds a way for us to prevail.

Political trends look terrible for our people, especially with anti-Semitic candidates defeating moderate candidates in New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and other parts of the country. When facing anti-Semitism, the Rebbe of blessed memory told Jews to become more observant, more obviously Jewish, and perform more mitzvot. Rabbi Marc Angel's reaction to the adverse election results in New York fits this pattern. He immediately purchased Israel Bonds for all his family members, contributed to AIPAC, and wrote to his representatives in Congress. He is also working for organizations in Israel and the United States that enhance Jewish life. These sorts of reactions have helped our people for thousands of years, and we should emulate the Rebbe and Rabbi Angel.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, advocated for peace in Israel, our country, and all over the world. However, Rabbi Cahan understood that pursuing peace requires moral grounding (our mitzvot) and strength. Pursuing peace sometimes requires that we and Israel go to war to defeat our enemies, especially those who follow the legacy of Amalek. Rabbi Cahan served in the Navy for many years, both on active duty and in the reserves. Our children and grandchildren are proud that both my father and Hannah's father served in World War II, and our son Evan has served in the Air Force and now Public Health Service for his entire professional career to date.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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. 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.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Shani bat Tziporah; Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeevi Esther; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Rena Michal bat Sara, Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Haftarat Parshat Chukat: The Argument That Persists
By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander *
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Rabbi Brander dedicates his Dvar Haftarah this week to the heroic soldiers, security forces and first responders of the IDF, defenders of the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and the United States Armed Forces, defenders of liberty and justice for all. May Hashem protect them and bring them all home speedily and safely.

The haftarah for Parshat Chukat (Judges chapter 11) opens with a scene that feels strikingly familiar. Yiftach, the judge and ad hoc military leader of Gilad, dispatches messengers to reason with the king of Ammon, asking: “*What do you have against us [you terrorize us], that you came to attack our land?*” (v. 12). The Ammonite reply is direct and bellicose, raising grievances from close to three hundred years before: “*Israel seized my lands when they came out of Egypt, from the Arnon to the Yabok and up to the Jordan. Now hand them back peacefully*” (v. 13).

The Ammonite’s claim centers on the disputed Transjordanian territory of Gilad, the shared backdrop of both our parsha and our haftarah. It also reflects a familiar charge: that Israel holds land that does not rightly belong to us.

In Parshat Chukat, the Israelites navigate past the kingdoms of Edom and Moav, which both refuse entry to the Jewish people. Then the Israelites are forced into confrontation with Sichon, king of the Amorites, after he refuses their request for safe passage through his land and attacks them. Israel defeats Sichon and takes possession of his land — the very land whose ownership lies at the heart of the Ammonite complaint centuries later, in the haftarah.

Yiftach’s response to that complaint is one of the most precise and legally rigorous arguments in all of Tanakh.

He does not bluster or threaten, but marshals the facts. When Israel came out of Egypt, he reminds the Ammonite king, it sought peaceful transit through the region. When passage was refused, Israel went around; it did not seize a single inch of Moabite or Ammonite territory. It took instead the land of the Amorites: territory already conquered by Sichon, who then launched an unprovoked assault on the wandering and weary Israelites.

The conclusion is clear: A nation that attacks another in an attempt to annihilate it forfeits its claims to protection. Israel did not conquer out of ambition. It defended itself, and the land it now holds is the rightful fruit of that defense. Yiftach’s message to Ammon is therefore not a threat; it is a warning. Tend to your own land. Do not press claims that history does not support. Leave us in peace, enjoy your land and let us live in safety in the land that is ours. [emphasis added]

The Ammonites, of course, do not listen. War follows, and Israel prevails.

Reading these passages today, their contemporary resonance is hard to ignore. Today, accusations abound: that the Jewish presence in their own land is illegitimate; that the wars Israel has been forced to fight were wars of conquest rather than survival. These arguments are all made today before biased international forums and news media with the same confidence and the same disregard for historical fact that the Ammonite king brought to his confrontation with Yiftach.

There is a consistency across history in the way our enemies engage us. Our obligation, beyond all else, remains to seek the truth, and to ensure the safety of our families and communities.

But as we all know, the haftarah does not end with Yiftach’s victory. It ends with a tragedy that carries its own lesson, one that speaks not to Israel’s enemies but to Israel itself.

When Yiftach returns home after the battle, he expects what any returning commander might reasonably expect: a grateful people, a jubilant reception, offerings brought in recognition of the victory. It seems to be precisely this expectation that drives him to vow to consecrate as a sacrifice the first thing to emerge from his house upon his return. But when he arrives, there are no crowds. There is only his daughter, coming out alone to meet him. The people, it appears, have never left their homes, and have never paused to acknowledge the man who secured their safety.

The tragedy of Yiftach's daughter is well known and has been much discussed (see my comments <https://ots.org.il/parshat-chukat-the-power-of-words-to-break-or-build/>). But the tragedy of Yiftach's reception deserves equal attention. A warrior's bravery and sacrifice went unrecognized by those he had protected. A man who had given everything, grown up an outsider, defended his community was once again rejected and neglected.

We dare not make that same mistake. Our soldiers today return from battles no less deserving than Yiftach. They return carrying the physical and emotional weight of what they have seen and done in our defense. What they require is not symbolic gratitude, but sustained responsibility... Mental health care, financial assistance, recognition, and gratitude are not optional gestures we extend to the heroes of the IDF. [emphasis added]

While it is God who protects Israel, He does so through the hands and hearts of these men and women. Our obligation is to ensure that those hands are never left unsupported; that no one who defends our people returns to silence. And that support should not be just for a moment. It should last for as long as it is needed.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Shabbat Shalom

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-chukat-rabbi-brander-5786/?pfstyle=wp>

Haftarat Parshat Balak: I Sent Miriam
By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander *
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

The connections between Parshat Balak and its haftarah, the prophecy of Micha, are layered and striking. Bilam's oracles, delivered at Balak's insistence, predict the flourishing and ultimate triumph of the Jewish people. Micha echoes that same vision, reminding us that it is not human power but, *"as ample rains shower upon grass; they will not look to any man, nor place their hopes in humankind"* (Micah 5:6): It is God who determines Israel's destiny.

For those reading these words in the shadow of the current geopolitical moment, when Israel's worldly alliances and maneuvering feel increasingly uncertain, this reminder carries particular weight.

But an equally resonant message in this haftarah can be gleaned from a single verse in which the prophet speaks in God's voice directly to the people of Israel: *"I redeemed you from the house of slavery; I sent Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam"* (Micah 6:4). Three names; three leaders, set side by side, without hierarchy.

This matters enormously, not only in its ancient context, but in ours. In nearly every generation, debates arise about the role of women in Jewish communal leadership, and those debates often carry the implication that authentic Jewish leadership is primarily, or essentially, male. Micha's verse cuts through these arguments with prophetic directness. It does not distinguish between the leaders it names. God sent all three.

Miriam's path to that standing was unlike that of her brothers, and understanding it deepens the prophet's claim. The Talmud teaches (Sotah 12a) that **Miriam was the first of the three siblings to show signs of leadership, and she did so as a child**. When her father, Amram, reeling from Pharaoh's genocidal decrees, concluded that Israelite men should separate from their wives — better, he reasoned, not to bring children into a world of slavery and male offspring to a fate of death — it was his young daughter who stood up to him. She recognized that her father's despair, however understandable, was itself a form of surrender. By speaking out against it, she engineered the circumstances that made Moshe's birth and rescue possible. [emphasis added]

At the crossing of the Yam Suf, the Torah designates Miriam as *"the prophetess, sister of Aharon"* (Exodus 15:20), a title that our Sages understood as placing her prophetic gifts on par with Aharon's own. But her leadership took a distinctive form. While Moshe spoke and legislated from the front, Miriam led from within the community. She organized the women in song and dance, creating a shared experience of divine encounter that was participatory rather than hierarchical, welling up from below rather than descending from above.

This quality is crystallized in the symbol most closely associated with her: the well. Our Sages teach (Rashi on Numbers 20:2) that throughout the years of wandering, a miraculous well accompanied Israel in the desert on Miriam's merit, its waters sweet and unceasing for as long as she lived. The well is no accident as a symbol. Like Miriam herself, it does not announce itself with declarations or commands. It simply sustains, always present beneath the surface, quietly nourishing those who draw from it. Her very name encodes this quality: mar, bitterness, transformed into mayim, water and life.

In last week's parsha, Chukat, Miriam dies, and the water disappears. What follows is not only a crisis of thirst, but a crisis of leadership. Moshe, who had overcome his struggles with speech to wield it with power, suddenly falters: he strikes the rock instead of speaking to it (Numbers 20:11).

It may not be coincidental that this failure comes so closely after Miriam's death. While she lived, her constant, consistent, sustaining presence seems to have enabled something in Moshe himself, a capacity for connection and communication that he could not maintain alone. (I am grateful to my wife, Ruchie, for this insight.)

Micha understands this, and this is why he names all three leaders in one breath. Leadership in the Jewish world has never been, and must never become, the exclusive domain of one voice, one gender, or one model. There are forms of wisdom and strength that emerge from the lived experience and spiritual gifts of Jewish women, capacities a community cannot afford to sideline. As we seek leaders in this critical moment in our people's history, we must look at the full breadth of our people: men and women alike who carry the courage of Miriam, the vision of Moshe, and the bridging spirit of Aharon.

This, in the end, is where Micha's prophecy calls us. *"What the Lord seeks from you: only to do justice, love goodness, and walk modestly with your God"* (6:8). To walk toward that vision, we will need all the diversity of spiritual power that we can muster.

Shabbat Shalom

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-balak-rabbi-brander-5786/>

[Ed. note: Because the material for this double parsha is so lengthy this week, I am skipping a week of Devrei Torah from outstanding graduates of Ohr Torah Stone. Watch this space next week.]

Dvar Torah: Balak: A Candidate for Blessings

By Rabbi Label Lam *

How goodly are your tents Yaakov, your dwelling places Israel... (Bamidbar 24:5)

So flattering are the words of Bilaam that if not for their lengthiness, our sages would have included them in our daily recital of the Shema. In the end Bilaam pronounced a great blessing about the Jewish People. My question is: Where is his blessing? It was told to Avraham by HASHEM that *"I will bless those that bless you and those who curse you I will curse."* (Breishis 12:3) If Bilaam effectively blessed the Jewish Nation so generously then we should see some manifestation of his blessing in return. There seems to be none. Why not?

In a futuristic story, the Talmud (Avoda Zara 2A-B) tells us of conversation between The Almighty and the nations of the world when the Epoch of the Moshiach will have already dawned. Here it is in an abbreviated form: Rabbi Chanina Bar Papa – some say Rabbi Simai – expounded so: In the times to come the Holy One, blessed be He, will take a scroll of the Torah in His embrace and proclaim: *"Let him who has occupied himself with this come and take his reward!"*

There upon the Kingdom of Edom (Rome) will enter first before Him... The Holy One blessed be He will say to them: *"With what have you occupied yourselves?"* They will reply: *"O' Lord of the Universe, we have established many market-places, we have erected many baths, we have accumulated much gold and silver, and all this we did only for the sake of Israel that they might have the leisure to occupy themselves with the study of Torah."* The Holy One blessed be He will say in reply: *"Fools of the world, all that you have done, you have only done to satisfy your own desires. You have established marketplaces for the purpose of prostitution, baths to indulge yourselves, and as for the silver and gold they are mine...Are there any amongst you those who have studied Torah?"* They will go out with crushed spirits!"

After Rome has departed, Persia enters...And to the question of the Holy One Blessed be He, *"What was your occupation?"* They will answer, *"We have constructed many bridges, conquered many great cities, we were engaged in many great wars, all for the sake of Israel to enable them to study Torah."* The reply to which will be, *"All that was done by you was done for your own sake! Fools of the world, bridges you made for the collection of taxes, cities you conquered to impose labor and as to waging war, I am the Lord of battles...Are there any amongst you who have studied Torah?"* They too will leave with crushed spirits!

The Brisker Rav ztl. asked an important question about the truthfulness of this dialogue. These nations are making up a last minute story just to ride on the coattails of the Jewish Nation that did devote itself to Torah study. They're telling lies and making excuses about why they did what they did. Why then does The Almighty only refer to them as "fools of the world"? They should rather be called what they really are – "liars."

In the grand scheme of things they are really telling the truth. They made bridges and banks that benefited the Jewish People and actually enabled them to study Torah. The reason they are more fittingly titled "fools" is because they only failed to have that benefit in mind.

Bilaam too could say no different than what G-d had scripted him to proclaim. Sure, he blessed the Jewish Nation with his mouth, and what he said was true but his heart betrayed a contrary agenda. Therefore he foolishly fails to qualify as a **candidate for blessings**.

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

Chukat: Growing Up Is Hard to Do

By Rabbi Dov Linzer*

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2019

Transitions are hard. As the period of wandering in the desert begins to draw to a close, Bnei Yisrael encounter many changes, and they anticipate many more. Their leaders begin to die: Miriam and Aharon both die in this week's parasha, and Moshe will pass away a few months hence. The people are also facing a shift in the very nature of their lives. For forty years they have been living an otherworldly existence, wandering in the wilderness, existing in a vacuum with all their needs being provided for directly by God in miraculous ways. Soon they will be living in the Land of Israel, fighting wars, planting and harvesting crops, living in a real society, and building a country. Will the people be ready for this change? What is necessary for a transition that is as smooth as possible, and what is required?

Perhaps the first thing that is needed is new leadership. Moshe and Aharon were the perfect leaders to bring the people out of Egypt, but they may not be the perfect leaders to bring them into the Land of Israel. They have led with the aid of ongoing and direct communication with God and with God's direct intervention through miraculous acts. Now, however, the people need leaders who don't need this option available to them, who can function without turning to God and expecting an answer. The people need leaders who can be effective when forced to work out real-world solutions for themselves, leaders who will be self-reliant and who can teach the people to be self-reliant as well.

Just as Moshe and Aharon have developed a reliance on God, the people have grown habituated to a reliance on Moshe and Aharon. This is not a healthy relationship, not for Moshe and Aharon and certainly not for the people. Consider the situation: The people have now spent forty years in the wilderness, and yet Parashat Chukat reads like a replay of their

complaints as they left Egypt at the beginning of Parashat Beshalach. They lament the lack of water and food, they utter words against Moshe and God, and they ask to go back to Egypt.

Shouldn't they know better? They presumably know by now that God is able to provide for them. They also have presumably learned that complaining only leads to bad results. And yet what do they do? They whine; they repeat the old line, *"Why did you take us out of Egypt?"* Their request for water at least reflects legitimate need, even if they ask for it inappropriately, but the grumblings about the man is nothing but ingratitude and small-mindedness. And the divine response is predictably deadly. Really, don't they ever learn?

The truth is that it is one thing to learn intellectually and quite another to change the dynamics of a relationship. We so often revert to old patterns and old roles, even when we know better. A person could be a mature, accomplished professional, but when she goes back to her family for Thanksgiving or Pesach, all of a sudden she is playing her old role of middle sister and interacting with her parents and her siblings just like she did when she was a teenager. A couple could have worked through a difficult relationship, learning the behaviors that set one another off and that need to be avoided, but without a lot of effort, when those old triggers are encountered they will again act in their old, counterproductive ways.

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

Moshe may not be aware of how little his own behavior has changed, but he certainly sees the people as failing in this regard: *"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).

This, then, might be what the sin of Moshe and Aharon is really about, but it is all so mysterious. What was their sin? Was it hitting the rock rather than speaking to it? Was it calling the people rebels? Was it getting angry? Even if their sin is a combination of all these, do they really justify the punishment of dying in the wilderness without entering the land?

The answer might be that their sin is all of those and none, that it lays not in the acts themselves but in what they demonstrate. For each one of these things shows that Moshe is still the leader of old, and that he is unable to adapt to the changes ahead. Think of what he could have done differently: He could have engaged the people rather than running to the Tent of Meeting and calling on God to help. God even told him to break the old patterns and commanded him to speak to the rock, not to hit it, but he couldn't do it. Instead, he fell back into what was familiar, hitting the rock rather than speaking to it.

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

And, lo and behold, even though Yehoshua is not selected yet, as soon as Moshe and Aharon are told that they will not take the people into the land, the people start acting in a more mature and self-reliant fashion. After Aharon's death, Israel suffers an attack by the king of Arad. Their response? Not to turn to Moshe, but to 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 to God, they went to battle, and they were victorious. This was no replay of the war with Amalek, another parallel to Parashat Beshalach. Here, the people were not dependent on Moshe or a miracle wrought by his hands raised to heaven. This war was won by the people themselves, by their skills in battle, their prayers, and their relationship with God.

Perhaps the event with the poisonous serpents represents a relapse, with their complaining about the man and turning to Moshe to pray to God to save them. But in the end, even with the miraculous intervention, there was something more empowering this time. Moshe didn't save the people with his prayers, and Aharon didn't save them with the incense. Moshe made a physical object, a serpent on a flag, which the people then used to save themselves. Each person's healing was in his or her own hands. This healing may have been a little too miraculous for the real world they would soon be encountering, and in the end the brass serpent was destroyed by King Hizkiyahu (II Kings, 18:3). But in the wilderness, where the supernatural was taken for granted, this was how healing took place. And they did it themselves.

And so it continues. The song that they sing, "*Az Yashir*," echoes the song sung by Moshe and Miriam back in Beshalach. But now it is not "*az yashir Moshe*," but rather, "*az yashir Yisrael*" (21:17). And by the time they are encountering Sichon, it is no longer Moshe who is sending the messengers, as was the case with Edom (20:14), but rather, the people themselves: "*Then Israel sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites...*" (21:21).

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

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

Nishmat haTorah: Parashat Chukat-Balak
Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov: Where Not to Look
By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

In this week's parsha, Parshat Balak, Bilaam says *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov*, "*How good are your tents, Yaakov*." Rashi, quoting Chazal, says that Bilaam was praising the Jewish people's *tzniut* (modesty). Whenever I come back to that Rashi, I think of a Chassidic story my rebbe told us when I was about fifteen years old. The story startled me because it sounded so different from the way *tzniut* was usually taught.

One Shabbos, the Chozeh of Lublin was staying with R. Barukh of Mezhbizh, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. At the Shabbos afternoon meal, as the family sat together, the Chozeh found himself seated next to one of R. Barukh's daughters. He was uncomfortable. He felt that it was not *tzanuah* for a woman to sit next to him.

Barukh sensed the Chozeh's discomfort and did not let it pass. He pointed him to a pasuk in Tehillim, where David HaMelekh pleads with God: *Ha'aver einai mei-re'ot shav*, "*Avert my eyes from seeing falsehood*" (Psalms 119:37).

"*Listen to the words*," R. Barukh said, rebuking him. "*David does not ask God to remove from before him whatever he should not see. He asks God to help him avert his own eyes. Not to make it impossible for him to see, but to help him not look.*"

In other words: why should your discomfort become my daughter's burden? The pasuk makes a demand of the one who looks, not of the one who is seen.

And with that, the matter was settled. The family went on with the Shabbos meal.

I still remember hearing this story for the first time and being startled by it. I was raised in a world where *tzniut* was spoken about constantly, but the emphasis fell almost entirely on women: how they dress, where they sit, how they appear, and how careful they have to be in public.

The story pushed back against that whole way of thinking. Why should the burden fall so heavily on the person being looked at, rather than on the person who is looking?

That is what made the story so striking to me. R. Barukh was not denying the value of *tzniut*. He simply refused to let it become one-sided. His daughter was sitting at her father's Shabbos table. The problem was not her presence, but how the Chozeh should respond to his own discomfort. That discomfort may have been real, but it was not hers to solve.

Chazal, I think, hear the same demand in Bilaam's blessing.

When Bilaam blesses the Jewish people, he says the famous words: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*, "How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Yisrael." He praises their tents; Rashi, quoting Chazal, understands the compliment to refer to the way those tents were arranged: *she'ein pitcheihem mechuvanin zeh mul zeh*, their openings were not aligned with one another. When one family looked out from its own entrance, it was not looking straight into another family's home.

At first glance, this is simply a praise of modesty. And it is. But Chazal frame that modesty in a very specific way: the focus is less on people making themselves invisible, and more on people making sure not to look into someone else's space.

They do not speak of families closing themselves off from view. Rather, each family arranged its entrance so that one door did not face another, so that looking out from one tent did not mean looking into someone else's home.

That is the deeper point Chazal hear in Bilaam's words. The beauty of the camp was that each family took responsibility for the way its own home faced someone else. **Kedusha was built not only by guarding one's own space, but by honoring the space of the next person.** [emphasis added]

This is not only an ethical intuition; it also carries halakhic weight. In *hilkhos nezikin*, when my property or behavior may cause damage to someone else, I cannot simply say, "Protect yourself from me." Often, *al ha-mazik leharchik et atzmo*: the one creating the risk has to move away from the place where he might cause harm. The camp described by Chazal reflects that same structure. If my doorway opens into your private space, the burden is on me to arrange my doorway differently.

At R. Barukh's table, the Chozeh is told to take responsibility for his own eyes. In the camp of Israel, each family arranges its own doorway so it does not look into another family's tent. In both, **the demand is simple: do not make your looking someone else's burden.** [emphasis added]

This is *tzniut* in a broader sense. Clothing matters, and so does the way men and women share public space. But *tzniut* also reaches beyond that. **It is about remembering that my ability to look does not mean I have a right to look.** [emphasis added]

That matters for kedusha. A holy community is not created only by rules about what may be seen. It is also created by people who know how to place limits on themselves. Sometimes that means how I dress or speak or carry myself. And sometimes it means how I look, where I stand, what I allow myself to notice, and what I choose to leave alone.

That does not erase the standards of *tzniut*. It deepens them. *Tzniut* cannot rest only on the person being seen. It also has to rest on the person who sees.

Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov.

How beautiful were those tents.

Because each family understood: my doorway is my responsibility. My gaze is mine to guard.

<https://library.yctarah.org/2026/06/mah-tovu-ohalecha-yaakov-where-not-to-look/>

Reclaiming "Bible Zionism"

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

What is Zionism after all?

The term seems to have originated in the 1890s by Nathan Birnbaum, founder of the Kadimah nationalist Jewish students' movement. Theodor Herzl popularized the term as the expression of the Jewish People's national aspiration to return to their historic homeland in Zion.

The term "Zionism" is often used by friends and enemies of Israel without proper reference to its historic roots in biblical times. Zionism didn't just pop up in a vacuum, as though it was a new and artificial framework for Jews to return to their land. Although the term as a political movement dates from the late 19th century, it in fact encapsulates thousands of years of Jewish attachment to their historic homeland.

Zion is mentioned over 150 times in the Hebrew bible. While originally referring to Mount Zion, it came to refer to Jerusalem and then to all the land of Israel. [emphasis added]

Rabbi Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, who was associated with the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York from 1877 to 1937, advocated what he called "Bible Zionism." He was proud of the fact that Theodor Herzl asked his cooperation in organizing the Zionist movement in the United States. Dr. Mendes was elected vice-president of the Federation of American Zionists and a member of the actions committee of the World Zionist Organization. He believed that Zionism had the goal of establishing a Jewish State founded upon the principles and ideals of the Jewish religious tradition. In a letter to Haham Gaster of London (July 21, 1903), Dr. Mendes wrote: **Here is true work for Zionists: to keep Hebrews true to Jewish life, Jewish law, Jewish sentiment.**" [emphasis added]

Dr. Mendes taught that "Bible Zionism" aspired to go beyond simply providing a homeland for Jews. It had a universal message and goal: "Peace for the world at last and the realization of reverence for God by all men. These are the essentials for human happiness. Zionism stands for them."

We rarely hear about "Bible Zionism" from Israeli political leaders, media, or the various Zionist organizations worldwide. But wouldn't it be nice if leaders and opinion makers reclaimed "Bible Zionism" and reminded the world at every opportunity of the biblical roots of Zionism?

"Bible Zionism," as Rabbi Mendes pointed out, has a dual agenda. It stresses the national aspirations of the Jewish People to live in their own historic homeland and foster their religious and cultural traditions. The prophet Isaiah foresaw that Jews will *"come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing will flee away"* (Isaiah 35:10). He taught that *"Zion will be redeemed with justice and those that return to her with righteousness"* (1:27).

But "Bible Zionism" also points to the ultimate victory of justice and righteousness for Israel and the entire world. Isaiah taught that many people shall come to Zion *"for out of Zion shall go forth Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem"* (Isaiah 2:3). Isaiah looked to the day when *"the nations shall see your righteousness and all kings your glory"* (62:1-2). The prophet Zechariah (8:3) taught that the Lord has returned to Zion and that *"Jerusalem shall be called the city of truth and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain."* Zion was to be a bastion of truth, justice and wisdom for the entire world.

Recent months have seen ugly manifestations of anti-Zionism throughout the world. The haters have distorted the meaning and mission of Zionism. We need to embrace "Bible Zionism" in every forum to set the record straight.

The Psalmist sang (122:6): *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they who love you will prosper; peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces."* Just as those who love and support Zion will be blessed, the Psalmist warns (129:5): *"May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back."*

As for us, we must heed the words of Isaiah (62:1-2): *“For the sake of Zion I will not hold my peace, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still, until her righteousness goes forth like radiance and her salvation like a burning torch.”*

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City. Rabbi Marc Angel has a youtube series on religion and literature, with the first session dealing with the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqP9UMJOwmk> Originally published in *Jewish Link*, December 12, 2024.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3299>

A Jewish Response to Troubling Election Results:

Election Frustrations...and Challenges

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The recent elections in New York were disappointing in many ways, not least of which is that several of the victorious candidates are staunchly and unapologetically anti-Israel. They add their hateful voices to a growing chorus of maligners of Israel.

Being disappointed does not change reality. We are a strong, resilient people; we've overcome enemies in the past; we defeat enemies in the present; and we will overcome enemies in the future. Although we turn to the Almighty in prayer, we also need to take personal responsibility to try to improve the situation.

Here are some things I did personally on the day after elections.

I bought Israel Bonds for each of our grandchildren and our great granddaughter.

I made a contribution to AIPAC.

I wrote to our representatives in Congress.

I gave (and am raising funds) for organizations in Israel and the U.S. that enhance Jewish life.

Aside from those charities that provide material aid, it's also important to support those organizations (including our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals) that foster a vibrant religious/spiritual life.

Each of us has his/her own way of strengthening the Jewish People and the State of Israel. It can be through contributions and investments; political action; attending religious services and Torah classes; buying Israeli products; standing up for Israel whenever/wherever possible.

We pray that the current peace process will achieve positive results for the United States, Israel, the countries of the Middle East...and the entire world.

Psalms 122:6 *“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they who love you will prosper; peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces”*

Psalms 126:1 *"When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion we were as in a dream"*

Psalms 129:5 *"Let all who hate Zion fall back in disgrace".*

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3462>

Decisively Indecisive: Thoughts for Parashat Balak

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Parashat Balak begins (Bemidbar 22:2): *"And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Ammorites."* Interestingly, the Torah doesn't tell us at this point who Balak is!

The passage then continues with two verses describing how the Moabites feared the advent of the large contingent of Israelites. Only at the end of verse 4 are we informed that *"Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time."* Wouldn't it have been more logical to tell us from the outset that Balak was king of Moab?

Apparently, the Torah is alluding to aspects of Balak's personality and leadership style. When Balak first surveyed the problem, he did not know what to do. He did not act in a kingly manner. He vacillated, choosing not to make an independent decision. But then he heard the murmurings of his people. They were afraid. They wanted action against a perceived threat. Only after hearing their complaints did Balak realize he had to make a decision: he was, after all, the king of Moab.

Balak the king still did not know what to do — only that he had to do something to calm his fears and the fears of his people.

A strong and confident king might have presented the people with a clear strategy, such as: 1) we will send emissaries to the Israelites to see what their intentions are; perhaps we can reach a peaceful understanding with them; 2) we will muster our troops and be ready for battle, if necessary; 3) we will reach out to our neighboring allies to see if they will stand with us in our confrontation with the Israelites.

But Balak does not do these things. Rather, he sends emissaries to hire a soothsayer, Bil'am, to curse the Israelites! Balak decides to rely on magic rather than on practical diplomatic and military tactics. He puts his hopes in the skills of a noted orator whose words supposedly had supernatural powers.

But the Torah goes on to make a mockery of this orator soothsayer. Bil'am is outwitted by his own donkey! The donkey sees reality more clearly than he does. And then when Bil'am is supposed to use his great oratorical powers on behalf of Moab, he is unable to utter his intended words. Rather, the Almighty puts words into his mouth that give blessings, rather than curses, to the Israelites.

A weak and frightened king Balak chooses a highly praised — but obviously imperfect — magician, and the problem facing the Moabites is not abated at all.

The story of Balak and Bil'am highlights wrong ways to make decisions. Balak is indecisive and feels he must act only when he senses pressure from the public. When he does make a decision, it is not based on tested diplomatic and military knowledge, but on wishful thinking, relying on a notorious wonder-worker. Balak and his advisors had an illusion of validity, thinking that their course of action was correct, even though it meant dismissing sound practical tactics in favor of following a smooth-talking soothsayer.

And, of course, Balak and Bil'am failed to achieve their goals.

When making important decisions, one must make pragmatic judgments based on as much fact as possible.

To base decisions on wishful thinking and the aid of glib soothsayers is to follow the leadership style of Balak. Failure is an inevitable result.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/decisively-indecisive-thoughts-parashat-balak>

Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Hukat **The Sin at the Rock: Leadership, Anger, and the Failure to Begin Again**

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

The episode of Mei Merivah (Numbers 20:1-13) is among the most difficult and perplexing narratives in the Torah. After the people complain about the lack of water, God commands Moses to take the staff, gather the nation, and speak to the rock so that it will produce water. Instead, Moses angrily rebukes the nation, strikes the rock twice, and water emerges abundantly. Immediately afterward, however, God declares that Moses and Aaron will not lead the people into the Land of Israel.

The punishment appears astonishingly severe. The Torah never explicitly states what the sin was, and generations of commentators struggled to identify it. Moses had devoted his life to leading Israel through impossible circumstances. Yet this moment at the rock becomes the event that bars him from entering the land. The problem is compounded further by Aaron's inclusion in the punishment. Even if Moses sinned, what precisely did Aaron do?

The classical commentators offer a remarkable range of answers.

The Sifrei (Devarim 349) already raises the problem of Aaron's culpability. Ramban and Sforno explain that Moses and Aaron functioned as partners in leadership, and therefore shared responsibility for the failure. Rabbi Tobiah ben Eliezer in Lekah Tov suggests that Aaron should have restrained or corrected Moses.

Rashi explains that Moses's sin was striking the rock instead of speaking to it. Rashbam and several others adopt similar approaches. Yet this interpretation raises difficulties. Ramban asks why God instructed Moses to take the staff if striking the rock was entirely inappropriate. Moreover, why would this constitute a desecration of God's Name? The people did not know the precise command God had given Moses, and in their eyes an extraordinary miracle still occurred.

Rambam, at the end of the fourth chapter of Shemonah Perakim, develops a different approach. Moses's primary sin was anger. By crying out, "*Listen now, rebels,*" and striking the rock twice, Moses projected rage and frustration. The people therefore concluded that God Himself was angry with them. Yet, according to Rambam, the narrative contains no indication that God was enraged at Israel in this episode.

Other commentators focus on Moses's language: "*Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?*" Rabbenu Hananel, Bekhor Shor, and Ramban understand this formulation as potentially attributing the miracle to Moses and Aaron rather than to God. Ramban further explains that "*Speak to the rock*" means that Moses should publicly announce the miracle before the people in the rock's presence, emphasizing God as the source of salvation. Moses regularly does this before miracles throughout the Torah. Instead, the wording here risked creating the impression that Moses and Aaron themselves possessed supernatural power. This concern becomes especially significant in light of Numbers 21, where the people sing of the well provided by the "*princes*" and "*nobles*," potentially associating the miracle with human agents rather than with God.

Yet beneath the many technical explanations lies a deeper question: why did this moment disqualify Moses and Aaron from leading the nation into the land?

The answer may emerge from the broader literary context of the narrative.

The complaints in Numbers 20 sound strikingly familiar. Once again, the people lament leaving Egypt. Once again Moses and Aaron fall upon their faces. Once again there is a crisis involving survival in the wilderness. The scene recalls the generation of the spies and the rebellion of Korah.

But there is one crucial difference.

In the earlier narratives, God reacts with fury. After the spies, God threatens destruction. After Korah, divine wrath breaks forth against the nation. Moses repeatedly intercedes to save the people.

At Mei Merivah, however, God's response is entirely different. He neither threatens annihilation nor rebukes the nation harshly. Instead, He simply instructs Moses to provide water. [emphasis added]

As Eliyahu Assis observes, this episode marks the Torah's first major encounter with the new generation. The old wilderness generation has nearly disappeared. **God seeks to begin again with their children. The new generation must learn that God remains present and caring despite the failures of their parents.** [emphasis added]

Moses and Aaron, however, do not fully recognize the shift. Hearing the familiar complaints, they interpret the people through the lens of the previous generation. *"Listen now, rebels."* Their response assumes continuity rather than renewal. **God seeks a fresh beginning, but Moses and Aaron still see the shadow of the old failures.** [emphasis added]

Within this framework, the symbolism of the rock becomes profound.

Rashi cites a Midrash explaining that had Moses spoken to the rock rather than striking it, the people would have learned a powerful lesson: if even an inanimate rock obeys God's word, certainly human beings should do so willingly. The miracle was meant to educate through persuasion rather than coercion.

The distinction between speaking and striking reflects two fundamentally different models of leadership. The first generation of freed slaves often required firmer discipline. They emerged from Egypt traumatized, fearful, and unstable. But **the second generation stood at the threshold of nationhood. They needed to be addressed differently.** [emphasis added]

A Midrash in Yalkut Shimoni compares this process to education itself: when a child is young, the teacher may discipline physically; when the child matures, the teacher instructs through words. Speaking to the rock would symbolize leadership through communication, trust, and internal growth. Striking the rock symbolized force, confrontation, and external control.

This transforms the episode entirely. Moses' action was not merely a technical deviation from God's command. It reflected a deeper inability to transition into a new stage of leadership.

The tragedy is therefore not that God scrutinized the righteous *"to a hairsbreadth."* Rather, **the moment revealed a genuine leadership failure. Moses and Aaron remained shaped by decades of struggle with the first generation. They could not fully enter the psychological and spiritual world of the new one.** [emphasis added]

This perspective also helps explain why Aaron shares the punishment. The issue was not merely Moses striking the rock incorrectly. It was a shared leadership posture. Both leaders interpreted the people through categories that God Himself no longer wished to apply. [emphasis added]

Moses remains the greatest prophet in Israel's history. His failure at Mei Merivah does not erase his unparalleled greatness. Yet even the greatest leader may become bound to the struggles of one era and unable to guide the next. The generation entering the land required a different kind of leadership, a different language, and a different beginning. At the rock, Moses and Aaron could still produce water from stone. But they could no longer fully speak to the generation standing before them.

* National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Also Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City — founded 1654 and faculty of Yeshiva University for many years.

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Parshas Chukas -- Do you see what I see?

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine © 2014

The Torah describes an incident in which dangerous snakes attacked the Jews while they were in the desert. The people cried out for help, and Moshe erected a pole with the image of a snake at its top. The Torah relates, *"It was, that whoever was bitten by the snakes, they would look to the image that Moshe erected, and they would be healed."*

The Talmud asks, *"Could it be that the image of a snake caused people to be healed?"* The Talmud explains that when people looked up at the image of the snake that Moshe created, they were reminded to look even higher. They saw the image as a catalyst for heartfelt prayer. They realized that the snakes came from G-d, and only He could save them.

It is fascinating that years later people looked at the image which Moshe built and did not see deeper than its surface. Jewish Scripture records that in the time of King Chizkiya, there were people who worshipped the image as an idol instead of being reminded through it to focus exclusively on G-d. Chizkiya took the bold step of destroying the image that was made by Moshe, because he saw that people were not seeing its deeper message.

Much of life is to be able to see beyond the surface. When we talk to people we not only hear what they say, but we also listen to their body language, and take in a variety of "context" clues. One who does not see beyond the surface sees the "image" but doesn't appreciate its message.

Jewish tradition compares life to the "garden maze" in which one walks between the bushes trying to get from start to finish. One who is in the maze has trouble interpreting the signs which he encounters. "Is this turn an opportunity, or merely a dead end." Only one who has risen above the challenges can turn around and advise people as to which turn to take. Everyone sees the same "image," but only one with the gift of vision can appreciate its deeper ramifications.

Recently I had a conversation with a young man who was embarking on a three year program for a prestigious sounding degree. I asked him in all innocence what he would be able to do with the degree once he obtained it. Did his chosen field have significant job opportunities? He told me he wasn't sure. I recommended that he speak to a guidance counselor before the semester began.

He phoned me two days later to tell me that he met with the guidance counselor. It was now clear to him that there were few job opportunities in the field. "Actually," the guidance counselor told him, "Those who excel in this field, end up going on to teach others."

He posed the question to me. "What do you think I should do?"

I said, "You should thank G-d for helping you realize the deeper significance of your field choice before you spend three prime years of your life on it, and then regret it."

Our sages felt very strongly about the importance of having a mentor in our lives. Parents, guidance counselors, Rabbis, and people with life experience whom we can respect play an important role in the decision making process. If a trusted mentor tells you something, listen well. Sometimes such people can see things that we simply cannot see.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

From my archives.

* 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 and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com.
For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.

Balak – The Temple and Jewish Eternity

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 5780

One of the many lessons from the story of Bilaam is how far Hashem went to warn Bilaam. Hashem sends warnings to Bilaam throughout the parsha, despite Bilaam's wickedness and extreme desire to curse Hashem's treasured nation. Among the warnings sent to Bilaam is the miraculous rebuke from his donkey. Bilaam's donkey strayed from the intended course three times, and each time Bilaam hit the donkey to continue on the intended journey. After the third time, Hashem opens the donkey's mouth and has it rebuke Bilaam saying, "*What have I done to you that you have hit me these three times?*" (Bamidbar 22:28)

Rash"i notes that the donkey was given an unusual word for "*times*" – מִלְגָּר / *Regalim*. This word is also used to refer to the three pilgrimage festivals when we would travel up to the Temple for the Holiday. Rash"i explains based on a Medrash Tanchuma that the donkey was given this word to hint to Bilaam that he should turn back because the nation he is trying to curse observes the three pilgrimage festivals. (Rash"i *ibid.*)

The Sifsei Chachamim asks why this mitzvah was singled out from all of the mitzvos of the Torah? He quotes a Gemara in Chagiga (2a) which notes that the wording of the pilgrimage mitzvah is expressed by the word "הָאֵרִי" which can be vowelized in two different ways. The verse can be read "three times a year הָאֵרִי - *yei'ra-eh* - every male shall be seen," or "three times a year הָאֵרִי - *yir'eh* - every male will see." (Shemos 23:17; Devarim 16:16) The Gemara learns from here that just as there is a mitzvah to come to the Temple and experience G-d's Presence during the holidays, so too is there a mitzvah to be "seen" by G-d, that G-d should "experience" our presence. G-d wants us to come "visit" so He can enjoy our company. This, explains the Sifsei Chachamim, was the message from Bilaam's donkey. The Jewish nation is so beloved to G-d, that He desires them to "visit" three times a year. How can you possibly think to remove them from G-d's world?!

This explanation of the mitzvah to travel to the Temple for the Festivals requires some understanding. In what way would we experience G-d's Presence in the Temple? Moreover, in what way does G-d experience our presence when we come to the Temple, more than He would when we are at home?

Experiencing G-d in the Temple is more readily understood. The Temple was a magnificent and beautiful structure that inspired awe in all who saw it. The Kohanim who served in the Temple wore special garments and were alacritous and careful in their service. There was a sense of significance in all that occurred there. The Sanhedrin Hagadol, the High Court, would meet at the Temple, and it was a place of sages, elders, and high level learning and Torah study. There were mystical elements in the structure of the Temple and in all of its vessels. All of these factors combined would enable one to

sense and experience G-d in the Temple, in a way that could not be experienced anywhere else. This experience is the first half of the mitzvah.

Why, though, does G-d need us to come to the Temple for Him to “experience” us? Perhaps this question can be answered with another question. How could there be a mitzvah upon us for G-d to experience something? Perhaps the mitzvah is not for G-d to experience us, but for us to know and feel that G-d cherishes our “visit.” When we would come to the Temple and sense the awesome nature of G-d’s greatness and majesty, we would simultaneously sense G-d’s deep love for each and every one of us. As the Temple enabled us to sense G-d’s greatness, it also enabled us to sense G-d’s love for each of us.

As we approach the Fast of the 17th of Tammuz, beginning the period mourning the loss of the Temple, this message gives us an insight into the magnitude of our loss. At the same time, G-d’s message to Bilaam can give us strength and hope. G-d yearns for us to experience not only His greatness, but also His love for us. If so, then -- as was hinted to Bilaam -- G-d will ensure that we live on and that we will have that experience again.

* Rav at Sha’arei Tefilla and the co-founder of the RI Torah Network in Providence, Rhode Island. For several years, Rabbi Singer was the Rabbi at Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD. The RI Torah Network included this Dvar Torah in a booklet for Shavuot 5786. Rabbi Singer’s recent Devrei Torah normally come as podcasts rather than texts.

Chukat - Balak

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

[Ed.: I did not have time to search for a new Dvar Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this week. Watch this space for more insights in coming weeks.]

Shabbat Shalom

Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia, who has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright rights to this material.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD). Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **Many of Rabbi Ovadia’s Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights (copyright) to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

Since Shavuot, Jews in the Diaspora have been one parsha behind Israel due to the second day of Yom Tov. This week, we finally catch up to our brothers and sisters in Israel by reading both Chukat and Balak, while they read only Balak. Beginning next week, we will once again be reading the same parsha together until the next time a second day of Yom Tov falls on Shabbat.

One of the central concepts we encounter in Parshat Chukat is that of *chukim,* laws that transcend human understanding. But first, it is important to recognize that there are three categories of mitzvot.

The first are **mishpatim** – laws that, even without the Torah, humanity likely would have discovered on its own. These include commandments such as not stealing, not murdering, and honoring one's parents.

The second are **eidot** (or testimonies) – mitzvot that we would not necessarily have devised ourselves, but once commanded, we can appreciate their logic and value. Shabbat is a perfect example. While humanity may not have invented it independently, once given, we can understand its beauty and significance. In fact, many societies later adopted the concept of a weekly day of rest.

The third category is **chukim** – mitzvot that we cannot fully understand and for which we find no human rationale. These are what I like to call the "because I told you so" commandments. The classic example is the mitzvah of the **Parah Adumah** the Red Heifer, whose laws remain beyond human comprehension.

Within this lies a powerful lesson in education and parenting. Every parent knows that children need guidance, instructions, and boundaries. Some rules they understand immediately. Others require explanation, and once explained, they accept them. But there are also times when a child must follow a rule simply because a parent has said so. Healthy parenting requires a balance between explanation and authority.

And while we recognize this as parents, the same is expected of us in our relationship with our Father in Heaven. We are asked to trust that Hashem loves us deeply and knows what is best for us — even when we cannot understand His reasons. Sometimes faith means following His guidance not because we see the logic, but because we trust the One who gave it.

B'Ahavat Yisrael
Rabbi Netanel

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

** Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

Rav Kook Torah Chukat: The Death of a Tzaddik

As the Israelites neared the end of their forty-year trek in the wilderness, they lost two great leaders, Miriam and Aaron. While a tremendous loss for the nation, their passing had a hidden spiritual benefit.

The Torah informs us of Miriam's death immediately after enumerating the laws of the Parah Adumah, the red heifer whose ashes were used for purification. The Talmudic sages already wondered what connection there might be between Miriam's death and the Parah Adumah:

Why is the death of Miriam juxtaposed to the laws of the Parah Adumah? This teaches that just as the Parah Adumah brings atonement, so too, the death of the righteous brings atonement. (Mo'ed Katan, 28a)

While this connection between Miriam and the Parah Adumah is well-known, the continuation of the same Talmudic statement, concerning the death of Aaron, is less so.

And why is the death of Aaron juxtaposed to [the mention of] the priestly clothes? This teaches that just as the priestly clothes bring atonement, so too, the death of the righteous brings atonement.

In what way does the death of tzaddikim atone for the people? And why does the Talmud infer this lesson from both the Parah Adumah and the priestly clothes?

Larger Than Life

The principal benefit that comes from the death of tzaddikim is the spiritual and moral awakening that takes place after they pass away. When a tzaddik is alive, his acts of kindness and generosity are not always public knowledge. True tzaddikim do not promote themselves. On the contrary, they often take great pains to conceal their virtues and charitable deeds. It is not uncommon that we become aware of their true greatness and nobility of spirit only after they are no longer with us. Only then do we hear reports of their selfless deeds and extraordinary sensitivity, and we are inspired to emulate their ways. In this way, the positive impact of the righteous as inspiring role models increases after their death.

While stories of their fine traits and good deeds stir us to follow in their path, certain aspects of great tzaddikim — extraordinary erudition and scholarship, for example — are beyond the capabilities of most people to emulate. In such matters, the best we can do is to take upon ourselves to promote these qualities in our spiritual leadership, such as supporting the Torah study of young, promising scholars.

Two Forms of Emulation

In short, the death of tzaddikim inspires us to imitate their personal conduct — if possible, in our own actions, and if not, by ensuring that there will be others who will fill this spiritual void.

These two methods of emulation parallel the different forms of atonement through the Parah Adumah and the priestly clothes. Ritual purification using Parah Adumah ashes was only effective when they were sprinkled on the body of the impure person; no one else could be purified in his place. This is comparable to those aspects of the tzaddik that are accessible to, and incumbent upon, all to emulate.

The priestly garments, on the other hand, were only worn by the Kohanim. It was through the service of these holy emissaries that the entire nation was forgiven. This is like those extraordinary traits of the tzaddik that are beyond the capabilities of most people. These qualities can be carried on only by a select few, with the support of the entire nation.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 263-265; adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 346-347.)

https://ravkooktorah.org/chukat_65

The Consolations of Mortality (Chukat 5778)

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

Chukat is about mortality. In it we read of the death of two of Israel's three great leaders in the wilderness, Miriam and Aaron, and the sentence of death decreed against Moses, the greatest of them all. These were devastating losses.

To counter that sense of loss and bereavement, the Torah employs one of Judaism's great principles: The Holy One, blessed be He, creates the remedy before the disease.[1] Before any of the deaths are mentioned we read about the strange ritual of the red heifer, which purified people who had been in contact with death – the archetypal source of impurity. That ritual, often deemed incomprehensible, is in fact deeply symbolic.

It involves taking the most striking emblem of life – a heifer that is pure red, the colour of blood which is the source of life, and that has never been made to endure the burden of a yoke – and reducing it to ash. That is mortality, the fate of all that

lives. We are, said Abraham, “mere dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27). “*Dust you are,*” said God to Adam, “*and to dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:19). But the dust is dissolved into “*living water,*” and from water comes new life.

Water is constantly changing. We never step into the same river twice, said Heraclitus. Yet the river maintains its course between the banks. The water changes but the river remains. So we as physical beings may one day be reduced to dust. But there are two consolations.

The first is that we are not just physical beings. God made the first human “*from the dust of the earth*”[2] but He breathed into him the breath of life. We may be mortal but there is within us something that is immortal. “*The dust returns to the earth as it was but the spirit returns to God who gave it*” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The second is that, even down here on earth, something of us lives on, as it did for Aaron in the form of his sons who carry the name of the priesthood to this day, as it did for Moses in the form of his disciples who studied and lived by his words as they do to this day, and as it did for Miriam in the lives of all those women who, by their courage, taught men the true meaning of faith.[3] For good or bad, our lives have an impact on other lives, and the ripples of our deeds spread ever outward across space and time. We are part of the undying river of life.

So we may be mortal, but that does not reduce our life to insignificance, as Tolstoy once thought it did,[4] for we are part of something larger than ourselves, characters in a story that began early in the history of civilisation and that will last as long as humankind.

It is in this context that we should understand one of the most troubling episodes in the Torah, Moses’ angry outburst when the people called for water, for which he and Aaron were condemned to die in the wilderness without ever crossing into the Promised Land.[5] I have written about this passage many times elsewhere, and I do not want to focus on the details here. I want simply to note why the story of Moses hitting the rock appears here, in parshat Chukat, whose overarching theme is our existence as physical beings in a physical world, with its two potentially tragic consequences.

First, we are an unstable mix of reason and passion, reflection and emotion, so that sometimes grief and exhaustion can lead even the greatest to make mistakes, as it did in the case of Moses and Aaron after the death of their sister. Second, we are physical, therefore mortal. Therefore, for all of us, there are rivers we will not cross, promised lands we will not enter, futures we helped shape but will not live to see.

The Torah is sketching out the contours of a truly remarkable idea. Despite these two facets of our humanity – that we make mistakes and that we die – human existence is not tragic. Moses and Aaron made mistakes, but that did not stop them being among the greatest leaders who ever lived, whose impact is still palpable today in the prophetic and priestly dimensions of Jewish life. And the fact that Moses did not live to see his people cross the Jordan did not diminish his eternal legacy as the man who turned a nation of slaves into a free people, bringing them to the very brink of the Promised Land.

I wonder if any other culture, creed or civilisation has done greater justice to the human condition than Judaism, with its insistence that we are human, not gods, and that we are, nonetheless, God’s partners in the work of creation and the fulfilment of the covenant.

Almost every other culture has blurred the line between God and human beings. In the ancient world, rulers were usually thought of as gods, demigods, or chief intermediaries with the gods. Christianity and Islam know of infallible human beings, the son of God or the prophet of God. Modern atheists, by contrast, have tended to echo Nietzsche’s question that, to justify our dethronement of God, “Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”[6]

In 1967, when I was just beginning my university studies, I listened to the BBC Reith Lectures, given that year by Edmond Leach, professor of anthropology at Cambridge, with their opening sentences, “*Men have become like gods. Isn’t it about time that we understood our divinity?*”[7] I recall that as soon as I heard those words, I sensed that something was going wrong in Western civilisation. We are not gods, and bad things happened when people thought they were.

Meanwhile, paradoxically, the greater our powers, the lower our estimate of the human person. In his novel *Zadig*, Voltaire described humans as “*insects devouring one another on a little atom of mud.*” The late Stephen Hawking stated that “*the human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate size planet, orbiting round a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a billion galaxies.*” The philosopher John Gray declared that “*human life has no more meaning than that of slime mould.*”[8] In his *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari reaches the conclusion that, “*Looking back, humanity will turn out to be just a ripple within the cosmic data flow.*”[9]

These are the two options the Torah rejects: too high or too low an estimate of humankind. On the one hand, no man is a god. No one is infallible. There is no life without error and shortcoming. That is why it was so important to note, in the parsha that deals with mortality, Moses' sin. Likewise it was important to say at the outset of his mission that he had no special charismatic endowments. He was not a natural speaker who could sway crowds (Ex. 4:10). Equally the Torah emphasises at the end of his life that “*No one knows his burial place,*” (Deut. 34:6) so that it could not become a place of pilgrimage. Moses was human, all-too-human, yet he was the greatest prophet who ever lived (Deut. 34:10).

On the other hand the idea that we are mere dust and nothing more – insects, scum, slime mould, a ripple in the cosmic data flow – must rank among the most foolish ever formulated by intelligent minds. No insect ever became a Voltaire. No chemical scum became a chemist. No ripple in the data flow wrote international bestsellers. Both errors – that we are gods or we are insects – are dangerous. Taken seriously they can justify almost any crime against humanity. Without a delicate balance between Divine eternity and human mortality, Divine forgiveness and human error, we can wreak much destruction – and our power to do so grows by the year.

Hence **the life-changing idea of Chukat: we are dust of the earth but there is within us the breath of God. We fail, but we can still achieve greatness. We die, but the best part of us lives on.** [Emphasis added]

The Hasidic master R. Simcha Bunim of Peshischke said we should each have two pockets. In one should be a note saying: “*I am but dust and ashes.*”[10] In the other should be a note saying: “*For my sake was the world created.*”[11] Life lives in the tension between our physical smallness and our spiritual greatness, the brevity of life and the eternity of the faith by which we live. Defeat, despair and a sense of tragedy are always premature. Life is short, but when we lift our eyes to heaven, we walk tall.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Megillah 13b; Midrash Sechel Tov, Shemot 3:1.

[2] Or as we might put it today: from the same source of life, written in the same genetic code, as everything else that lives.

[3] See the essay on ‘Women and the Exodus,’ in *The Rabbi Sacks Haggadah*, 117-121.

[4] See Tolstoy’s parable of the traveller hiding in a well, in his *Confessions*; and his short story, ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich.’ See also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, 1973.

[5] Num. 20:1-13.

[6] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125.

[7] Edmund Leach, *A Runaway World?*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

[8] I owe these quotes to Raymond Tallis, ‘You chemical scum, you,’ in his *Reflections of a Metaphysical Flaneur*, Acumen, 2013.

[9] Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus*, Harvill Secker, 2016, 395.

[10] Gen. 18:27.

[11] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

* 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.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/consolations-mortality/>

On Viperous Attitudes and Their Cures

By Eliezer Shemtov * © Chabad

People often believe they are products or victims of the circumstances that surround them. *"Of course, I feel bad! I'm surrounded by such toxic people!"*

But is that really so? Might it be the other way around? Does the external world shape us or do we shape the world around us?

In this week's Torah portion, one story stands out:

The Jewish people complained about their uncomfortable conditions and exhausting journey through the desert, with no reliable access to water or food. As a consequence, G d sent venomous serpents, and many people died.¹

The people repented and asked Moses to intercede with G d to remove the serpents.

G d instructed Moses to fashion a serpent and mount it on a pole, instructing anyone who had been bitten to look at it.

Moses fashioned a copper serpent, placed it atop the pole, and whoever gazed upon it after being bitten was healed.

Why specifically a copper serpent? What healing properties could it possibly have? How could it heal people, from a distance, from a venomous snakebite?

The Sages, cited by Rashi, ask precisely this question and explain that the healing power did not reside in the serpent at all. It resided in the heart of the one afflicted. Does a serpent kill or give life? Rather, this comes to tell you that when Israel looked upward and submitted their hearts to their Father in heaven, they were healed; and if not, they perished.²

In other words, what neutralized the poison of the physical snakebite was the person's own attitude and conduct. By looking "upward" and submitting their hearts, including their internal destructive impulses, to their Heavenly Father, they not only neutralized the physical venom but transformed the serpent itself into a source of healing. Looking up at the serpent and recognizing their own ungrateful, serpent-like behavior brought them to repentance and renewal.³

The viperous forces in the world are a reflection of (and are fed by) the viperous character within people. When one manages to master, neutralize, and transform one's own inner serpent, no external serpent or viperous force can touch them.

We find a biblical precedent for this in the story of Joseph and his brothers. The brothers threw Joseph into a pit described as *"empty, without water."*⁴ Why the redundancy? If it was empty, obviously it had no water.

Our Sages explain that while empty of water, it was full of snakes and scorpions.⁵ How did Joseph survive? An animal can only harm a human who behaves like an animal — i.e., one dominated by instinct. Joseph, who had mastered his instincts, had nothing to fear from the animals.

Snakes and scorpions each carry a different kind of venom; one is “hot” and the other is “cold.” Hot venom attacks the circulatory system; cold venom attacks the nervous system, causing paralysis.

On a spiritual level, there are also two “venoms,” two attitudes that paralyze and kill. The “hot” one is hypersensitivity and obsessive ambition for the approval of others; the “cold” one is numbness and indifference towards growth. Neither of these represents a healthy life. Each one is “viperous” behavior, driven either by hot or cold venom. Neither of these represents a healthy life.

When we raise our eyes heavenward, submitting ourselves to a Higher Power, we then hold the keys to heal from the internal snakebites we’ve experienced.

The tool for this week: When the world around you feels toxic and threatening, don’t just complain — reconfigure your own viperous attitudes. You will feel better, and you will be surprised by the change in your surroundings.

Based on Likutei Sichot, vol. 13, pp. 71–77.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers 21:4–9.
2. Rosh Hashanah 29a.
3. See Rashi on Numbers 21:6.
4. Genesis 37:24.
5. See Rashi on Genesis 37:24.â

* Chabad-Lubavitch emissary in Montevideo, Uruguay.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/7404379/jewish/On-Viperous-Attitudes-and-Their-Cures.htm

Chukat/Balak: Eliminating Egocentricity

By by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Having blessed the Jewish people three times, Balaam prophesied the fate of Balak’s people, as well as that of other nations, in the future. In these prophecies, he also mentioned how the Jewish people’s future king – the Messiah – would bring all humanity to serve G-d.

When he saw Amalek, he began to recite his parable, and said, “Amalek was the first of the nations, and his end will be everlasting destruction.” (Num. 24:20)

– From *Daily Wisdom* *

The Torah commanded the Jewish people to displace the seven Canaanite nations that occupied the Land of Israel: the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites. Allegorically, these

seven nations embodied the misdirected versions of our seven emotions (love, fear, mercy, trust, sincerity, fidelity, and lowliness). The commandment to conquer these seven nations is thus also a commandment to control our emotions, reorienting them toward their intended Divine focus.

Although Amalek was not one of these nations, the Torah here refers to them as their progenitor (*"the first of the nations"*). Amalek embodied egocentricity, which is the root of all the evil emotions. When a person is focused on himself, he loves the wrong things, fears the wrong things, is merciful to the wrong things, and so on. By meditating on Divinity properly, we can neutralize our self-centeredness. This, in turn, will cause our emotions to be properly directed.

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos,

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Shabbat Parashat Chukat - Balak

5786 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Losing Miriam

It is a scene that still has the power to shock and disturb. The people complain. There is no water. It is an old complaint and a predictable one. That is what happens in a desert. Moses should have been able to handle it with ease. He has been through far tougher challenges in his time. Yet suddenly at Mei Meriva ("the waters of contention"), he exploded into vituperative anger:

"Listen, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock? 'Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff.'"

Num. 20:10–11

In past essays I have argued that Moses did not sin. It was simply that he was the right leader for the generation that left Egypt but not the right leader for their children who would cross the Jordan and engage in conquering a land and building a society. The fact that he was not permitted to lead the next generation was not a failure but an inevitability. As a group of slaves facing freedom, a new relationship with God, and a difficult journey, both physically and spiritually, the Children of Israel needed a strong leader capable of contending with them and with God. But as builders of a new society, they needed a leader who would not do the work for them but who would instead inspire them to do it for themselves.

The face of Moses was like the sun, the face of Joshua was like the moon (Bava Batra 75a). The difference is that sunlight is so strong it leaves no work for a candle to do, whereas a candle can illuminate when the only other source of light is the moon. Joshua empowered his generation more than a figure as strong as Moses would have done.

But there is another question altogether about the episode we read of this week. What made this trial different? Why did Moses momentarily lose control? Why then? Why there? He had faced just this challenge before. The Torah mentions two previous episodes.

One took place at Mara, almost immediately after the division of the Red Sea. The people found water but it was bitter. Moses prayed to God, God told him how to sweeten the water, and the episode passed. The second episode occurred at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1–7). This time there was no water at all.

Moses rebuked the people: "Why are you quarrelling with me? Are you trying to test God?" He then turned to God and said, "What am I to do with this people? Before long they will stone me!" God told him to go to a rock at Horeb, take his staff, and hit the rock. Moses did so, and water came out. There was drama, tension, but nothing like the emotional distress evident in this week's parsha of Chukat. Surely Moses, by now almost forty years older, with a generation of experience behind him, should have coped with this challenge without drama. He had been there before.

The text gives us a clue, but in so understated a way that we can easily miss it. The chapter begins thus: "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. Now there was no water for the community..." (Num. 20:1–2). Many commentators see the connection between this and what follows in terms of the sudden loss of water after the death of Miriam. Tradition tells of a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites during Miriam's lifetime in her merit.[1] When she died, the water ceased.

There is, though, another way of reading the connection. Moses lost control because his sister Miriam had just died. He was in mourning for his eldest sibling. It is hard to lose a parent, but in some ways it is even harder to lose a brother or sister. They are your generation. You feel the Angel of Death come suddenly close. You face your own mortality.

Miriam was more than a sister to Moses. She was the one, while still a child, to follow the course of the wicker basket holding her baby brother as it drifted down the Nile. She had the courage and ingenuity to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that she employ a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus ensuring that Moses would grow up knowing his family, his people, and his identity.

decree that Hebrew husbands should divorce their wives and have no more children because there was a 50 per cent chance that any child born would be killed. "Your decree," said Miriam, "is worse than Pharaoh's. He only decreed against the males, yours applies to females also. He intends to rob children of life in this world; you would deny them even life in the World to Come." [2] Amram admitted her superior logic. Husbands and wives were reunited. Yocheved became pregnant and Moses was born. Note that this Midrash, told by the Sages, unambiguously implies that a six-year-old girl had more faith and wisdom than the leading rabbi of the generation!

Moses surely knew what he owed his elder sister. According to the Midrash, without her he would not have been born. According to the plain sense of the text, he would not have grown up knowing who his true parents were and to which people he belonged. Though they had been separated during his years of exile in Midian, once he returned, Miriam had accompanied him throughout his mission. She had led the women in song at the Red Sea. The one episode that seems to cast her in a negative light – when she "began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife" (Num. 12:1), for which she was punished with leprosy – was interpreted more positively by the Sages. They said she was critical of Moses for breaking off marital relations with his wife Tziporah. He had done so because he needed to be in a state of readiness for Divine communication at any time. Miriam felt Tziporah's plight and sense of abandonment. Besides which, she and Aaron had also received Divine communication but they had not been commanded to be celibate. She may have been wrong, suggested the Sages, but not maliciously so. She spoke not out of jealousy of her brother but out of sympathy for her sister-in-law.

So it was not simply the Israelites' demand for water that led Moses to lose control of his emotions, but rather his own deep grief. The Israelites may have lost their water, but Moses had lost his sister, who had watched over him as a child, guided his development, supported him throughout the years, and helped him carry the burden of leadership in her role as leader of the women.

By Moshe and Marci Wiesel
on the occasion of the yearzeit of
Moshe's father, ר' יוסף בערל בן משולם ע,
on 17 Tamuz

In a truly remarkable passage, the Sages said that Miriam persuaded her father Amram, the leading scholar of his generation, to annul his

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It is a moment that reminds us of words from the book of Judges said by Israel's chief of staff, Barak, to its judge-and-leader Deborah: "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I cannot go" (Judges 4:8). The relationship between Barak and Deborah was much less close than that between Moses and Miriam, yet Barak acknowledged his dependence on a wise and courageous woman. Can Moses have felt less?

Bereavement leaves us deeply vulnerable. In the midst of loss we can find it hard to control our emotions. We make mistakes. We act rashly. We suffer from a momentary lack of judgement. These are common symptoms even for ordinary humans like us. In Moses' case, however, there was an additional factor. He was a prophet, and grief can occlude or eclipse the prophetic spirit. Maimonides answers the well-known question as to why Jacob, a prophet, did not know that his son Joseph was still alive, with the simplest possible answer: grief banishes prophecy. For twenty-two years, mourning his missing son, Jacob could not receive the Divine word.[3] Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, remained in touch with God. It was God, after all, who told him to "speak to the rock." But somehow the message did not penetrate his consciousness fully. That was the effect of grief.

So the details are, in truth, secondary to the human drama played out that day. Yes, Moses did things he might not have done, should not have done. He struck the rock, said "we" instead of "God," and lost his temper with the people. The real story, though, is about Moses the human being in an onslaught of grief, vulnerable, exposed, caught in a vortex of emotions, suddenly bereft of the sisterly presence that had been the most important bass note of his life. Miriam had been the precociously wise and plucky child who had taken control of the situation when the life of her three-month-old brother lay in the balance, undaunted by either an Egyptian princess or a rabbi-father. She had led the Israelite women in song, and sympathized with her sister-in-law when she saw the price she paid for being the wife of a leader. The Midrash speaks of her as the woman in whose merit the people had water in a parched land. In Moses' anguish at the rock, we sense the loss of the elder sister without whom he felt bereft and alone.

The story of the moment Moses lost his confidence and calm is ultimately less about leadership and crisis, or about a staff and a rock, than about a great Jewish woman, Miriam, appreciated fully only when she was no longer there.

[1] Rashi, Commentary to Num. 20:2; Ta'anit 9a; Song of Songs Rabbah 4:14, 27.

[2] Midrash Lekach Tov to Ex. 2:1.

[3] Maimonides, Shemoneh Perakim, ch. 7.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin **Why They Hate Us, and Who Will Redeem Us?**

"Behold, it is a nation that will dwell in solitude, and will not be reckoned among the nations." (Numbers 23:9) Is the biblical statement about our solitude within the family of nations a blessing or a curse?

From the biblical context of this prophecy, it is clearly meant to be a blessing, a vision of the remarkable ability of Israel to live in splendid isolation and ultimately outlast – and ideologically triumph over – the nations of the world. The most classic commentary, Rashi, maintains that our forebears – the patriarchs and matriarchs – have merited us with a unique set of values and a consecrated lifestyle which prevents our degenerative assimilation into the licentious practices of the nations round about (see Ibn Ezra ad loc.); and although every other nation will eventually leave the stage of world history, we alone will emerge victorious.

And so Balak reviled Bileam for this very laudatory vision: "What have you done to me? I hired you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed, yes blessed, them" (Numbers 23:1).

However, when we look upon the last two thousand years of Jewish history, at least the first part of Bileam's words have indeed been fulfilled – but not as a blessing; his prophecy has truly come to pass, but rather as a horrific curse. Until the establishment of the State of Israel we had been hopelessly and helplessly persecuted and exiled from pillar to post by the nations of the world – culminating in the Holocaust, when we truly stood alone in the midst of the Nazis' attempted genocide. And even now post-Medinat Yisrael – when we do have the ability to defend ourselves against the terrorism of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran – we (and not the allies of Iran and Al Qaeda) have become the whipping boy not only of the Arab bloc, but also of the European Union, the entire United Nations, and even of the president of the United States. Yes, we stand in isolation – but "stinking" isolation rather than splendid isolation. How can we understand this in light of Bileam's prophecy?

Allow me to take a page from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in order to understand the mentality of our enemies. Hitler – like his present-day heirs, fundamentalist and Jihadist Islam – sought world domination by the sword. But at the same time that he was building up military prowess to destroy the free world, he was also waging a deadly and diabolical campaign – replete with Kristallnachts and death camps – to dehumanize and decimate the Jewish people. Why the stateless and powerless Jews?

Likutei Divrei Torah

You see, Fascist Hitler believed in Aryan supremacy, in "might makes right," in "to the military victor belongs the spoils," and he, Hitler, belonged to the race of "übermenschen" who had conquered Germany today and tomorrow would conquer the world. But there was one fly in the ointment: the Jews. The Jews believed – a principle of faith deriving from their patriarch Abraham four thousand years ago – that "right would conquer might," that "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" would take over the world (Genesis 18:19), that through the Jews the world would be blessed with peace and freedom, divine ideals that would trump the sword and despotic domination.

Now Hitler wanted to believe that the Jews were "selling" a slave morality based upon their own self-serving need for the world's compassion and righteousness if they were to survive. But he could not deny the fact that they – the most powerless of people – had nevertheless survived the persecutions of Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, and the Catholic Church, giving credence to their claim that they were indeed God's witnesses, entrusted with the mission to enthrone the God of the Ten Commandments as the world's only Führer. And so he became obsessed with the Jews, and was hell-bent on destroying the last Jew, on obliterating Judaism – and its message of love, compassion, and morality – from the face of the world. Only then could he be sure that he would triumph, and would not be subject to eternal damnation.

Hitler is dead, having taken his own life in a Berlin bunker; the final expression of his "Jewish" obsession, a Talmudic tractate Pesachim (our festival of freedom and redemption) which was curiously found among the few personal effects he brought with him to his suicide sepulcher. The failed Führer probably believed he was burying the last remnant of the Jewish faith, the Talmud; instead, the Talmud buried him. And in his own Germany, a \$10 million Jewish Center – replete with synagogue, Hebrew school for children, and adult education classes – has just been completed in Munich. Jews throughout Germany are coming out of the woodwork and declaring themselves as Jews, hundreds of descendants of Jewish fathers are converting to Judaism, and in Hitler's own country Jewish life is slowly but surely being renewed.

Nevertheless, the world is still not ready to accept our morality, hypocritically siding with those who send out suicide bombers and target innocent civilians, with those who repress the rights of their own citizenry (the women, the Christians, the Kurds, the Jews within their own borders); they would rather revile Israel as an apartheid and terrorist state, Israel which enables enemy Arab voices to be heard in its

parliament, Israel which avoids aerial bombing whenever possible even at the risk of her own soldiers to prevent the death of innocents, Israel who alone in the world is standing up to the scourge of terrorism, Israel who had an Arab judge serve as chief justice in the trial of its “esteemed” president.

And so the words of Bileam still remain as an eventual promise – but also as a challenge. At the conclusion of our biblical portion, Bileam understands that no external source can vanquish Israel; we can only vanquish ourselves if we fall sway to the immorality round about. But if indeed we continually check our morality not only against the perverted standards of our enemies but also against the morality of the Ten Commandments, then we are guaranteed that not only will we survive, but we will prevail.

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

Balaam and Dostoevsky

Frustration. Disillusionment. But also insight and a lifelong intellectual perspective. That is how I would describe the experience I am about to share with you, dear reader.

It all started with Dostoevsky. That's right, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the famous 19th century Russian novelist, author of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and much more. His works were strangely not part of the curriculum of the high school I attended. I came to his writing on my own.

How impressed I was! Here was a writer who really plumbed the depths of the human psyche. He grappled, not only with profound moral issues, but with questions of existential religious significance.

I vividly remember reading *Notes from the Underground*, astounded by the fact that a gentle author, living in Czarist Russia, had so much to say to a Brooklyn yeshiva boy.

And then I learned a bit about Dostoevsky's background. I was stunned to discover that this perceptive, sensitive and gifted man was...a vicious anti-Semite. I had great difficulty in reconciling the discrepancy between the art—sophisticated and empathic; and the author, full of primitive hatred, which I experienced as aimed at me. After all, my ancestors lived in the towns and villages he describes—and not long ago!

I experienced this disillusionment time and time again in subsequent years. In college, I became enamored with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who was often acclaimed as the greatest thinker of the 20th century. Then I learned of his support for the Nazi regime, and

I could no longer bring myself to even open his books.

This experience was repeated later in my education when I became familiar with the psychology of Carl Jung, only to discover his complicated relationship with Jews and Judaism, and his pro-Nazi sentiments. What an exhaustive list of gifted men who possessed such talent when it came to humanity, yet who were so absurdly tainted by their active aversion to our people. It extends back in time to Martin Luther, persists through the music of Wagner and the history of Toynbee, and is certainly not lacking for contemporary examples.

Truth be told, the list goes back even further, to this week's Torah portion, Parshat Balak, and the extraordinary and fascinating man named Balaam. If there is one lesson to learn from this week's narrative of Balaam and his encounter with the Jewish people, it is this: A man can be a universally acclaimed spiritual leader, and a gifted poet and orator with prophetic powers almost identical to those of Moses, and simultaneously be a vile anti-Semite, capable of genocidal schemes.

Read this week's parsha very carefully, for there is an essential message in it. The message is that we dare not assume that we need only fear anti-Semitism at the hands of maniacs, fanatics, or ignoramuses. Quite the contrary! Sophisticated, educated and highly cultured individuals can also detest us and conspire to destroy us.

This is the lesson of the Holocaust. True, Hitler was hardly an intellectual or artistic giant. But his evil genius lay in his ability to realize that the most advanced civilization in the history of the world would eagerly abide by his murderous vision. He knew how this was just the veneer of German art, literature, philosophy and, yes, religion.

In terms of this week's Torah portion, he knew what Balak knew: That there are individuals with:

Strong religious commitments: “I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do anything small, or great.” (Numbers 22:18);

A direct spiritual channel to the Divine: “And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him...” (ibid. verse 20)

Inventive skills sufficient to create a phrase which we ourselves adopted to preface our daily prayers: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob...” (Numbers 24:5).

But in actuality, they are no more than “hired guns,” and beneath the façade of the “gentleman” lies the “agreement” to discriminate, persecute, murder and exterminate an entire people.

Likutei Divrei Torah

It is a difficult lesson to accept. But our history has long established its deep-rooted veracity and its urgency, clearly based upon the story we read this Shabbat.

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Where do we find the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Succot in Parshat Balak?

The parsha tells us that after Bilam had cruelly struck his donkey three times, Hashem opened the mouth of the animal, which said to Bilam (Bamidbar 22:28),

“Mei Asiti lecha, ki hikitani zeh shalosh regalim?” – “What have I done to you that you have struck me in this wicked way on three occasions?”

Now, the donkey didn't say ‘shalosh peamim’ which would have been the expected way of saying ‘three times’, but rather ‘shalosh regalim’ which is the term that we use for our three Pilgrim Festivals. There is an allusion here to Pesach, Shavuot and Succot, and the midrash tells us that actually from here we see that Bilam hated the Jewish people because he despised us on account of the way that we celebrate our pilgrim festivals. What is the message here?

What did Bilam have against the shalosh regalim: Pesach, Shavuot and Succot? Well, you see, when it comes to Shabbat, it's Hashem who determines the time of Shabbat, when it starts, when it ends, the fact that it occurs every seventh day, etc. We don't have any say in it. But when it comes to our festivals, in the Torah, Hashem has told us that we determine when we celebrate the festivals. It's for us to work out when Rosh Chodesh is. That's why in ancient times there was a Beit Din which took the testimony of people who witnessed it. Then there was Hillel, who set a perpetual calendar in motion for us. It's in our hands. That's why in the blessing we recite on our festivals we say,

“Baruch atah Hashem ... mekadesh Yisrael vehazemanim,” – “Blessed are you Hashem ... who sanctifies Israel and the times of the year.”

God sanctifies the people of Israel and we sanctify the zemanim, the times. It's in our hands to determine when the yomtovs will be. This brings us to a very powerful point. It means that we, as human beings, have the capacity to make time sacred. We can enable our world to become a holy place thanks to our efforts.

What makes the Jewish people holy is our appreciation of the fact that we can make this

world holy. That's something that Bilam realised. That's what he was envious of, and let us therefore celebrate our capacity to make this into a far more sacred world.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Drawing Water from a Rock

Rabbi Yaron Adorian

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach z"l once came to Manhattan to deliver a lecture at the New York Diamond Dealers Club. During the talk, one of the participants asked him why he devoted so much of his time to helping those on the margins of society. Rabbi Shlomo replied with a question of his own:

"I've heard that you folks know a thing or two about diamonds, right? So tell me — is it possible that you'd walk past an especially valuable diamond, hidden beneath many layers, and fail to notice it?"

They answered with confidence: "Impossible! We're the best in the world when it comes to diamonds!"

Rabbi Shlomo said: "Well, I know diamonds too — diamonds of infinite worth. Every person is a diamond. And when I see such a diamond, even if it's buried beneath many rough layers, I recognize it — and I would never miss its immeasurable value."

Human beings are complex. Within each person lies a pure diamond, though it may at times be encased in a hard shell of stone. The question that troubles us all is how to uncover the radiant soul hidden beneath the coarse material exterior. A possible answer may lie in one of the Torah's central narratives, found in our parsha — Moshe Rabbeinu's transgression at the waters of Merivah.

The Sin and Its Consequence - The story opens with a clear emphasis: a new generation now stands before us. "And the entire congregation arrived" — Rashi explains, "A complete congregation, for the generation of the wilderness had passed away." The Torah takes us forward in time, to the beginning of the fortieth year in the desert, where we now meet a generation born into freedom — one destined to enter the Land of Israel.

But no sooner had the final stretch of their journey begun than they face their first test. Miriam passes away, and with her, the miraculous well disappears. Once again, there is no water for the community. The people complain. Moshe and Aharon fall on their faces, and God instructs Moshe on how to satisfy their thirst:

"Take the staff and assemble the congregation... and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it shall yield its water."

Moshe carries out the first part of the command precisely, taking the staff. But in the second part, he deviates: instead of speaking, he strikes the rock twice. The punishment is swift — Moshe and Aharon are handed a severe decree that shatters their most cherished dream: "Therefore, you shall not bring this congregation into the land..."

This story raises several pointed questions. How could Moshe, the faithful shepherd, diverge from the Divine command? On the other hand, does it truly matter whether the water came through speech or striking? After all, drawing water from a rock is a profound miracle either way. And why punish them by denying entry into the Land — the very pinnacle of their aspirations?

The difficulty intensifies when we recall that striking the rock had previously been acceptable in God's eyes. Moshe already had experience drawing water this way — thirty-nine years earlier, at the rock in Chorev, when he had been explicitly commanded by God to strike it. What had changed this time?

Spot the Differences - A close look at the story of the striking of the rock at Chorev, in Parshat Beshalach, reveals several intriguing differences.

In our parsha, Moshe is first instructed to gather the congregation, to draw water "before their eyes," and to give them to drink. The people are given a meaningful role — they are to be active participants in the miracle.

In the Book of Shemot, by contrast, the people remain in the background. Moshe is not told to gather them, but rather to "pass before them," and the miracle is to take place only "in the sight of the elders of Israel."

Furthermore, while in Shemot Moshe acts alone, here he is explicitly commanded to include Aharon and to assemble the people together with him.

Another fascinating difference lies in the description of the rock itself. In Beshalach, the verse states, "and water shall come out of it," whereas in our story, it reads, "and it shall yield its water." Two changes are evident: the water does not burst forth under force, but rather the rock gives of its own accord — and not just any water, but its own water.

Two Modes of Leadership - Midrash Yalkut Shimoni offers a powerful interpretation of these differences:

"When a boy is young, his teacher strikes him and teaches him; once he grows up, he is corrected with words. So said the Holy One to Moshe: When this rock was 'young, 'you

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struck it, as it says, 'and you shall strike the rock. 'But now: 'Speak to the rock' — review a chapter of Torah before it, and it will yield water."

This story turns out to be a profound lesson — one that Moshe, and all of us, are meant to internalize.

There are two ways to break through the hard outer shell and reveal the living waters hidden beneath the surface. These two approaches lie before every educator.

The first is to strike the rock — to attempt to force reality through external pressure. In the world of education, any approach that relies on punishment or threat is, in essence, a form of coercion aimed at producing the desired behavior. Establishing firm boundaries, backed by the possibility of enforcement, breaks down the student's negative will and forces the water to flow. Even when lofty truths are imposed from above without walking the child through a gradual process — this too is a form of striking the rock.

The second approach is speech — not a blow that compels the water to come forth, but a word that moves the rock to give of its own accord. Through gentle speech and pleasant explanation, the student is persuaded to walk the right path. After an inner journey, he arrives at a clear understanding of what is good — and comes to desire it on his own. He does not behave properly because he "must," but because he truly understands, identifies with, and wishes to live by that good.

The first method may be easier and more immediately effective: strike hard enough, and water comes out. But in that approach, it is not the rock that gives the water — and certainly not its own water. The blow compels submission, robbing the rock of its natural integrity. The second method, though slower and more demanding, ultimately leads the rock to want to give — to offer its waters authentically, from its pure depths.

Stages of Growth - The Midrash points out that this distinction reflects developmental stages. When the student is still a child, we may need to rely on the method of striking. His nature is unrefined, his intellect not yet fully developed, and at times, only a strong response can break through his negative tendencies. Often, the child is locked into his own worldview, and there is no choice but to compel him to bend his misguided desires.

But as the young person matures, the rules change. His intellect deepens, his self-awareness expands, and he seeks to do good out of understanding and clarity. He is no longer content to act simply "because that's how it has to be." At this stage, striking may

not only fail — it may cause harm. Only through speech can we guide the adolescent to a place where he offers his own water — where he freely chooses what is right.

Just as these principles hold true for the individual, so too do they apply to the nation. The first approach was essential during the early stages of the development of the people of Israel. They had only just emerged from Egypt, after 210 years of slavery and cultural assimilation. Immersed in the forty-ninth gate of impurity, there was no choice but to deliver the overwhelming Divine truth from above.

But after forty years of wandering in the desert, the generation had transformed. The people had reached a level of maturity — a readiness that demanded a new mode of leadership: not striking, but speaking. They now had to choose the upright path through their own recognition and inner alignment. Therefore, in our parsha, Moshe is instructed to gather the congregation and involve them in the miracle. The event must unfold with their full presence and participation.

From the Miraculous Dimension to the Natural One - The transition from the generation of the Exodus to the generation poised to enter the Land of Israel marks a true revolution. One of the clearest expressions of this change is the shift in Divine governance — from the miraculous to the natural.

The verse in Parshat Beshalach emphasizes that the staff Moshe took was the very one with which the signs and wonders were performed. The essence of miracles is to break the bounds of nature and compel it to conform to the will of God.

But the miracles that accompanied the people during the Exodus and throughout their journey in the desert were now to fade gradually as they prepared to enter the Land of Israel. No longer would there be bread from heaven — but bread from the earth. No longer would “the Lord fight for you and you shall remain silent”; rather, warfare would now unfold through natural means. The reality itself was to be elevated. Human nature, with all its strengths and virtues, was to be revealed in full — and to become a source of blessing.

In our story, God commands Moshe to take the staff — but not to use it. This was meant to highlight that from this point onward, the staff was to recede from the stage, and with it, the entire mode of miraculous leadership. The approach of imposing Divine truth from above would now give way to a gradual process of inner growth from below.

Moshe himself, in his exalted spiritual stature, belonged to the realm of the staff. But here, he was called upon to shift — from miraculous

intervention to natural guidance. To help bridge that transition, he was to bring Aharon with him — the speaker, the one who had served as his mouthpiece ever since their mission to Pharaoh in Egypt.

But Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it. And so it became clear: his elevated persona no longer aligned with the generation about to enter the Land. His punishment was not merely a consequence — it revealed a deeper incompatibility. The transition to natural leadership would have to be entrusted to his disciple.

The Generation of Our Own Entry into the Land - In our time, as the people of Israel have returned to Zion after thousands of years in exile, a new generation has arisen — a generation of those who have entered the Land, yet who will not yield their water through being struck. They reject coercion. They refuse to connect to Torah out of fear of punishment. They do not wish to observe mitzvot simply because they “must” or are “obligated to.”

HaRav Kook zt”l taught us that the time has come to move from striking to speaking. Only through gentleness — through dialogue that flows from heart to heart — can we pierce the layers of stone. Then the rock will want to give forth its water — the unique waters of Torah meant for this generation — out of genuine desire and deep identification.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

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

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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.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez - The Narrative War Against Israel

There is an incredible insight into the difference in vision between a bat and an eagle which Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein heard from Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. It's the difference between a critical, condemning person as opposed to a person of love, blessing and encouragement.

The eagle does not see well at night but has amazing eyesight during the day, and the bat cannot see during the day, but has amazing eyesight during the night. This is the difference between a person who is a condemning curser and a person who is positive and full of light. One person can only see darkness and the other person, light.

Why did Balak summon Bilam – not to fight Israel with swords, but with words? Because he understood a timeless truth: when Israel cannot be defeated on the battlefield, its enemies turn to narrative warfare.

Like the bat, Bilam “saw” only in darkness – one-eyed, tunnel-visioned, cursed with the inability to perceive depth, nuance, or truth. His was the vision of propaganda, of distortion, of cursing rather than blessing.

In contrast, Moshe – like the eagle – saw with clarity and elevation. His was the vision of light.

Today, Israel is not only fighting on the front lines of war, but also in the echo chambers of social media, and in the halls of academia. The accusations of “genocide” and “apartheid” are nothing new – they are modern-day curses, conjured by those who see with a vision of hate.

But just as Hashem turned Bilam's curses into blessings, so too in our time: may the justness of Israel's cause shine through the fog of falsehood, and may light once again triumph over darkness.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Rav Meir Shpiegelman

The Sin of Moshe and Aharon

Many different interpretations have been offered for the episode of Mei Meriva, each attempting to address two central issues. First: the similarity between the narrative in our parasha and the episode of Masa u-Meriva in Parashat Beshalach is self-evident, and highlights the question of what the problem was in Parashat Chukat. Some commentators propose that Moshe's sin lay in striking the

rock (as he had in Parashat Beshalach) instead of speaking to it (as instructed in Parashat Chukat). But why is it that in the earlier instance, Moshe was commanded to strike the rock, while in our parasha, he is commanded to speak to it? Secondly, even if we accept this as the explanation of Moshe's sin, why is he punished so harshly for such a seemingly trivial misdeed?

Although a vast body of exegesis has already been devoted to these questions, I will try to illuminate a new angle of this troubling story. First, let us consider another question: Why is Aharon punished? The Torah states explicitly that the staff was in Moshe's hand, that it was he who spoke to the people, and he who struck the rock. Why, then, is Aharon punished along with him? Moreover, it seems that the punishment meted out to Aharon is even worse, since he dies at the beginning of the journey towards Eretz Yisrael and is deprived of any experience of it, while Moshe lives to conquer the lands of Sichon and Og, which later become part of Eretz Yisrael.

Why did Moshe and Aharon not enter Eretz Yisrael? - In Parashat Devarim, Moshe points to the sin of Bnei Yisrael in the episode of the spies as the reason he is not permitted to enter the land: The Lord was angry with me, too, for your sakes, saying, “You too shall not go there.” (Devarim 1:37)

Indeed, a review of the story of the spies reveals that when Bnei Yisrael express their rejection of Eretz Yisrael, only Kalev and (later) Yehoshua stand up to them and try to persuade them that they can and should continue to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe and Aharon do not intervene in any way; instead, they “fall upon their faces”:

And they said to each other, “Let us appoint a head, and let us return to Egypt.” Then Moshe and Aharon fell upon their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of Bnei Yisrael. And Yehoshua, son of Nun, and Kalev, son of Yefuneh, of those who had spied out the land, rent their clothes. And they said to all the congregation of Bnei Yisrael, saying: “The land which we passed through, to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land.” (Bamidbar 14:4-7)

It is clear that Moshe and Aharon, like Kalev and Yehoshua, do not agree with the spies' fearmongering. We can understand their lack of authoritative response in light of the fact that they have not toured the land themselves, and so even if they were to protest that the land is good, it would not convince the people. Still, their lack of response to such brazen rebellion is a stain on their leadership and may be a factor in their exclusion from entry into the land. God's words in our parasha – “Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me among Bnei Yisrael?” – may be understood as a reference to the episode of the spies as well, and not just to what has happened at Mei Meriva, as we shall see below.

Mei Meriva in the chronology of stops in the wilderness - The chain of events described in

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our parasha, from Mei Meriva onwards, parallels the events that have happened to Bnei Yisrael since the Exodus, but in inverse order.

The crisis of Mei Meriva parallels Korach's rebellion in several respects. First, Am Yisrael themselves connect these two events when complaining of the lack of water: “If only we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord” – clearly referring to those who died in the plague recorded in Parashat Korach. Second, Bnei Yisrael claim that Moshe and Aharon have brought them to a place that is “not a place of seed and figs and grapes and pomegranates” (20:5), paralleling the words of Dan and Aviram: “nor have you brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey” (16:14). In both episodes, Moshe uses the staff to show the people that they are wrong: in our parasha, we read that Moshe takes the staff “from before the Lord” (20:9) – apparently indicating that this is the same staff belonging to Aharon which had been set down “before God” in Parashat Korach, and which had sprouted buds, blossoms, and almonds (17:21-26).

In chapter 21, following the episode of Mei Meriva, the Torah records a battle against the Canaanites – paralleling the battle against the Canaanites waged by the ma'apilim after the sin of the spies. This is followed by the arrival of the fiery serpents, which recall the story of Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, “the graves of desire” (chapter 11), since Bnei Yisrael complained in both instances without justification: “and our soul loathes this light bread” (21:5). Thereafter the parasha records some of their journeys (paralleling the journeys at the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar), and then they arrive at the well and sing its praises, recalling the Song of the Sea.

The above might be summarized in the following clearly chiastic structure:

Starting from the Exodus

(in chronological order):

Song of the Sea (Shemot 15)

Journeys of Bnei Yisrael (beginning of Sefer Bamidbar)

Kivrot ha-Ta'ava (Bamidbar 11)

Ma'apilim – war with Canaanites (14:40-45)

Korach (Bamidbar 16-17)

Starting from Mei Meriva

(in reverse chronological order)

Song of the Well (Bamidbar 21:17-18)

Journeys of Bnei Yisrael (21:10-20)

Fiery serpents (21:4-9)

War with Canaanites (21:1-3)

Mei Meriva (20:2-13)

However, there is a clear difference between these two sequences. Bnei Yisrael's responses to the events in the first sequence are negative: when the quails arrive, Bnei Yisrael gather them and die in a plague; after the sin of the spies, they try to continue the journey without

authorization, and fall at the hands of the people of Canaan; after Korach's rebellion, they rail against Moshe and Aharon, and they continue to attack Moshe even after the plague "—Are we all to die?!" (17:28). In the second sequence, they respond positively: in the wake of the fiery serpents, they recognize that they have sinned and ask Moshe to pray on their behalf; during the war against the Canaanites, they turn to God on their own initiative and make a vow to which God accedes; and the Song of the Well emphasizes the people — "then Israel sang this song," in contrast to, "then Moshe and Bnei Yisrael sang" at the Song of the Sea.

It seems, then, that the episode of Mei Meriva signifies a fundamental change in the attitude of Bnei Yisrael. They do not acknowledge their sin at Mei Meriva, but following the fiery serpents they admit that they have sinned, and they repent:

And the people came to Moshe and said: We have sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He remove the serpents from upon us... (Bamidbar 21:7)

This is in fact the first time that Bnei Yisrael acknowledge wrongdoing. Until now they have mainly argued and complained, withdrawing only after being punished and without admitting that they sinned.

The copper serpent - And the Lord said to Moshe, "Make yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole, and it shall be that whoever is bitten — he shall see it, and live." (Bamidbar 21:8)

Why does God command Moshe to fashion a copper serpent? Until now, when Moshe has prayed on behalf of the people, God has not required any further action. Following the sin of the spies, Moshe prays and God forgives the people. When Miriam is struck with tzara'at, Moshe prays for her and she is healed. We see the same process after the murmuring of Bnei Yisrael following Korach's rebellion, and even after the sin of the golden calf. But here, God commands Moshe to make a copper serpent that will heal the people.

It seems that God wants to show the people they do not need Moshe's intervention in order to be healed. Once they understand that they must repent and acknowledge their sin before God will forgive them, God seeks to teach them something else: the plague does not begin or end because of Moshe's prayers, just as it is not Moshe's hands that make war. It is up to the people themselves. It is clear to them that it is not the serpent that kills or heals; rather, the act of directing their own hearts towards God is what brings salvation.

The copper serpent represents the first time that God sets Moshe aside as intermediary between Himself and the people, proposing that they turn to Him directly.

Following this turnaround, we see that in the events that follow in the parasha, Bnei Yisrael are active themselves. In the war against the kingdom of Sichon, the Torah describes the

conquest in a way that attributes it to Bnei Yisrael, since it is they who send messengers to Sichon (21:21). This represents a step forward in comparison with the war against Edom (which precedes the copper serpent): there, it is Moshe who dispatches the messengers (20:14), and only after his request is refused does Bnei Yisrael send additional messengers (v. 19). In the war against Sichon, there is no mention of Moshe himself sending messengers, and as the war progresses, Moshe functions not as God's representative but as a regular leader: he sends spies, and does not make use of miracles. Like the initiative of the ma'apilim, Bnei Yisrael act without Moshe's assistance in the war against Sichon — but obviously in contrast to the ma'apilim, here their initiative is viewed in a positive light.

The change in Moshe's leadership - Why is the absence of Moshe's intermediary role emphasized in the accounts of the copper serpent and the war against Sichon? We might understand this as the result of the sin at Mei Meriva: since Moshe will not enter the land, Am Yisrael needs to learn to manage without him. However, we can also propose a different explanation: it may be that the lack of an active role for Moshe arises from a deficiency in his leadership.

Starting from Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, Moshe's leadership undergoes a continuous decline. He transfers some of his authority to the elders at his own initiative; Miriam and Aharon undermine his leadership; in the story of the spies, the conquest of the land is entrusted (at least symbolically) to the representatives of the people, and even when these representatives act improperly, Moshe does not react as he should. Korach's challenge to Moshe's leadership arises in the wake of this decline, and because of Moshe's inaction. We may therefore conclude that what God is emphasizing in the story of Mei Meriva is that Moshe's leadership has come to an end.

Indeed, there is a conspicuous difference between the story of Masa u-Meriva and the account of Mei Meriva in our parasha. In the former, Moshe is commanded to take the staff with which he previously struck the Nile — in other words, his own staff. At Mei Meriva, however, Moshe takes the staff "from before the Lord" — indicating, as mentioned, that he is to take Aharon's staff, which had been laid before God and had blossomed. Moshe is commanded to take that staff specifically in order to symbolize that the miracle here is not happening because of Moshe, but rather by virtue of God's representatives — the tribe of Levi, which is headed by Aharon. For this reason, God addresses Moshe and Aharon jointly, rather than speaking only to Moshe as He did at Masa u-Meriva.

Moshe's sin - Now we can try to understand what constituted Moshe's sin. What was Moshe supposed to say to the rock? Clearly, the idea was not that he politely ask the rock to

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produce water. If the intention were to show that the rock split thanks to God and not thanks to Moshe, it would have made more sense for God to reveal Himself directly and cause the water to gush forth without Moshe's agency. Perhaps, then, Moshe was meant to "bring on" this revelation — by declaring the Thirteen Attributes, by calling to God, or the like.

Once Moshe struck the rock, the revelation to Israel was thwarted, since Moshe had now acted as an intermediary. As a result, Bnei Yisrael were not able to respond directly, of their own initiative, to the event (as they did in the incident of the copper snake, and during the war against Sichon). The striking of the rock demonstrated that Moshe was not capable of standing aside without intervening. Until now, we might have thought that Moshe could enter the land as a regular individual, and not as the leader and intermediary between Bnei Yisrael and God. Since he has shown that he cannot enter the land without leading the nation, it is decreed that he will die in the wilderness.

This also explains why Aharon is punished. Since the aim here was to minimize Moshe's role, the fact that Aharon remained passive is held against him. His intervention could have been of great significance.

The entire congregation — all are holy - In the previous parasha, Korach had argued that "the entire congregation — all are holy, and God is in their midst." In principle, this argument is true, and its message is important to internalize. Am Yisrael's ability to act is dependent on their recognition that they are God's nation. Indeed, the people acknowledge this, declaring, "Why have you brought God's congregation to this wilderness" (Bamidbar 20:4). This sort of self-awareness has found almost no expression prior to our parasha, and one of its ramifications is that the nation is able to communicate directly with God, without Moshe's mediation. In contrast to the revelation at Sinai, where the people feared that direct communication with God would kill them, in our parasha God seeks to teach them that they can lift their eyes heavenward without fear, and be saved. (*Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph*)



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Chukas — The Sin of Moshe

Adopted from **Nechama Leibowitz** עיונים בספר במדבר *The Psukim*

The Torah recalls the sin of Moshe and Aharon four times: twice in our parsha, once in Pinchas, and once in Haazinu. The accusations are heavy and varied. The first pasuk sets the frame:

ויאמר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן יען לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל לכן לא יבא אל הארץ אשר נתתי להם (20:12) Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land.

The second in the same chapter at Hor HaHar: ויאסף אהרן אל עמיו כי לא יבא אל הארץ אשר נתתי לבני ישראל על אשר מריתם את פי למי מריבה (20:23-24) Aharon shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land I gave to Bnei Yisrael, because you rebelled against My word at the waters of Meriva.

In parshas Pinchas, to rouse Moshe to find a successor now that

Aharon was gone: ויאמר ה' אל משה עלה אל הר העברים הזה וראה את הארץ אשר נתתי לבני ישראל וראיתה אתה ונאספת אל עמך גם אתה כאשר נאסף אהרן (27:12-14) Go up to this Har HaAvarim and see the land I have given to Bnei Yisrael. When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother was gathered, because you rebelled against My word in the wilderness of Tzin, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes.

And the fourth, near Moshe's death in parshas Haazinu: וידבר ה' אל משה בעצם היום הזה לאמר עלה אל הר העברים הזה הר נבו אשר בארץ מואב אשר על פני יריחו וראה את ארץ כנען אשר אני נתן לבני ישראל לאחזה ומת בהר אשר אתה עלה שמה על אשר מעלתם בי בתוך בני ישראל במי מריבת קדש מדבר צן על (Devarim 32:48-51) Go up to Har Nevo...because you trespassed against Me in the midst of Bnei Yisrael at the waters of Meriva Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin, because you did not sanctify Me in the midst of Bnei Yisrael.

The charges across all four passages are: לא האמנתם בי, מריתם את פי, מעלתם בי, לא קדשתם אותי בתוך בני ישראל. The place is fixed: מריבת קדש. The incident is in chapter 20:2-11. Yet reading those verses carefully, the exact nature of the sin remains stubbornly obscure. R. Yitzchak Arama in *Akeidas Yitzchak* (Shaar 80) captures the frustration with a Talmudic image: the table is set, the meat and knife are there, yet there is no mouth with which to eat. The command is written, the act is not hidden, the punishment follows, yet no single peirush fully settles the matter. He proposes to survey all the views and measure each against the specific language of the psukim: how many fit לא האמנתם בי, how many fit מעלתם בי.

Rambam: The Sin of Anger

The Rambam in שמונה פרקים (ch. 4) reads the episode through his principle of the golden mean. Every middah has two extremes; where one errs to one side one must correct toward the other. Moshe's sin was inclining from forbearance toward anger, expressed in שמעו נא (20:10), hear now, you rebels. For a man of his stature, anger before the entire assembly where it was not warranted constitutes a chillul Hashem: כל תנועותיו ודבריו היו בית מדרש, all his movements and words were a school of conduct for all of Yisrael. When they saw him angry, they would not read it as personal temperament; they would conclude that Hashem Himself was wrathful at their request for water, that the All-Merciful was withholding, rather than a compassionate Father hastening to quench their thirst. Moshe's outburst distorted the people's perception of the divine character, and this is the deeper meaning of מריתם את פי.

The Rambam thus identifies two dimensions: a personal sin of anger, and a public sin of misleading the nation about the nature of Hashem. The Rambam ends characteristically: ראה מה שנאמר בו ומה שאמרנו: ואנהנו, see what has been said about it and what we have said, and let the truth make its way.

Ramban: A Sharp Rebuttal

The Ramban, attacks this sharply. (i) The Torah says explicitly לא יאמרו, you did not believe in Me, and nowhere mentions anger. (ii) Aharon walked his whole life בשלום ובמישור, he was never a man of anger, yet received the identical punishment, how can anger explain a sin attributed equally to both? (iii) The people had sinned gravely at Meriva; Tehillim says למשה וירע למשה בעבורם (106:32), and Moshe himself said וגללכם (Devarim 1:37). How can The Rambam claim Hashem was not angry and that Moshe alone created a false impression? (iv) The calm tone of the

command, קח את המטה, proves nothing: even when the people sinned with the manna, Hashem responded calmly, providing the need and merely informing them of their sin; anger was reserved for causeless complaints, as with Korach and the meraglim. Moreover, the appearance of כבוד ה' (20:6) was itself an ominous portent, as at the meraglim (Bamidbar 14:10) and Korach (16:19), signaling judgment, not serenity.

Ramban's Own View: Rabbeinu Chananel

Having cleared the ground, Ramban adopts the explanation of Rabbeinu Chananel. The core sin lay in a single word. Moshe said (20:10), shall we bring forth water for you from this rock? He should have said יוציא ה' לכם מים, as on every previous occasion where divine authorship was made explicit: באת ה' לכם בערב בשר לאכל (Shemos 16:8). By saying נוציא, we shall bring forth, Moshe and Aharon left open the possibility that the people, freshly out of Egypt with its world of sorcery and magic, would attribute the water to their personal power. This is precisely לא קדשתם. And אותי בתוך בני ישראל fits too: just as one who derives benefit from hekdesch commits me'ilah, so Moshe and Aharon arrogated to themselves what belongs to Hashem.

Ramban adds that at the previous episode at Chorev, the pillar of cloud stood visibly upon the rock, הנני עמד לפניך שם על הצור (Shemos 17:6), making divine authorship unmistakable. Here there was no such sign; everything depended on how Moshe framed the moment, and נוציא was the fatal word.

Ibn Ezra and Sefer Ha'Ikkarim: The Sin of Timidity

R. Avraham ibn Ezra locates the sin even earlier, before Hashem spoke to Moshe at all. His comment on ויבא משה ואהרן מפני הקהל (20:6) is terse and devastating: כדמות בורחים, like fugitives. When the people pressed them with complaints and threats, Moshe and Aharon fled to the ohel mo'ed instead of standing their ground with prophetic authority. They should have sanctified Hashem's name through bold initiative, ואין לך חילול השם גדול מזה.

R. Yosef Albo in Sefer Ha'Ikkarim (Maamar 4, ch. 22) builds this into a principled theology. A root of emunah is that Hashem overturns nature for His faithful: מקים דבר עבדו ועצת מלאכיו ישלים (Yeshaya 44:26). Eliyahu declared drought by his own word, חי ה' אם, יהיה השנים האלה טל ומטר כי אם לפי דברי ואם בריאה יברא (Melachim I 17:1). Moshe himself announced the splitting of the earth at Korach, ה, without prior explicit command. The prophet who fails to invoke miracles when kiddush Hashem demands it causes the people to doubt that ה' מקים דבר עבדו. This is the heart of לא האמנתם בי: insufficient faith to act on the divine power invested in a navi. Yehoshua, by contrast, commanded שמש בגבעון דום, and Hashem confirmed his word.

Akeidas Yitzchak: Against Sefer Ha'Ikkarim

Akeidas Yitzchak is withering in reply. What Rabbeinu Chananel calls פשע ומרד, Sefer Ha'Ikkarim calls avodah and kiddush Hashem, ראו כמה זה חדש ומפליא, see how remarkable, that what one calls rebellion the other calls sanctification. But Moshe's defining greatness was precisely that he never acted without the word of Hashem: לא מלבי, not from my own heart (Bamidbar 16:28). At Refidim, when the people pressed for water, Moshe cried ויצעק משה, and Hashem took no offence but directed him: עבור לפני העם... והכית בצור (Shemos 17:5-6). No rebuke came. Similarly, when Hashem provided the manna, הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים (Shemos 16:4) — no one criticized Moshe for not producing

bread on his own initiative. The principle is ויצור אלהים ויכלת עמד (Shemos 18:23): it is Hashem who commands, Moshe who executes. As for Yehoshua and the sun: the text says אז ידבר יהושע לה (Yehoshua 10:12), Yehoshua first prayed and received an answer, then commanded before the people. The verse confirms: ולא היה כיום (ibid. 10:14), Hashem hearkened to the voice of a man, not that the sun hearkened to the voice of a man. Even there, the prophetic command followed divine authorization. The lesson: we have only the mitzvah and the deed; even the greatest navi has no license to act beyond what the Creator commands.

Rashi and Or HaChaim: He Struck

After traversing all these views, R. Chaim ibn Attar in *Or HaChaim*, after surveying ten approaches, returns to the simplest answer, the one given by Chazal's Midrash and Rashi, and ultimately adopted by Shadal (R. Shmuel David Luzzatto) as well.

Rashi's position is straightforward: Moshe was commanded לדברתם אל הסלע, speak to the rock. Instead he struck it, twice. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Chukas) maps all four charges onto this single deviation: (i) לא האמנתם, I did not tell you to strike, yet you struck; (ii) לא קדשתם, you could have brought water from any rock had you spoken; (iii) מעלתם, you said המן הסלע הזה, from this rock?; (iv) מרייתם, I told you to speak, yet you transgressed My word. The power of speech lay in what it would teach: had Moshe spoken to the rock and it obeyed, the people would have reasoned, מה הסלע הזה שאינו שומע, if this rock which neither hears nor speaks fulfills the word of the Omnipotent, how much more so we. A miracle of speech would have carried far greater moral and spiritual force than a physical blow.

The Ramban objects on two grounds: since Hashem told Moshe קח, a staff is for striking, there would be no point mentioning it if speech alone were intended. Moreover, Moshe did address the rock, שמעו נא המרים, the people, so the charge cannot be a simple failure to speak. On these grounds Ramban regards the Midrash as aggadah, not peshat.

Shadal, nonetheless, after many years pursuing a more sophisticated answer, came back to Rashi. He had long favored the view of Minchah Belulah that the sin was cowardice, not standing boldly in the breach, but in the end could not make מרייתם carry that meaning. מרייתם means deviation from an explicit command, and the command was unambiguous: לדברתם אל הסלע. And even granting Ramban's point that the physical result is identical whether Moshe spoke or struck, to the onlookers the miracle of speech to a mute rock would have seemed incomparably more wondrous, and kiddush Hashem would have been that much greater.

HaKesav VeHakabbalah: לעיניהם

R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg in *HaKesav VeHakabbalah* adds a philological insight that deepens Rashi's peirush considerably. The command is לדברתם אל הסלע לעיניהם, speak to the rock before their eyes. But speech is perceived by the ear, not the eye; it should have said לאזניהם. He concludes that לעיניהם refers to the eyes of the understanding, as in ותפקחנה עיני שניהם (Bereishis 3:7), which describes inner awakening, not physical sight. The command was to perform an act that would open the people's inner comprehension of Hashem's mastery over nature, עיני השכל לא עיני הגוף.

In this light Rashi's comment on 20:12 becomes luminous: לא האמנתם, had you spoken to the rock, the congregation would have argued from within themselves, מה סלע זה

שאינו שומע ואינו מדבר מקיים את דברי המקום, קל וחומר אנחנו לעיניהם. The word was never about physical eyes. It was about the opening of minds.

Conclusion

As The Rambam opened, with והאמת יעשה דרכו. Each mefaresh seizes on a different word in the Torah's repeated indictment. The Rambam reads מריתם through the distorting social effect of a leader's anger on the nation's perception of Hashem. Ramban, following Rabbeinu Chananel, hears the fatal sin in a single word, נוציא, the arrogation of divine credit. Ibn Ezra and Sefer Ha'Ikkarim read לא האמנתם as a failure of prophetic boldness, the duty to sanctify Hashem through initiative. Akeidas Yitzchak insists that obedience to the divine command is itself the highest expression of emunah, and the prophet who acts beyond his mandate, however nobly, undermines the foundations of Torah. Rashi and Shadal hold that מריתם means exactly what it says: ודברתם אל הסלע was the command, and Moshe struck. HaKesav VeHakabbalah finds in the single word לעיניהם the deepest purpose of the entire moment, not a miracle for the eyes of the body, but one to open the eyes of the mind.

That no single peirush has silenced all the others across the centuries is itself, perhaps, the deepest lesson of the sugya.

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Why Hashem Left Some Things Unexplained:

The Deeper Lesson of Parah Aduma

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: ##1387 – May A Kohain Attend the Funeral of the Gadol HaDor. Good Shabbos!

The pasuk at the beginning of Parshas Chukas says "...asher lo alah aleha ol" (that did not go up on it, a yoke). Parshas Chukas begins with the narrative of the laws of the Parah Aduma (Red Heifer). When a person comes into contact with a dead body – even by being in the same room with a dead body – the person incurs tumas mes, a form of ritual impurity due to contact with a human corpse. The only way to remove this form of tumah is by being sprinkled by a kohen with water into which the ashes of the Parah Aduma were mixed.

The Torah refers to this as a 'chok.' At the beginning of the parsha, Rashi explains (based on the Medrash Rabba) that "since the Satan and the nations of the world mock Yisrael saying, 'What kind of mitzva is this? What reason does it have?' That is why this is called a 'chok' – a decree from before Me, which you have no permission to question."

The Medrash Rabba is actually a little more explicit than Rashi. The Medrash emphasizes the paradox of the fact that the Parah Aduma, whose function is to grant purification to someone who is tameh, also brings tumah to those who are tahor who handle it. Thus, although there are many 'chukim' in the Torah (mitzvos whose reasons are not revealed to us), the unique thing about Parah Aduma is that it is the ultimate paradox.

So, while we find sefarim that give reasons for mitzvos such as shatnez (forbidden mixtures), and chazir (the prohibition of eating pig and other non-kosher animals), Parah Aduma remains uniquely inexplicable. How is it that the very thing which purifies also contaminates? In fact, in another place in the Medrash, Chazal quote the pasuk spoken by the wisest man who ever lived "Kol zo nisisi b'chochmah; amarti echkomoh, v'hee rechokah mimenni." (Kohel 7:23) Shlomo Hamelech is confessing here that despite his wisdom,

understanding of the concept of Parah Aduma remained far beyond him. "I figured out everything else – but despite my efforts, the understanding of the Parah Aduma remains far beyond my grasp."

On the other hand, the Medrash says that the Ribono shel Olam did explain the inexplicable paradox of the Parah Aduma to Moshe Rabbeinu. The Medrash concludes, however, that in the distant future, the Ribono shel Olam will explain Parah Aduma to everyone.

There are several questions:

If Parah Aduma has a reason and, in fact, Moshe Rabbeinu knew the reason and, in fact, in the distant future, we will all learn the reason, why did the Ribono shel Olam keep this hidden from us?

Rashi uses the expression that the nations of the world tease Yisrael about this mitzva. They make fun of us, asking how can you say that the very substance used to purify makes the people who handle it impure? The Ribono shel Olam doesn't want us to become the laughingstock of the nations. On the contrary, the Torah is to be seen as our source of wisdom in the eyes of all the nations (Devarim 4:6).

The language of the Medrash is "A chok I have legislated; a gezeira I have decreed; do not question it." The first two expressions of this statement are redundant. Either "I have legislated a chok" or "I have decreed a gezeira" would be sufficient. Why are both statements necessary?

I saw a beautiful pshat in the sefer Be'er Yosef from Rav Yosef Salant. He wants to suggest as follows: We need to realize that Parah Aduma was not some type of obscure thing that people did not need to deal with. In the course of people's lives, it is inevitably necessary to deal with the effects of death of those around them. Every time someone went to a funeral, he needed the Parah Aduma. Anytime someone came into physical contact with a mes, he becomes a tameh mes himself. In the course of the average person's lifetime, he will contact tumas mes many, many times. If a person became tameh on a hundred different occasions, he would theoretically need to be sprinkled by the Parah Aduma ash-water mixture a hundred times! Each of those times, the Kohen who does the sprinkling would himself become tameh.

As the Rambam writes (in his Mishna commentary), when a person does something over and over and over again, it makes an impression. Thus, in the course of a Jew's lifetime, when he encountered Parah Aduma dozens if not hundreds of times, this message ("metaher es ha'temayim u'metameh es ha'tehroim") was pounded into his psyche. Why?

The Ribono shel Olam is teaching us an invaluable lesson in life that goes far beyond the confines of Parah Aduma. Namely, there are things in this world that do not make any sense. In the course of our lifetimes, we run into situations that are entirely inexplicable. Perhaps the greatest example of this is "Tzadik v'rah lo; Rasha v'tov lo" (Why the righteous suffer and why the wicked prosper). If, Heaven forbid, we need to confront the death of a young person, the death of a child, we cannot figure it out! What does the Ribono shel Olam want?

The answer is that we don't know those things, and we will never figure them out – at least not in this world, at least not until Messianic times. That is the lesson that the Ribono shel Olam wants us to learn from Parah Aduma. That is why He withheld the reason from us. He wants us to have real-life experience with the phenomenon that there are things that you cannot understand, no matter how smart you are.

Finally, Rav Yosef Salant says a beautiful diyuk in the Rabbinic expression “Chuka chakakti; gezeira gazarti.” Chuka chakakti means I made this chok called Parah Aduma. Gezeira gazarti is the idea of seeing gezeiros that happen in our community and in Klal Yisrael. We are at least familiar with the concept of gezeira.

We ask, “Why did this person die?” “Why is this happening?” It is a Heavenly decree. That is exactly what Chazal are alluding to. The Torah wants us to learn the lesson of Parah Aduma and to extrapolate the lesson, not only to the halachos of tumah and tahara, but also to the paradox of life and the incomprehensible things that we may, from time to time, unfortunately observe in life.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
 Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Chukas is provided below: #018 – Rending Garments on Seeing Yerushalayim #107 – Rabbonim and Roshei Yeshiva — Do Sons Inherit? #152 – Halachic Considerations of Transplanted Organs #379 – The Jewish “Shabbos Goy” #423 – Tefilah of a Tzadik for a Choleh #555 – Women Fasting on 17th of Tamuz, Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur #599 – Blended Whiskey #731 – Shkia – 7:02: Mincha 7:00 A Problem? #951 – The Body Works Exhibit #994 – Bilam and His Donkey: A Problem with Tzar Ba'alei Chaim? #1038 – Flowers At The Cemetery? #1125 – Saying Kaddish For More Than One Person; Lo'aig Le'rash for Women? #1255 – I keep 72 Minutes, You Keep 45 — Can I Drive Home With You After 45 Minutes? #1299 – Can You Remove Your Yarmulka for a Job Interview? #1519 – What Does Hashem Prefer: Small Miracles or Big Miracles? #1603 – Can You Use a Plastic Cup for Netilas Yadayim and Kiddush .. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

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Chukas — The Well of Miriam By Rebbetzin Chiena Kossowsky

Rebbetzin Chiena Kossowsky A"H (13 Tamuz 5673 / 1913 – 13 Tamuz 5755 / 1995), yahrtzeit is this Sunday. The following is drawn from her notes on the parshiyos www.hebrewbooks.org/42890 לויית חן

It is well known that the well existed in Miriam's merit, and that when she passed away, the well disappeared. It was later restored through the merit of Moshe and sustained in his merit from that point on. Yet a prior question presents itself: why was the well originally attributed to Miriam's merit and called Be'er Miriam, the Well of Miriam? Many commentators and Midrashim have grappled with this question, and I have not found an explanation that fully satisfies me. The Gemara relates that Amram divorced Yocheved after Pharaoh decreed that all male children be cast into the Nile. Miriam said to him: *קשה משל פרעה*. Father, your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's. She explained that while Pharaoh had decreed only against males, Amram's separation from his wife would prevent even daughters from being born. As a result, Amram remarried Yocheved, and in due course Moshe was born.

It is on account of this that Chazal called the well *Be'arah shel Miriam*. There appears to be a deep connection between this episode and why the well bears her name.

On the verse: *"ותתצב אחותו מרחוק לדעה מה יעשה לו"* "And his sister stood from afar, to know what would be done with him" (Shemos 2:4), the Midrash comments: *"ללמדנו רבינו למה התקינו שלא לפחות מימי"* "Our Rabbis taught: *פסוקים*, כנגד משה אהרן ומרים שניתנה תורה על ידיהן. Why was it ordained that one should not read fewer than three

verses? Corresponding to Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam, through whose agency the Torah was given." At first glance this Midrash is puzzling. What connection is there between the enactment of reading three verses and these three figures? In light of the well-known teaching *מים אלא תורה* Water refers to Torah, one may suggest that the merit through which Miriam's well came was not simply the merit of providing water for physical needs. It was the merit of the Torah she transmitted to the people. We must therefore ask: what was it that Miriam taught that made her worthy of water flowing from the rock in her merit?

Our Sages tell us that when Moshe was placed in the river, Miriam stood: *ומתצב אחותו מרחוק* "His sister stood from afar." The word *ומתצב* conveys something more than simply standing, it means standing firmly, steadfastly, refusing to move from one's place. Miriam's faith was indeed firm. Even as her little brother lay in a basket upon the Nile, as the mighty river swept past and Pharaoh's decree hung over every Jewish male child, Miriam did not waver.

But she was Miriam, and she stood firm. *ומתצב*, *מרחוק*. From afar. As the Midrash explains, she stood at a distance and watched. But her standing from afar was not merely a matter of physical distance. She held her ground in faith, as one who waits for something whose arrival is certain. She believed that this child would become the redeemer of Israel, even if years would pass before that promise was fulfilled. She wished only

לדעה מה יעשה לו, "to know what would happen to him," and, if necessary, to do whatever she could to bring about his salvation. One can perhaps read our parashah's verse in the same spirit: *"ויאמר משה, אל העם התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה' אשר יעשה לכם היום"* "Moshe said to the people: Stand firm and behold the salvation of Hashem that He will perform for you today."

Moshe was calling upon the people to possess the very same steadfast faith that had defined Miriam from the beginning, to stand with certainty and confidence that salvation would come. This steadfastness is what Miriam had modeled from the moment she stood by the river. It is the lesson every Jew needs, both in the wilderness and after entering Eretz Yisrael. As my revered grandfather explained regarding the verse *ונשקה על פני הישימון*, "It will water the face of the wilderness" (see the commentary to Bamidbar 21:20):

The waters of Miriam's well did more than quench physical thirst. They watered the spiritual wilderness as well, teaching Klal Yisrael to stand firm, to wait with faith, and to trust that the salvation of Hashem will surely come, even when it still appears *מרחוק*, far in the distance.

Sing to the Well, Respond to It

The verse states: *"אז ישיר ישראל את השירה הזאת עלי באר ענו לה"* "Then Israel sang this song: Ascend, O well, sing to it." (Bamidbar 21:17) Rashi explains that since this song was not sung at the beginning of the forty years, it must be that Bnei Yisrael composed it in honor of Moshe, after the well returned through his merit following Miriam's passing. Yet remarkably, the song contains no mention whatsoever of Moshe's name or his merit.

The Ba'al HaTurim writes: *"ונשען על מואב, ונשען על"* Just as the nations came to rely upon Moav, so too must one rely upon Hashem, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. When the Jewish people returned from war and sang over the well, they did not invoke Moshe's merit. They sang directly to the well

itself. I would add to the Ba'al HaTurim's words that the two ideas are intertwined.

The verse says: "אז ישיר ישראל", "Then Israel sang." This formulation emphasizes that the song arose from Bnei Yisrael's own initiative, it was not prompted by Moshe. They themselves awakened to sing to Hashem. They themselves turned to rely upon

ה' קדוש ישראל באמת, Hashem, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. And so, even though the well had returned through Moshe's merit, Bnei Yisrael directed their song neither toward Moshe nor toward the water itself. Moshe would one day leave the world, and the water would eventually cease as well. What they sought was to depend upon Hashem and to sing to Him alone.

This, too, was the lesson Miriam had taught. Just as she stood by the river in unwavering faith, "והתעצב", She stood firm, so too Bnei Yisrael, standing together as one people with one heart, declared: "אז ישיר ישראל", "Then Israel sang."

It was the song of trust and salvation, the song of a people who had learned to place their confidence not in human beings, nor even in miracles themselves, but in Hashem alone.

May her memory be a blessing. יהי זכרה ברוך.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein ZT"L Summary of recording abt. 1985 at <https://www.kehillanw.org/notices/rabbi-isaac-bernstein-shiurim> The **Mystery of the Parah Adumah and the Mei Merivah**

Welcome to our study of Parshas Chukas. I want to begin with a fascinating historical custom recorded in the Tanya Rabasi by Rav Yechiel ben Yekutiel Anav (c. 13th Century). Devout individuals used to fast specifically on the Friday of Parshas Chukas. This fast commemorates a terrible tragedy that occurred in France on the ninth of Tammuz in 1244. On that day, twenty wagons full of sacred texts were publicly burned. You might wonder why they didn't observe this fast on the specific calendar date of the ninth of Tammuz. The rabbis actually asked a dream question to understand the spiritual nature of the tragedy. The heavenly answer they received was the Aramaic phrase Da gezeiras d'Oraisa. This translates directly to Zos Chukas HaTorah, the opening words of our Parsha. Therefore, the crucial timing was tied to the Torah reading of Parshas Chukas, rather than the calendar date. Rav Hillel of Verona (c. 1220-1295) points out a striking historical parallel. These Talmudic texts burned in the exact same location in Paris where the works of the Rambam, Rav Moshe ben Maimon (1138-1204), were previously destroyed by his detractors. Specifically, they had burned his philosophical work, the Moreh Nevuchim, and the Sefer HaMadda from his Yad Chazakah. This profound coincidence made the opponents of the Rambam realize their grave error. They recognized the burning of the Talmud was a divine punishment for their disrespect toward the Rambam's works, and it successfully ended their bitter dispute.

Next, we must look at the ultimate paradox of the Parah Adumah. The Talmud in Gittin states this mitzvah was given at Marah before the great revelation at Har Sinai. However, this presents a contradiction because the Talmud also says it was given on the first of Nisan. The Ramban, Rav Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270), resolves this issue beautifully. He explains that the laws were given at Marah purely for the Jewish people to study, but the mitzvah wasn't practically applied until the Mishkan was erected on the first of Nisan. I also want to share an insight from the Or HaChaim

Hakadosh, Rav Chaim ibn Attar (1696-1743). He asks why the Torah calls this section Chukas HaTorah instead of the more accurate Chukas HaParah. He answers that it teaches us how the entire Torah must be accepted. We must approach all mitzvos as unquestioning decrees. I often quote the Emes L'Yaakov by Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky (1891-1986) to explain the early timing at Marah. The Parah Adumah is the ultimate mystery because it purifies the impure while simultaneously defiling the pure. It was introduced early to establish a foundational axiom for the Jewish people. We must observe all commandments purely because Hashem decreed them, even if a mitzvah seems completely illogical to our human minds. Rav Kaminetsky points out that the passage demands two specific axioms from us. These are (i) we must observe mitzvos purely as divine decrees, and (ii) success in Torah study requires total and absolute commitment. Casual study simply won't yield success.

Let's now address the fascinating juxtaposition of Miriam's death with the laws of the Parah Adumah. Rashi, Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), explains a famous Talmudic principle here. He states that the death of a righteous person atones for the entire generation. The Panim Yafos by Rav Pinchas Horowitz (1731-1805) asks a deeper question. He asks why her death links so specifically to the Parah Adumah. He answers that a righteous person brings great spiritual and physical protection to their generation. When they die, it brings a harsh consequence to the surviving righteous people who suddenly lose this blanket of protection. However, the tragic death brings a positive benefit to the wicked by providing them with necessary atonement. This duality perfectly mirrors the mechanism of the Parah Adumah. The Parah Adumah purifies the impure people, but it actively defiles the pure Kohanim who prepare it. The Torah Temimah by Rav Baruch Epstein (1860-1941) adds another critical layer to this comparison. He explains that a righteous person's death only provides atonement because of the concept of Areivus, or mutual responsibility. Women aren't technically bound by this specific halachic principle of Areivus. Therefore, Miriam's death atoning for the nation completely defies standard legal logic. It is placed next to the Parah Adumah to show that her atonement operates entirely as a divine mystery. It functions beyond our human understanding, just like the ashes of the heifer.

The central feature of our discussion focuses on the tragic sin of Moshe Rabbeinu at the Mei Merivah, the waters of dispute. The Rambam suggests that Moshe sinned by succumbing to the emotion of anger. Moshe harshly called the Jewish people rebels. This public display of anger was highly inappropriate for a leader of his immense spiritual stature. The people watched his every move closely. Seeing their great leader angry led them to falsely assume that Hashem was also angry with them. This misrepresentation caused a terrible desecration of Hashem's name. The Ramban strongly objects to the Rambam's explanation. He asks how anger relates to Hashem's specific accusation in the Torah. Hashem clearly stated that Moshe was punished because he didn't believe in Him, not merely because he lost his temper. I offer two brilliant solutions to the Ramban's powerful question. First, I cite Rav Eliyahu Lopian (1876-1970). He explains that a true prophet must speak with absolute conviction that the people will listen to the divine message. Anger stems directly from a feeling of frustration and powerlessness. When Moshe got angry, it showed he lost his faith in the people's willingness to listen.

This lack of faith in the Jewish people directly translated to a lack of faith in the ultimate power of Hashem's word. Second, let's explore a mystical perspective from the Toras Chaim by Rav Avraham Chaim Schor (c. 1550-1632). The soul of a completely righteous person is constantly joined to Hashem. They become a literal extension of the Divine. Because of this profound bond, their speech acts as an utterance of divinity itself. Anger violently severs this delicate divine connection. When Moshe became angry, the spirit of prophecy immediately departed from him. His initial speech to the rock lacked its usual divine power, and so he was forced to resort to hitting it. He hit the rock twice. The first strike occurred while he was still disconnected by his anger. He then composed himself, restored his divine connection, and hit it a second time. This second strike successfully brought forth the water.

Finally, let's touch upon the fascinating Haftarah reading concerning Yiftach. The elders of Gilad came and begged Yiftach for military help. Yiftach harshly rebuked them for previously driving him out of his father's house. Yiftach was considered an asufi, a foundling gathered from the street. Because no one knew the true identity of his father, his half-brothers forcefully expelled him. Rav Velvel Brisker (1886-1959) argues that this wasn't just a petty family squabble. A great leader chosen to save Israel wouldn't hold a trivial, vindictive grudge. Rav Velvel points out that the brothers had actually taken Yiftach to a formal Beis Din to legally strip his inheritance based on his asufi status. The elders of Gilad who were now begging for his help were the very judges who legally expelled him from the community in the first place. Therefore, Yiftach's response was a strict legal argument, not an emotional outburst. He stated that since the religious court officially ruled he wasn't part of the community, he had absolutely no legal or moral obligation to save them.

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Rav Hershel Schachter

A Proper Understanding of Tznius

In Lithuania before the second world war, the mussar movement was very widespread. There was a popular expression that a Jew has to be "ehrllich" and only a galach has to be "frum". "Frum" was, in a certain sense, a dirty word; the connotation of the word was outward demonstration of one's religiosity. There is a well-known Gemara at the end of Makkos which says that six hundred and thirteen mitzvos were given to Moshe Rabbeinu at Har Sinai, and eventually the prophet Michah singled out three specific issues that one should be careful about which would lead one to observance of all six hundred and thirteen mitzvos. The passuk quoted in that Gemara is the concluding line in the haftorah of Parshas Balak, "ki im asos mishpat v'ahavas chessed v'hatzne'ah leches - doing justice, loving chesed and leading one's life in the fashion of tziniyus" (Micha 6:8). The Gemara did not mean to say that the only mitzvos one must observe are these three matters. The simple meaning is that observance of these three will lead one to observing all the six hundred and thirteen mitzvos. The Gemara in Sukkah points out that it is usually expected at a funeral or wedding that there will be a public demonstration of emotion. However, because the aforementioned passuk in Michah uses the term "leches" ("v'hatzne'ah leches") and the passuk in Koheles (7:2) refers to weddings and funerals by using that same verb (leches - "tov la'leches el beis ovel mi'leches el beis mishteh"),

even at weddings or when one is delivering a eulogy at a funeral, one should not overdo in public expressions or demonstrations of one's emotions.

The concept of tznius is often misunderstood. Many people think that it only applies to women in the way that they dress. This is clearly incorrect. The mitzvah applied equally to men and to women. Yeshaya haNavi (45:15) describes Hashem as being a Keil mistater. Hashem does such a good job at hiding that many think that he does not even exist. The Torah tells us that man was created b'tzelem Elokim, possessing all the middos of elokus. The Jewish people were instructed, "vehalchta bidrachav" (Devarim 28:9), i.e. that we must imitate the ways of Hashem in order to preserve that tzelem Elokim which is already in our personalities from birth. We cannot be invisible like Hashem, but we should try as much as possible to lead our lives b'tzinah as opposed to b'farhesya.

The Mesilas Yesharim describes two different people who want the public to know that they are here: one gets an aliyah and screams out the berachos louder than anyone else, and one who gets an aliyah and whispers the berachos and no one can hear him. Both are doing something irregular in order to draw attention to themselves. Some students come into a beis medrash every day with a loud colored sweater. The sweater is screaming out loud: take notice of me, I am here!! The whole idea of tznius is to dress, speak, and act in an inconspicuous fashion, to lead one's life b'tzinah as opposed to b'farhesya. This concept is one of the three singled out by the navi Michah which will help us observe all of the other six hundred and thirteen mitzvos.

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Summary of **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net>

Jun 25, 2026, on A Finger on the Pulse of Our Generation: Why Was Moses Denied The Promised Land? Slaves Respond to a Stick; Free People Need Inspiration

There was a rabbi known for preaching about nurturing children with warmth and love. One day he noticed children playing in the freshly laid concrete outside his home and started chastising them. A congregant asked how he could speak that way, given his life's teaching. The rabbi replied: "I love children in the abstract, not the concrete."

Speak to the Rock

After forty years in the wilderness, with most of the older generation gone and even Miriam departed, Israel was finally ready to enter the Promised Land. Then an incident occurred that would transform the nation's destiny.

The Torah portion Chukas relates: the people had no water and quarreled with Moshe. G-d responded with a command: *speak* to the rock, and it will give forth water. Moshe assembled the congregation, called them rebels, and *struck* the rock twice. Water gushed forth — but G-d told Moshe and Aharon: "Since you did not have faith in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly to the Land."

The Questions

What exactly was the sin? Moshe produced water as commanded.

Why was he punished — and so severely?

Rashi's famous answer: G-d said *speak* to the rock; Moshe *struck* it.

But this raises deeper questions: (i) Why did Moshe make this change? (ii) Does it matter whether you get water from a rock

through words or a staff? (iii) Why was the penalty so severe — denial of his life's dream? (iv) How did striking the rock fail to sanctify G-d's name? and (v) Why did Moshe need to strike *twice* — if G-d opposed it, why allow water at all?

Forty Years Earlier

The answer begins with a similar episode in Exodus. Forty years prior, facing the same complaint about water, G-d told Moshe to *strike* the rock — and water flowed. No wonder Moshe repeated the method. But why did G-d change His instruction? And why did the difference carry such enormous consequence?

A Process of Education

The Yalkut Shimoni offers a striking Midrash: "Speak to the rock, do not strike it. When a child is young, the educator may at times hit the lad to teach. When the child grows into adulthood, the educator must rebuke verbally. Similarly, when the rock was but a 'small child,' I instructed you to strike it; but now you must only speak to it. Teach it a chapter of Torah and it will produce water."

The story of the rock is also a psychological and moral tale about how to open sealed human hearts.

Slaves and Free People

There is a critical difference between slaves and free human beings. Slaves respond to orders. Free people must be educated, inspired, and persuaded — otherwise they will never internalize the message and make it their own. Slave masters compel through the stick. Free human beings respond not to power but to persuasion.

The difference between G-d's two commands — *strike* vs. *speak* — represented two different generations: Jews who grew up in slavery, and Jews who grew up in freedom.

The generation that left Egypt bore lofty souls, the founders of Jewish nationhood, the only generation to encounter G-d face-to-face. But their 210 years in exile had formed a thick outer "rock." Before their inner waters could flow, the husk needed to be cracked. That is why G-d instructed Moshe to strike — and why that generation, ultimately too traumatized to conquer the Land, died in the desert.

We all have moments when our hearts are in jail, when we are so emotionally numb that we need a tough wake-up call to break through the dense husks we built to protect ourselves from pain and truth.

A New Generation

Forty years later, their children — born in freedom, raised in the presence of Moshe and divine miracles — had spiritually matured. When they lamented a lack of water, a careful reading reveals a different tone: they ask only for water, not meat or delicacies; they don't yearn for Egypt; they don't threaten to stone Moshe. They are simply frightened of dying of thirst. G-d was sensitive to these distinctions. The husk is no longer thick. Now you need empathy, not a staff.

Moshe could not make the shift. So deeply identified with the generation he had liberated — for whom he told G-d, "if You will not forgive them, erase my name from the Torah" — he could not abandon their model. He called the new generation "rebels," struck the rock, and struck it *twice*, because when you try to change things through pressure rather than persuasion, you always need more than one blow.

G-d said: "You did not have faith in Me." Moshe failed to trust G-d's assessment of the new generation — failed to believe in their

capacity to respond to words alone. Moshe's place, it turned out, was in the desert with his beloved people. His exclusion from the Land was not a punishment but a truth: he belonged to the generation that left Egypt.

Two Types of Stones

This explains one more anomaly. The first incident calls the rock a *tzur*; the second calls it a *selah*. Both are translated "rock" in English, but in Hebrew they differ profoundly. A *tzur* is solid through and through — all rock. A *selah* is hard on the outside but contains water within.

When dealing with a *tzur*, you must strike. When dealing with a *selah* — rocky on the outside, soft inside — you have no right to strike it. You must speak to it, and inspire it to reveal its inner waters.

Understanding the Generation

Leaders, parents, and educators must always feel the zeitgeist of their time. There is a time to strike the rock and a time to speak to it. Discipline fosters confidence and responsibility — but only when it follows genuine love, safety, and attachment. Without that foundation, all forms of "striking" cause the rock to retreat behind heavier layers of rockness.

As King Solomon wrote: "There is a time for everything under the heaven... A time to wreck and a time to build... A time to embrace and a time to shun embrace." We may add: a time to smite a rock and a time to speak to one.

But we can only do this for others if we do it for ourselves. If the only method I know is to strike my own inner rock, that is what I will do to my children and students. Only when I learn to speak with empathy to my own inner rock can I radiate that to my loved ones. When the moment is ripe for love and respect — when you see that reality can be changed through empathy and enlightenment — employ that path with the same vigor you once brought to coercion. Only then can you mold a generation ready to enter their Promised Land.

(Based on discourses by the Tzemach Tzedek; his son Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch; and his son Rabbi Sholom Dovber of Lubavitch.)

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Sichot Rashei HaYeshiva 5784 - Lesson 35

Balak & Bilam – The Pursuit of Honor and Power Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein

22.06.2026

Summarized by Hillel Cohen. Translated by David Strauss

In today's talk we will discuss Bilam. Balak's motives for dealing with Israel are clear: he saw what happened to Sichon and Og, and therefore fears the people of Israel and seeks to fight them. This fear is already mentioned in the Song of the Sea:

Then were the chiefs of Edom affrighted; the mighty men of Moav, trembling takes hold of them; all the inhabitants of Canaan are melted away. (Shemot 15:15)

In contrast, Bilam's motivation for agreeing to Balak's request and cursing Israel is not obvious. One could give a whole talk claiming that Bilam is a pure antisemite, driven by unfiltered hatred of Israel. But we will try to explain his motivation differently.

Our parasha highlights the difference between Bilam's sorcery and true prophecy:

For there is no enchantment with Yaakov, neither is there any divination with Israel; now is it said of Yaakov and of Israel: What has God wrought! (Bamidbar 23:23)

Enchantment [nichush] refers to the belief that there exist heavenly forces, completely detached from the physical world, which can be manipulated for human use through various techniques. It is similar to opening an umbrella when it rains or applying sunscreen so as not to burn – human actions that can nullify or strengthen the influence of forces greater than us. Balak tries, through Bilam, to manipulate God. He understands that the sword will not work here, and so he turns to this alternative method. With Bilam's help he seeks, as the Gemara in Berakhot 7a puts it, the "moment" at which God is angry, in order to exploit it and curse Israel.

Unlike Balak, Bilam seeks power and control. The Sages already noted that Bilam craved honor; he had a "haughty spirit," as the Mishna in Avot (5:19) says. This approach is supported by the verses: Balak offers Bilam great honor, and Bilam responds that even for all the wealth in the world he cannot transgress the word of God. Let us put it this way: a person who truly does not seek honor does not have to emphasize that he does not seek it. But it seems that beyond the pursuit of honor, there is a deeper layer here – the pursuit of power and control.

When Balak's messengers arrive, Bilam says to them:

Lodge here this night, and I will bring you back word, as the Lord may speak to me. (Bamidbar 22:8)

Bilam stresses to Balak's emissaries that he is "in a different league" – God Himself will speak to him that night. This connects to a teaching I heard from Rabbi Michael Edrei in the name of Harav Amital. Lavan said to Yaakov: "It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying: Take heed to yourself that you speak not to Yaakov either good or bad" (Bereishit 31:29). At first glance, there seems to be a contradiction between the two parts of the verse: Lavan begins by saying he can harm Yaakov, but then reverses himself and claims he cannot harm him because God prevents him from so doing. Harav Amital explained that Lavan is willing to admit that he is in fact incapable of harming Yaakov – just so that he can boast that God spoke to him.

It is also interesting to note the interplay between the Divine names – the Tetragrammaton and "Elokim" – in the parasha. Bilam tells the princes of Moav: "Lodge here this night, and I will bring you back word, as the Lord may speak to me," using the Tetragrammaton, a name associated with closeness and relationship. Bilam boasts that he and God are close, that he is in a different league. But the Torah itself describes: "And God came to Bilam, and said: What men are these with you?" (Bamidbar 22:9), using the name "Elokim." The name Elokim leans toward technical command: God is simply instructing Bilam what to do. And similarly later on: "And God [Elokim] said to Bilam: You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people; for they are blessed" (Bamidbar 22:12). Bilam, however, continues to cling to the Tetragrammaton:

And Bilam answered and said to the servants of Balak: If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord [the Tetragrammaton] my God, to do anything, small or great. Now therefore, I pray you, tarry you also here this night, that I may know what the Lord [the Tetragrammaton] will speak to me more" (Bamidbar 22:18-19)

But the Torah continues with the name "Elokim":

And God [Elokim] came to Bilam at night, and said to him: If the men are come to call you, rise up, go with them; but only the word which I speak to you, that shall you do... And God's [Elokim] anger was kindled because he went. (Bamidbar 22:20, 22)

Bilam seeks to conquer the world. After operating mainly with Moav and Midyan, Bilam sets out to fight against God Himself, aiming to be the one in control. It is important to emphasize: the desire for control is implanted in every human being. This desire fueled, for example, the Industrial Revolution and significantly advanced the world. The question is whether one channels this desire into partnership with God in the work of creation – "to work it and to safeguard it" (Bereishit 2:15) – or whether one channels it into a struggle for domination. Bilam chooses the path of struggle for domination.

Let us now move to the moment of Balak and Bilam's meeting:

And Bilam went with Balak, and they came to Kiryat-Chutzot. And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent to Bilam, and to the princes that were with him. And it came to pass in the morning that Balak took Bilam, and brought him up to Bamot-Ba'al, and he saw from there the utmost part of the people. (Bamidbar 22:39-41)

Balak is looking to perform the magic, the manipulation that will help him curse Israel. Bilam, however, is not interested in this at all; from his perspective, even if Israel ends up being blessed, it does not matter. What matters to Bilam is proving that he is the one in control, that his will can override the will of God.

Here it is important to note an interesting point. Bilam says to Balak: "The word that God puts in my mouth, that shall I speak" (Bamidbar 22:38). Bilam admits here that the words coming out of his mouth depend entirely on God's will. If earlier Bilam only claimed that God might prevent him from going but that he could still say whatever he wished, now Bilam acknowledges that he has no control even over his own speech.

After looking over the people, Bilam and Balak perform a ritual: And Bilam said to Balak: Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams. And Balak did as Bilam had spoken; and Balak and Bilam offered on every altar a bullock and a ram... And God met Bilam; and he said to Him: I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered up a bullock and a ram on every altar. (Bamidbar 23:1-4)

This offering had a certain power, as the Ibn Ezra notes on the spot: "Seven altars" – There are deep secrets here, understood only by a select few: the seventh in days, in months, in years; the seven lambs of the burnt-offering; the seven sprinklings; and God said to Iyov: "Take for yourselves seven bullocks and seven rams" (Iyov 42:8).

When one gives completeness for completeness, a spirit of understanding is renewed; the wise will understand.

However, Bilam and Balak do not offer these sacrifices as an attempt to draw closer to God (which is the true purpose of a korban, from the root meaning "closeness"). Rather, they are trying to create magic – a manipulation of the heavenly force.

The turning point comes during the third attempt to curse:

And Balak said to Bilam: 'Come now, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there" (Bamidbar 23:27)

Balak continues his attempts to produce a momentary magical effect that will yield the desired outcome. But suddenly something happens to Bilam:

And when Bilam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. (Bamidbar 24:1)

Bilam here abandons sorcery and turns to prophecy. He merits an intimate encounter with God – a type of encounter characteristic of a true prophet. Ramban (ad loc.) describes this at length:

This means] that on the previous [two] occasions Bilam acted as a sorcerer, and wanted to curse them by means of sorcery, and God came to him as if by chance, and not because he [Bilam] had concentrated on [attaining] prophecy, nor because of any superior status that he had achieved. But now when he was told, "For there is no enchantment with Yaakov, neither is there any divination with Israel," whether to do them evil or good, Bilam abandoned his enchantments, and he went not [any more] as at [the] other times to seek them. Instead, he set his face toward the wilderness where Israel was [encamped], so that he would see them and prepare his soul towards them, so that the Divine communication would come to him, as had happened to him twice [previously], and so indeed it happened to him now.

It is no coincidence that Chazal expound (Sifrei Devarim, 357):

"And there has not arisen a prophet in Israel like Moshe' (Devarim 34:10) – in Israel none arose, but among the nations one did arise." Only when Bilam stops trying to challenge God and instead humbly turns to hear the voice of God, does he reach a very high level of prophecy.

[This sicha was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat Parashat Balak 5784.] Edited by Yair Lichtman

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Cultivating the Proper Path

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Parshas Balak introduces us to one of the most fascinating and complex figures in the Torah: Bila'am. Endowed with extraordinary prophetic ability, Bila'am possessed gifts that few people in history ever attained. Yet despite his remarkable talents, he is remembered not as a model of righteousness, but as a cautionary example of squandered spiritual potential.

Chazal draw a striking contrast between Bila'am and Avraham Avinu. In Pirkei Avos, the Mishnah teaches:

Whoever possesses three qualities is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu, and whoever possesses three opposite qualities is among the disciples of Bilaam HaRasha (Avos 5:19).

The Mishnah explains that the students of Avraham possess *ayin tova*, a good eye; *ruach nemucha*, a humble spirit; and *nefesh shefala*, a restrained and disciplined soul. The students of Bila'am possess the opposite traits: *ayin ra'ah*, an evil eye; *ruach gevohah*, an arrogant spirit; and *nefesh rechava*, an insatiable appetite.

At first glance, this Mishnah appears somewhat surprising. Why does the Mishnah compare the students of Avraham to the students of Bila'am? Could there be two individuals who seem more antithetical to one another?

Perhaps the Mishnah is teaching that a person's greatness is determined not by his natural and Divinely endowed talents, but by

his character, his *tikun ha'middos*, the choices he makes in how he lives his life, and the person he shapes himself to be.

Avraham and Bila'am were certainly both influential figures. Both possessed extraordinary abilities. Both affected the lives of countless people. Yet they traveled in opposite directions because they developed fundamentally different outlooks on life.

Avraham possessed an *ayin tova* — a good eye. He looked upon others generously and sought their welfare. Even when praying on behalf of the wicked people of Sodom, Avraham searched for merit and pleaded for compassion. When welcoming dusty travelers to his tent, though they were idol worshippers, he was kind and self-effacing, offering them water to wash with, food to eat, and shade under which to rest.

Bila'am, by contrast, possessed an *ayin ra'ah*, a wicked and stingy eye. Rather than seeking the good of others, he looked upon them with jealousy and resentment. Chazal teach that his desire to harm Klal Yisrael ultimately reflected a deeply negative view of others and their success. He wanted more and more for himself, both in terms of monetary wealth ("If Balak gives me a house full of silver and gold...") and *kavod*, honor ("I cannot travel with you, lowly officials," Bila'am said to the officers of Balak. "However, if Balak sends more prominent ministers, with them I shall travel!").

Avraham possessed a *ruach nemucha* — genuine humility. Despite becoming the father of a great nation and the bearer of Hashem's covenant, he described himself as: *afar va'efer* — but dust and ashes (Bereishis 18:27).

Bila'am, however, embodied *ruach gevohah* — arrogance. Again and again throughout the parsha, we see his preoccupation with honor, prestige, and personal importance.

Finally, Avraham possessed a *nefesh shefala* — self-discipline and contentment. He understood that true satisfaction comes not from acquiring more, but from faithfully serving Hashem.

Bila'am exemplified *nefesh rechava* — endless craving. Despite the gifts, honor, and recognition he already possessed, he constantly sought more. His desires were never fully satisfied.

Perhaps this is why the Mishnah presents these two figures as opposites. Avraham and Bila'am represent two fundamentally different approaches to life.

One person views the world through the lens of gratitude, humility, and generosity. Such a person appreciates what Hashem has given him and seeks to use those blessings for good. Another person views the world through the lens of jealousy, arrogance, and endless desire. No matter how much he possesses, he remains dissatisfied because he is focused on what he lacks rather than on what he has.

This contrast in outlook and worldview remains highly relevant today. It is easy to become preoccupied with another person's accomplishments, possessions, opportunities, or recognition. Yet the Mishnah reminds us that our own happiness and spiritual growth depend less on what we possess and more on how we view ourselves, others, and the world around us.

An *ayin tova* allows a person to celebrate the success of others. A humble spirit enables a person to continue learning and growing. And a *nefesh shefala* helps a person live with gratitude and contentment.

While Bila'am's talents could not compensate for deficiencies of character, Avraham's greatness emerged precisely because he refined his character and lived his life according to the will of Hashem.

May we merit to become true students of Avraham Avinu. May we learn to view others generously, to live with humility, and to appreciate the blessings that Hashem has bestowed upon us. And in this merit, may we continue to grow as faithful servants of Hashem, building lives of kindness, gratitude, and spiritual greatness.

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Conviction in an Age of Convenience

By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

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According to Merriam-Webster, a grifter is "a person who swindles or cheats others through deception or fraud." The word comes from *graft*, an old slang term for dishonest gain. Traditionally, it referred to a con artist, someone who manipulates others for personal profit. In recent years, though, the word has taken on a broader cultural meaning. Today, "grifter" is often used to describe a public figure who shifts principles, loyalties, or convictions depending on what is most useful or profitable at the moment. The focus is no longer only on fraud, but on flexibility without principles. The question becomes less "What is true?" and more "What works for me right now?"

We see this pattern across media personalities, politicians, entertainers, and even religious leaders. Positions and convictions once held and stated with certainty are walked back and abandoned. Yesterday's critic is today's supporter, and today's supporter might be tomorrow's critic — all depending on what the audience wants, what drives engagement, or what helps the bottom line.

In today's media world, too many commentators shift positions to chase clicks, followers, ratings, access, or political influence. Just this week, Tucker Carlson, after decades as one of the most prominent voices on the right, announced that he is leaving the Republican Party, citing serious disagreements over its direction and the war with Iran. This isn't a principled stand; it is just the latest pivot from a person who can make your head spin with how quickly and radically he changes his opinions and loyalties.

While perhaps the most prominent example, he is far from the only one. Megyn Kelly, consistent with her recent ideological shift, sharply criticized President Trump's approach to the Iran conflict, expressing regret for voting for him. Until the opportunity to host Vice President Vance on her show arose — and then she suddenly became a supporter of President Trump again. Changing one's mind is not the issue. Everyone can, and in some cases should, change their mind when appropriate. The question is what drives it: conviction or convenience?

For this group of grifters, the pattern repeats itself. Positions shift with public mood. Strong statements are softened when they become inconvenient.

Judaism makes a clear distinction here. There is a place for honest reassessment. We are expected to think, learn, grow, and correct ourselves when we are wrong. But there is a difference between changing because we have grown and changing because we are grifting.

Chazal describe Bilam, the non-Jewish prophet hired by Balak to curse Bnei Yisrael, as both highly gifted and deeply corrupt. On the pasuk "ולא קם בישראל עוד נביא כמשה" — "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moshe" (Devarim 34:10) — the Sifrei notes that while no prophet like Moshe arose in Israel, such a prophet did arise among the nations: Bilam. His level of prophecy matched that of

Moshe Rabbeinu. Yet the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:2) lists him among those who lose their share in the World to Come.

How does someone on that level fall so far?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l points to the Gemara (Sanhedrin 105a), which connects the name Bilam to בלא עם — "without a people." Bilam was not rooted in anything. He had no real loyalty or commitment. He was available to be hired, and his blessings and curses could be purchased. We tend to think of Bilam as someone specifically out to get the Jews, but there is no evidence that he was guided by ideology, justice, or moral responsibility. He had ability, but not allegiance.

In that sense, Bilam was the original grifter. He had extraordinary gifts but no anchor. He attached himself to whoever offered him the most benefit. He was בלא עם — a man without a people.

Moshe Rabbeinu is the opposite. Hashem testifies about him, "בכל ביתי נאמן הוא" — "In all My house he is the most trustworthy"

(Bamidbar 12:7). Moshe is defined by loyalty and faithfulness. He stands with his people even when it is difficult. He defends them when they fail. He challenges them when they need it. He does not leave them when things are hard.

Moshe is not בלא עם. He belongs to his people and they can rely on him. That is the difference between talent and character. Bilam had only talent. Moshe also had trustworthiness — and in the end, trust is what matters.

In a world where it is increasingly common for public figures, particularly those who stand to profit, to adjust their positions based on what is popular or useful, there are still those who try to stay consistent. Among the most visible Orthodox Jewish public figures, Ben Shapiro has often taken positions that come with criticism and personal cost — especially in his public defense of Israel and in maintaining an openly observant Jewish identity in a very public arena. Whether one agrees with everything he says or not, someone who continues to stand by his core commitments to the Jewish people and to Israel, even when it is uncomfortable, inconvenient, and even dangerous, is admirable.

For him, and for any of us, sometimes it would be easier to shift. It would be more profitable, more comfortable, or more accepted. But that has never been what Torah life is meant to be.

Being a Jew is about consistency — about showing up the same way whether it is convenient and comfortable or not. It is about being someone whose word can be trusted and whose values do not change with the moment. Moshe Rabbeinu is our teacher in perpetuity not just because of his brilliance and greatness, but because of his reliability, consistency, steadfastness, and trustworthiness.

We may not stand to gain financially by changing our appearance or our opinions, but we do live in a world where there is often a perceived benefit in minimizing the visible signs of our Jewish identity or staying quiet about our values and principles. The temptation is to blend in, to avoid attention, to say less and be seen less. But that is not our calling.

Don't be a Bilam who detaches from his people when it is inconvenient or costly. Be a student of Moshe Rabbeinu, who stood with his nation and stood for truth — choosing principle over profit and faithfulness over favor.

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Potomac Torah Study Center

Message for Chukat - Balak

Chukat opens with the Torah of the Red Heifer – the procedure required to become tahor (ritually pure) again after contact with a dead body (ch. 19). God almost certainly gave this law to Moshe at Har Sinai, but the Torah presents the law here, at the end of the discussion of the generation of the Exodus, after the sins from the Korach rebellion and the Meraglim lead to many deaths among the people. Without further discussion, the Torah continues in chapter 20 with the story of the next generation, after a gap of 38 years. Miriam dies at Kadesh, and the well that had accompanied her since three days after the Exodus stops giving water. The people complain of thirst:

Why did you have us ascend from Egypt to bring us to this evil place. . . not a place of seed, or fig, or grape, or pomegranate; and there is no water to drink" (20:5).

Moshe and Aharon fall on their faces and believe that they are hearing the same complaints several times over the past forty years. However, the complaints this time are very different. Instead of wanting to appoint a leader to return to Egypt, the people are complaining that they are impatient to enter the land of "grains, figs, grapes, and pomegranates" – Israel. That is the main complaint. The lack of water comes second. If the people had sinned in their request, God would have been angry. Instead, Hashem tells Moshe to speak to the rock (Miriam's well) and it would provide water. Moshe instead calls the people rebels, treats them with anger, and strikes the rock twice. As Rabbi Hayyim Angel recognizes, Moshe and Aharon, without Miriam to advise them, do not recognize that the source of the upset is thirst and impatience to arrive and enter Israel. The new generation needs a leader who can recognize the needs of the new generation and how these needs differ from those of their parents. Why must Aharon and Moshe die at this point, before entering the land that Hashem had promised to our Avot? Suppose Moshe and Aharon had stepped aside to let Yehoshua and Eleazer take their positions? Would the people who had looked to these leaders for forty years accept the new leadership without looking back to Moshe and Aharon? Would Yehoshua and Eleazer be comfortable as leaders if their predecessors were still around?

Chukat shows that the new generation still has problems looking to Hashem for all their needs. When the people again face hunger and thirst, and they show signs of depression, God releases the snakes and serpents to bite the people. Instead of praying directly to Hashem, they ask Moshe to do something. God tells Moshe to make a fiery serpent, place it on a pole, and tell the people to look up to it. When they look toward heaven, they recover from the poison (21:6-9). While the serpent incident shows a relapse, the people also initiate contact with Sihon, and when its king refuses permission for B'Nai Yisrael to pass through and engages the Jews in war, the new generation meets the challenge and defeats Sihon and then Og (21:21 ff.).

Many years we read Balak with Chukat outside Israel. Balak is unique as the only parsha since the time of Noach to take place entirely from the perspective of non-Jews. None of the Jews are aware of the interactions between Balak and Bilaam or the efforts of Moab and Midian to protect their countries from Israel. The king of Moab hires Bilaam, a noted sorcerer, to curse B'Nai Yisrael. Bilaam asks Hashem for permission, and God tells him not to curse the

people. Bilaam proceeds anyway, and Hashem turns his curses into blessings of great beauty.

From this story, we learn that non-Jewish nations surrounding Canaan fear B'Nai Yisrael, and God protects our people even when we are unaware of the threat. We should remember this episode whenever Israel faces a threat from neighboring countries.

Mordechai understood that when Haman threatened the Jews of Persia, God would find a way to save the Jews. Esther could be Hashem's agent, or she could refuse – then God would find another agent to save our people. We had the same issue at the time of Chanukah. In multiple wars between Israel and the Arab countries, military historians could not explain how Israel defeated the combined Arab forces – but we understand that Hashem behind the scenes finds a way for us to prevail.

Political trends look terrible for our people, especially with anti-Semitic candidates defeating moderate candidates in New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and other parts of the country. When facing anti-Semitism, the Rebbe of blessed memory told Jews to become more observant, more obviously Jewish, and perform more mitzvot. Rabbi Marc Angel's reaction to the adverse election results in New York fits this pattern. He immediately purchased Israel Bonds for all his family members, contributed to AIPAC, and wrote to his representatives in Congress. He is also working for organizations in Israel and the United States that enhance Jewish life. These sorts of reactions have helped our people for thousands of years, and we should emulate the Rebbe and Rabbi Angel.

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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 taken place in the interim, but recall that Ibn Ezra

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHERE HAVE THEY BEEN TILL NOW?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE 18 STOP JOURNEY IN PARSHAT MASEI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enter Parshat Devarim!

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

WILL THE REAL 'KADESH' PLEASE STAND UP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE EVENTS FROM MERAGLIM TO ARVOT MOAV

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

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

Let's follow the flow:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOT SO FAST!

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

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

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

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

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

(see 2:2-14)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN CONCLUSION / & SOME REMARKS

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

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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

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

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

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

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

THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

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

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

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

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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

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

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

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

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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

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

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

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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

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

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

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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

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

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

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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

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

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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'dbartem EL ha'sela" - the word "el" should be understood as "odot" (about). God commands Moshe to speak to the people ABOUT the rock THAT it should give water; and that is exactly what Moshe does!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART II

DID MOSHE DO ANYTHING 'WRONG' ?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CRIME & PUNISHMENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

LET'S START FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

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

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

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

purpose of their special relationship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHOSE STAFF IS IT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAKING NO MISTAKES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BELIEVING or SUPPORTING

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

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

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

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

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

THE FINAL STRAW

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

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

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

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

"kiddush Hashem"; but this did not happen.

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

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

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

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

2. How else can one explain this pasuk?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parshat Balak: Bilam: The Prophet and the Consultant

by Rabbi Menachem Leibtag

Is Bilam really such a 'bad guy?' Indeed, God's anger with his decision to travel with Balak's messengers (see 22:12,22) suggests that his true intentions may have been to curse Am Yisrael. However, this fact may prove exactly the opposite - that Bilam is a man of high moral stature! After all, over and over again, Bilam overcomes this personal desire to curse Yisrael and blesses them instead, "exactly as God commands him" (see 23:12,26 and 24:13). In fact, his final blessing of Am Yisrael appears to have been on his own initiative (see 24:1-6).

Why then do Chazal cite Bilam as the archetype "rasha" (a wicked person - see Pirkei Avot 5:19)? Simply for once having 'bad intentions'?

This week's shiur attempts to answer this question by reconstructing what really happens in Parshat Balak, based on other Parshiot in Chumash.

Introduction

From Parshat Balak alone it is hard to pinpoint any specific sin that Bilam commits. In fact, a careful reading of the entire Parsha shows that not only did he do nothing wrong, he is even quite a "tzadik" (a righteous man). Before leaving on his journey he clarifies to Balak's messengers that he will not stray one iota from whatever God will tell him (see 22:18). Upon his arrival in "sdeh Moav," he blesses Am Yisrael instead of cursing them, precisely as God commands him (see 23:1-24:9). Bilam is so 'pro-Israel' that by the conclusion of the story, Balak is so angry that he basically tells Bilam to 'get lost':

"Balak's anger was kindled with Bilam and, striking his hands together, Balak tells Bilam: I asked you to curse my enemy and instead you have blessed them three times! Now, run away to your own place..." (24:10-11)
Before Bilam leaves, as though he had not disappointed Balak enough, he informs Balak of how Yisrael will one day defeat Moav and Edom in battle. Finally:

"Bilam gets up and goes to his homeland, and Balak also went on his way." (24:25)

Clearly, Parshat Balak leaves us with the impression that Bilam and Balak split on 'no-speaking' terms. Bilam the 'loyal prophet' returns home, and Balak is left to deal with his problems by himself. Surely, had this been the only story in Chumash about Bilam, it would be quite difficult to judge him as a "rasha."

To take case with Bilam's behavior it is necessary to look elsewhere in Chumash - in Parshat Matot - where the Torah tells us about Bilam's untimely death.

We begin by showing how these two Parshiot are connected.

Bilam and the War with Midyan

Immediately after the story of Bilam (chapters 22-24), we find the story of Bnei Yisrael's sin with "bnot Moav" (the daughters of Moav and Midyan; see chapter 25). Although the Torah does not specify who instigated this sin, the juxtaposition of these two stories already suggests a thematic connection (see Rashi and Ramban 25:1).

Due to this sin, Bnei Yisrael are punished by a terrible plague, but finally they are saved by the zealous act of Pinchas (25:1-9). At the conclusion of that entire incident, God commands Bnei Yisrael to avenge the Midyanim with a reprisal attack (see 25:16-18). For some reason (to be discussed in the shiurim to follow), the details of that battle are only recorded several chapters later - in Parshat Matot (see 31:1-12).

In the brief detail of that battle, the Torah informs (almost incidentally) that Bilam is killed together with the five kings of Midyan (31:8).

Why is Bilam executed? What did he do to deserve the death penalty?

The answer to this question is alluded to in the story that follows. When the army returned from battle with Midyan, Moshe mentions Bilam in his censure of the military officers for taking female captives:

"And Moshe became angry at the military officers... saying: Were they not the very ones who - b'dvar Bilam - at the bidding of Bilam, induced Bnei Yisrael to sin against God in the matter of Peor!" (31:14-16)
What is Moshe referring to when he mentions "dvar Bilam?" The Gemara in Sanhedrin 106a explains that "dvar Bilam" refers to Bilam's advice to use the daughters of Moav and Midyan to lure Bnei Yisrael towards the idol worship of "Baal Peor." (See Rashi there.) Now, the connection between these two parshiot becomes clear. It was Bilam himself who instigated the entire incident of "chet bnot Moav!" It was his idea to lure Bnei Yisrael into sinning. Bilam is so involved that this entire incident is associated with his name!

[Furthermore, from this statement by Moshe, we see that Bilam's involvement in this scheme is 'common knowledge' for it takes for granted that the military officers are aware of what "dvar Bilam" is. In other words, everyone knows that Bilam

was the instigator.]

Therefore, when Bilam is executed, it is not because he had once intended to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilam is found guilty for it is he who orchestrated the entire scheme of "chet bnot Midyan."

So why the sudden change of heart? Why, after blessing Am Yisrael, does he turn around and orchestrate their demise? Was "dvar Bilam" simply some last minute advice to Balak before leaving? It doesn't seem so. Recall from Parshat Balak that when Bilam was sent away, he and Balak were not exactly on speaking terms. Furthermore, what is Bilam doing in Midyan at all? Had he not gone home?

Before we can answer these questions, we must first determine where Bilam is from. [Time for a little Biblical geography.]

Bilam's Home Town

To better understand Bilam's true character, it is important to recognize that he lived in Mesopotamia, a very far distance away from Moav and Midyan! How do we know this? In the opening psukim of the Parsha we are told that: "Balak sent messengers to Bilam ben Be'or to city of Ptor which is by the river... to call him." (22:5)

In Chumash, the river ("ha'nhar") refers to the Euphrates ("n'har prat"), the main river flowing through Mesopotamia. (See Board #1.)

This assumption can be confirmed by Sefer Devarim, in a short reference to Moav and the story of Bilam:

"...and because they hired Bilam ben Be'or from Ptor Aram Naharaim [Aram (located between) the two great rivers (the Euphrates and Tigris)]." (23:5)

(See Board #2.) Furthermore, Bilam's opening blessing states specifically that he came from Aram, from the East (modern day Syria/Iraq):

"From Aram, Balak has brought me... from mountains in the East [har'rey kedem]." (23:7)
Why is it so important that we know that Bilam came from Mesopotamia, a location so far away?

The Return of Bilam

Recall that Bilam had returned home (see 24:25), i.e. to Mesopotamia, after blessing Bnei Yisrael (instead of cursing them). Nevertheless, only a short time later, when Bnei Yisrael sin with "bnot Midyan," we find that Bilam is back in the 'neighborhood,' together with the five kings of Midyan (31:8). Thus, we must conclude that after Bilam had returned home, he comes back to Moav - a second time!

For what purpose does he return? Why does he embark on another journey of several hundred miles to give some advice to Moav and Midyan? The answer is startling, but simple: Bilam the 'prophet' went home and Bilam the 'consultant' returns!

What motivates Bilam's lengthy trek back to Moav? Why is he so interested in causing Bnei Yisrael to sin?

Bilam the Rasha

Bilam's return to Moav proves that his true intention all along was to curse Bnei Yisrael. Yet as a prophet, he could not do so for 'how could he curse he whom God Himself does not curse' (see 23:8). However, even though he may be faithful to God as a prophet, he is far less faithful as a person. Overcome by his desire to cause Bnei Yisrael harm, he employs his prophetic understanding to devise an alternate plan - to create a situation where God Himself will curse Am Yisrael.

As reflected in his blessing of Bnei Yisrael, Bilam the prophet realizes the special relationship between God and His Nation. He fully understands why God does not allow him to curse them, for it is His will that Bnei Yisrael fulfill their Divine purpose to become God's special nation.

On the other hand, Bilam finds a loophole. Being a prophet, he also realizes that should Bnei Yisrael themselves fail in their obedience to God, He Himself would punish them. In other words - this special nation could not be cursed without reason. However, should they sin, God would punish them. Bilam's conclusion is shrewd: to cause Bnei Yisrael to be cursed - by causing them to sin. Bilam finally finds a method to curse Bnei Yisrael. He advises Moav and Midyan to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin.

This may be the deeper reason that Chazal consider Bilam the archetype "rasha," for he utilizes his prophetic understanding, the special trait that God gave him, to further his own desires rather than to follow God's will. Taking God-given qualities, and using them in an improper manner is the 'way of life' for a "rasha."

Between Avraham and Bilam

In the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:19), not only is Bilam called the "rasha;" he is also contrasted with Avraham Avinu:

"Whoever has the following three traits is among the 'talmidim' (disciples) of Avraham Avinu; and whoever has three other traits is among the 'talmidim' of Bilam 'ha'rasha':

Avraham

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 Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov"

From the time that Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, Sefer Bamidbar has few positive events to record. The nation appears to be going from one sin to the next (mit'on'nim, mit'avim, meraglim, Korach, Mei M'riva etc.). With all the complaining, internal strife etc., it is difficult to find anything positive.

It 'davka' takes an outsider, like Bilam, looking from a distance at Am Yisroel, to perceive the greatness of this nation despite all of its problems. When Bilam recognizes that an entire nation is following Hashem through the desert, he proclaims:

"Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov..."
(24:5)

This is an important insight for today also. Sometimes we become over disillusioned with ourselves, as we see so much disagreement, lack of unity, lack of commitment etc. We become so involved with the details that we sometimes are unable to take a step out and look at the whole picture, to see our achievements. With all the problems in Israel today, there continue to be great achievements in all walks of Jewish life. It is important to periodically take a step back and assess the good as well as the bad. It gives us the motivation to continue to achieve. "Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov" - a nice attitude to start off the day!

Parshat Chukat

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

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

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

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

TO BEGIN:

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

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

Now there was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moshe and against Aharon; the people quarreled with Moshe, they said, saying: "Would that we had expired when our brothers expired before the presence of Hashem!"

Why did you bring the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, us and our cattle? Why did you make us go up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place -- not a place of seeds and figs, vines and pomegranates! And water there is none to drink!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DEVARIM 32:48-52 – Hashem spoke to Moshe on that same day, saying: "Go up these heights . . . Mount Nevo, that is in the land of Mo'av, that faces Jericho, and see the land of Canaan that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael for a holding. You are to

die on the mountain that you are going up, and are to be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother died . . . and was gathered to his people, because you *MA'ALTEM* Me in the midst of Bnei Yisrael at the waters of the quarrel at Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin, because you did not sanctify Me among Bnei Yisrael. Indeed, at a distance you shall see the land, but there you shall not enter, the land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael."

*note: "ma'altam" 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 Efrayyim 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'ila," which implies that Moshe and Aharon usurped a prerogative of Hashem's?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moshe continues to defend himself as the parasha goes on -- another sign of trouble. He summons the Earth to swallow the rebels in order to prove his legitimacy as leader, not in order to defend Hashem per se. When the people then accuse Moshe and Aharon of having murdered the people who died, Hashem becomes angry with them: have they not learned by now that He is behind Moshe and Aharon? But there is an echo of truth in the people's accusation -- it is not clear how much of what has happened was for Hashem, and how much was necessary to prop up Moshe's and Aharon's

leadership.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Land as leaders of the successful new generation.

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom
Emphasis added

PARASHAT BALAK

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

QUESTIONS:

- 1) The elders of Mo'av and Midyan bring "kesamim" with them to Bil'am. What are they, and why are they brought? Where else in the parasha is this word mentioned, and how does that reflect back on the "kesamim" here?
- 2) When the elders come to Bil'am and solicit his sorcery, he invites them to stay the night so he can consult Hashem about the matter. Hashem asks him, "Who are these men with you?" Why does Hashem ask a question, since He certainly already knows the answer? Where else does Hashem ask questions like this, and what is the significance of the connection between this story and that story?
- 3) Our parasha is a great place to look at the ways in which people play "telephone" in real life. Hashem tells Bil'am one thing, but Bil'am reports something slightly (but significantly) different to the elders of Mo'av; they in turn report something slightly (but significantly) different to Balak. What are these subtle differences, and what accounts for them? Are they important to the theme of the parasha, or are they just an interesting side comment on the nature of communication? How is Balak's understanding of Bil'am's response reflected in his comments to Bil'am in 22:37 and later in 24:11?
- 4) Bil'am responds to Balak's second group of emissaries by consulting Hashem again about going with them. Hashem tells Bil'am to go (22:20). But, incredibly, just two pesukim later (22:22), Hashem "was angry because he was going." Well, does Hashem really want him to go or not?
- 5) Next comes the story with Bil'am and the donkey. But what is the point? Why is this story in the Torah? What are we supposed to get out of it?
- 6) Why does the angel show up to threaten Bil'am at all, if in the end he is going to tell Bil'am to keep going with Balak's men anyway? And what is the point of delivering to Bil'am again the same instructions Hashem had already given him in 22:20?
- 7) When Bil'am meets Balak, they embark on their joint effort to curse Bnei Yisrael. Why does Bil'am say nothing about himself in the first two "meshalim" he offers, but in the third and fourth "meshalim," he prefaces his words with extensive self-description? And what is the significance of the content of the self-description?
- 8) Bil'am makes several theological statements in the course of the "meshalim" he delivers. How does this theological information contradict his own behavior?
- 9) Finally, a very basic question which should have been on our minds all this time: who is this Bil'am, anyway? Is he a close friend of Hashem's who is believed to have power to bless and curse, or is he a sorcerer, a devotee of darker powers than Hashem? Or is he something else?

QUESTIONS WE WILL NOT ADDRESS:

- 1) Why, in the beginning of the parasha, is there so much switching back and forth between "Balak" as an individual and "Mo'av" as an entire nation? For example, if "Balak" sees what Bnei Yisrael have done to their enemies, then why is "Mo'av" afraid?
- 2) Where is the first time we come across the phrase "va-y-khas et ein ha-aretz" ["They covered the 'eye' of the land"]? By using this phrase, what is the Torah trying to tell us about the Moavites' perception of Bnei Yisrael?
- 3) Balak, Bil'am, and Hashem (in that order, in the parasha) use several terms for the word "curse." What do they each mean, and do they all indicate the same degree of cursing? If not, what is the significance of the shift between one term and the next?

4) In 22:7, we hear that the elders of both Mo'av and Midyan come to Bil'am to seek his cursing services, but in the very next pasuk (verse), we hear that only the elders of Mo'av stay the night with Bil'am. Where have the elders of Midyan gone?

5) For that matter, there seems to be a lot of confusion about Mo'av and Midyan: in the beginning of our parasha, the elders of Mo'av and Midyan appear together, discussing the approaching threat. Soon, as noted, the elders of Midyan disappear. In the end of the parasha, we hear that Bnei Yisrael become involved in all sorts of bad doings with the people of Mo'av, but this seems to change into "Midyan" before long. What is going on?

PARASHAT BALAK:

In this week's parasha, several things seem to happen more than once. In fact, many things (three of them, in fact) seem to come in threes:

1) **WARNINGS TO BIL'AM:** In the beginning of the parasha, Balak, king of Mo'av, sends messengers to summon Bil'am, a local sorcerer, to curse Bnei Yisrael so that he (Balak) can defeat the powerful young nation in battle. Bil'am consults Hashem about going to curse Bnei Yisrael, and Hashem tells him not to go with Balak's men and not to curse the nation, "for it is blessed" (= warning #1). The messengers leave, but soon another group of Balak's messengers comes to urge Bil'am to offer his cursing services. Once again, Bil'am consults Hashem; Hashem tells him to go with them, but warns him to follow whatever directions Hashem gives him (= warning #2). Bil'am reports the good news to the messengers and travels with them back to their home. On the way, Hashem sends an angel to deliver another warning to Bil'am to follow his instructions carefully (= warning #3). In total, then, Bil'am is warned three times.

2) **THE SCENE WITH THE DONKEY:** Bil'am, riding on his donkey toward Balak's headquarters, is confronted by an angel which at first only his donkey can see. This hilarious scene provides us with three sets of three:

- a) The Torah tells us three times that the donkey sees the angel (22:23, 22:25, 22:27);
- b) Three times, the donkey turns aside from the path, or in other ways refuses to go on (turning into the field =1, pressing itself into a wall =2, crouching down under Bil'am =3);
- c) Three times, Bil'am hits his donkey with his stick to make it return to the path and behave itself. This thrice-repeated hitting is noted by the donkey itself in 22:28, when the donkey miraculously acquires the power of speech and complains to its master for hitting it thrice; the triple hitting is also noted by the angel when Bil'am's "eyes are opened" and he sees the angel (22:32 and 22:33).

3) **BIL'AM'S ATTEMPTS TO CURSE THE PEOPLE** also provide us with sets of 3:

- a) Bil'am and Balak erect a set of altars and sacrifices each time Bil'am attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael (i.e., three times in total).
- b) Bil'am delivers three prophetically inspired speeches in which he praises/blesses Bnei Yisrael.
- c) In response to each of Bil'am's blessings/speeches, Balak complains of "breach of contract"; he had hired Bil'am to curse, not to bless (23:11, 23:25, 24:10). In fact, after the third blessing, Balak notes explicitly that he and Bil'am have now been through the same thing for the third time: "I took you here to curse my enemies, but you have blessed three times!"

So not only do we have several patterns of triads, but we also have several explicit statements in the Torah which demonstrate awareness by the characters in the stories that there are triads here. It is almost as if the Torah is trying to direct our attention to the fact that there are these triads. But what are they supposed to mean?

There is no way to be sure, but to me they suggest the following: When something happens once, you can dismiss it completely. Even when it happens twice, you can still sort of pretend it didn't happen or wonder if maybe you misinterpreted it somehow. But when it happens for a third time, there's no denying it any longer: the number three has a certain solidity and certainty to it. This is perhaps related to the halakhic principle of "hazaka," a state which is created when something happens three times (e.g., once something has happened three times, we assume that it will happen again in the future).

For now, let us defer further development of this issue and look at other features of the parasha. Once we have greater clarity in the story as a whole, these patterns will provide deeper meaning.

BIL'AM THE SORCERER:

When Balak's men set out for Bil'am, they bring "kesamim" -- magical charms or totems -- with them. The fact that Balak provides these items for Bil'am tells us that Balak sees Bil'am as a professional sorcerer. As a magician, he will of course need the standard sorcerer's toolbox, full of the usual tools: amulets, figurines, spell books, colored powders, rare herbs, incense to burn, and sundry other items. Unlike today, when a service professional usually brings his own tools -- the plumber comes with his own plunger and wrench, the doctor brings his own medical bag, etc. -- Balak provided Bil'am with "kesamim," magical trinkets, tokens, or totems. (Without meaning to compare my son's mohel to Bil'am the Evil, I recall that the mohel instructed me to bring gauze, antibiotic creams, pillows, and several other things. On the other hand, he did bring his own scalpel and scissors.)

So whoever Bil'am really is, we know that Balak thinks he is a sorcerer, a magician, a practitioner of mystical arts. We will take a closer look at Bil'am as sorcerer as we move on.

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT:

So Balak's men arrive and set their master's cursing-request before Bil'am, who consults Hashem. Hashem first wants to know who these people are who are spending the night at Bil'am's place: "Who are these men with you?" Bil'am tells Hashem that they are Balak's men. But this whole conversation certainly is a strange exchange. Why does Hashem have to ask Bil'am who the men are? Can't He "see" for Himself?

By way of seeking an answer, where else have we seen Hashem ask questions to which He knows the answer? Some examples which come to mind:

1) Bereshit 4:9 -- Hashem said to Kayyin, "Where is Hevel, your brother?"

This is, of course, just after Kayyin has murdered his brother Hevel.

2) Bereshit 3:9 -- Hashem, the Lord, called to the man and said, "Where are you?"

This is, of course, just after Adam has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge against Hashem's instructions. His eyes are opened, and he now knows that he has no clothing; he is hiding, he says, because he is naked. So Hashem has another question for him:

3) Bereshit 3:11 -- He said, "Who told you that you are naked?"

And then another question:

4) Bereshit 3:11 -- "Have you -- from the tree which I commanded you to not eat from it -- eaten?"

Without belaboring the point, one thing seems clear: Hashem asks questions when someone has done something wrong and He wants that person to own up to the deed: Kayyin is supposed to admit to the murder of his brother (he instead denies knowledge of Hevel's whereabouts). Adam is supposed to admit that he is hiding because he is afraid of being punished for his deed (instead he claims modesty, but Hashem traps him anyway because he is not supposed to know about modesty!). Adam is supposed to respond to Hashem's next question by admitting having eaten from the tree (but he instead blames it on his wife).

In other words, a question from Hashem usually signals that someone has done something wrong. And in the cases above, human nature attempts to hide the deed anyway.

Bil'am is no exception to the pattern: Hashem asks, "Who are these men with you?" because he wants Bil'am to understand that He knows who these men are -- and that Bil'am's relationship with them should end right here. But Bil'am doesn't take the hint, just as Kayyin and Adam didn't.

On the other hand, Bil'am is a bit different from Adam and Kayyin: instead of shrugging his shoulders ("Well, uh, how should I know where my brother is?") or trying to sidestep the question ("Uh, I'm behind this tree because I, uh, have no clothes"), he decides to brazen right through: "Oh, these men here? You want to know who they are? They, uh, they're Balak's men. Yeah. From Mo'av. They came to me to ask me to curse someone. You know, that nation that left Egypt, the nation that's swarming across the desert towards Balak. Balak wants my help in defeating them. That's who these men are." Bil'am either pretends that he doesn't understand the significance of Hashem's question, or he really is blind and doesn't see the problem: that these are Hashem's most favorite people and that He is not excited about their being cursed.

Hashem listens to Bil'am and makes it explicit: don't do this job. Don't go with them, and don't curse this people, "for they are blessed."

BIL'AM DOESN'T TAKE THE HINT . . . AGAIN:

When Bil'am receives this first warning, he obeys the direct order not to go with the men, but he is still quite eager to do a little hexing on Bnei Yisrael if the opportunity presents itself. So instead of telling Balak's men that he will not do the job because the target nation is blessed, i.e., because he himself feels it would be wrong to curse them, he tells them that his Boss said no: "Hashem has refused to allow me to go with you." He himself, of course, would be delighted to do the job and take the money.

Balak's men return to their master and report Bil'am's response -- except that they make an important emendation to Bil'am's response: "**Bil'am** refused to go with us." This is not exactly how Bil'am himself had formulated it: Bil'am had said, "**Hashem** has refused . . .", making it clear that he was willing but that Hashem was not. But Balak's men don't notice this fine point, so in the game of telephone which is all of human communication, they flub it and change Bil'am's answer and make it sound like Bil'am himself doesn't want to do the job. Balak's thought, naturally, is that Bil'am must have refused his request because the messengers he sent weren't important enough to give Bil'am the honor he felt he deserved, and because Bil'am wasn't happy with the price (or didn't think Balak could afford his fees for a house call).

So Balak sends men again, "more numerous and more honorable than these" [i.e., than the first group], and they carry Balak's message that "I will surely honor you greatly," paying whatever you ask. Bil'am responds by correcting Balak; to paraphrase, "It is not I, Bil'am, who stand in the way here, it is Hashem! Even if you offered me your whole treasury, I could not go against Him!"

On the surface, Bil'am sounds like a faithful servant of Hashem. Nothing can make him disobey his God.

But we have already seen that Bil'am's dedication goes only so far. He is not so bold as to actually defy Hashem by going with Balak's men and cursing Bnei Yisrael, but he has not at all internalized Hashem's will as his own. In other words, he is only behaviorally saintly. He will not actually *do* anything to contravene Hashem's explicit instructions to him, but he is completely uninterested in Hashem's unexpressed will, even when it should be apparent to him what Hashem wants.

Of course, it is sometimes appropriate to want to do something which is forbidden. In such cases, we show our loyalty and dedication to Hashem by not doing the forbidden thing we want to do. But this is true only where the prohibition is not a moral or ethical one. For example, it is not praiseworthy to desire greatly to sleep with your neighbor's spouse but to refrain from doing so because you know it is forbidden. It is something we should not *want* to do because it is wrong, because to do so violates the sanctity of marriage and destroys the fabric of the family. On the other hand, we might say that it is praiseworthy to want to sample a piece of marinated squid but to refrain simply because it is forbidden. (Some might argue with this last example, too.) The point is that we are supposed to develop into ethical and moral people, not remain internally corrupt and simply *behave* externally the way ethical and moral people would behave.

Bil'am is a saint, externally. "Curse these innocent people for money? Sure! Let me just ask the Boss."

When Bil'am asks Hashem for the second time about going with Balak, Hashem allows him to go, but warns him to follow His directions carefully. As far as we can tell, Bil'am is ready to obey, and so he tells us himself: "I cannot transgress the mouth of Hashem, my God, to do a small or great thing." But as soon as he hits the road on his trusty donkey, we hear that "Hashem was very angry because he was going." Now, Hashem is the One who just told him to go -- so why is He angry?

Hashem is angry because Bil'am didn't take the hint. Bil'am tells Balak's men that he cannot do a thing without Hashem's approval -- but he is hardly making this journey just to be Hashem's mouthpiece to Balak, whether blessing or curse is to be delivered! Bil'am is hoping against hope that he will somehow be able to curse Bnei Yisrael and take home the jackpot Balak has offered him. So although he is making the journey with permission, he is quite eager to find a way to get around Hashem's earlier instruction: "Do not curse the nation, for it is blessed!" A true servant of Hashem, sensitive to His will, would not be making this journey at all.

WHO IS BIL'AM?

Here is the place to start to think about what Bil'am could possibly be thinking. Since Hashem has forbidden the cursing, what does Bil'am hope to accomplish? Don't we hear from Bil'am himself, later on in the parasha, that Hashem is not One to change His mind like a fickle human being ("No man is Hashem, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should retract"), that once He has blessed, He will not turn around and curse?

This brings us to one of the central questions of this week's parasha: what exactly is Bil'am? A great prophet? A small-time seer? A sorcerer of the dark arts, a necromancer? What exactly is his relationship with Hashem? Where does he get his power?

I believe that a careful reading of the parasha indicates that Bil'am's ideas about Hashem, and his conception of his own function, undergo radical change as a result of his experiences in trying to curse Bnei Yisrael in our parasha. And as his own ideas change and he learns who Hashem really is and who he himself really is, his sponsor, Balak, learns along with him.

SORCERER AND PROPHET:

At the beginning of the parasha, Bil'am is really more sorcerer than prophet. Unlike a prophet, a sorcerer is not a moral giant -- he is simply a technician. The power of the sorcerer does not come from Hashem's gracefully performing the sorcerer's will out of regard for his moral stature and faithful dedication; instead, the sorcerer is trained in tapping into the Divine power grid (or other sources of power) to do his work.

While the prophet works primarily on himself, perfecting his moral character and devotion to Hashem and achieving a level of focus on the Divine which enables him to communicate with Hashem, the sorcerer works primarily on manipulating other things: he uses magical totems, sprinkles colored powders, writes secret amulets, pronounces special incantations and obscure spells, and sacrifices animals to "appease" the demanding deities. The sorcerer manipulates forces which exist and which he sees as external to himself; there is nothing intrinsically holy or exalted about the sorcerer. The prophet, on the other hand, is a profoundly moral and religious figure; above all, his aspiration is not to manipulate the external supernatural for external purposes, but to come into direct relationship with Hashem by changing himself.

These two mentalities control how the sorcerer and prophet each conceive of God (or gods, if he believes in several): the prophet sees God as the moral North star, a transcendent, highest good and benevolence whose will must be obeyed. It would be inconceivable, under normal circumstances, for him to flout God's will. And, more importantly, he does his best to match his own will to God's. He obeys not only God's spoken, explicit command, but attempts to ascertain God's unexpressed will and follow it. The sorcerer, however, sees God (or gods) primarily as a force to be tapped, not a source

for imperatives or a Will to be matched with his own will. He therefore does not pay attention to the desire of the deity except insofar as disobeying explicit commands might interfere with the sorcerer's ability to tap the deity's power.

Bil'am begins the parasha as a sorcerer. He has tapped into Hashem's power grid and acquired a reputation as a powerful person: Balak says to him, "I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." When Balak's men come to him and request a hex on Bnei Yisrael, Bil'am goes right away to check with Hashem, his power source. Hashem tells him not to go with the men and not to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bil'am sees that he has no support for this stunt, so he tells Balak's men he can't do the job.

Then Balak sends more men to Bil'am, and Bil'am asks Hashem again. Bil'am has completely ignored the internal side of the issue -- that he is not supposed to curse Bnei Yisrael for an actual *reason* (which he himself will articulate later, in his own blessings to the people), and he once again checks the power grid for available "current." Hashem gives Bil'am what Bil'am sees as an equivocal response: go with the men, but take care to do what I tell you to do. Bil'am is encouraged: he has gotten approval from the power source for half of what he wants; maybe the next time he asks, he will be able to somehow get the other half: power to curse. As far as Bil'am is concerned, Hashem is not so much an identity with will as a power to be mechanically manipulated. If so, it may be possible to manipulate this power into serving his needs, as time goes on.

Hashem understands what Bil'am is up to and decides that he needs to be educated.

THE DONKEY:

As Bil'am rides along with Balak's men, an angel appears in front of him, sword drawn, looking menacing. As we know, Bil'am's donkey sees the angel, but Bil'am is blind to it. The donkey makes three attempts to turn aside and avoid the angel swordsman, and each time Bil'am beats the donkey with his stick (especially when it crushes his foot against a wall!).

After the third time, the donkey turns to Bil'am and miraculously says, "What have I done to you, that you have hit me these three times?" Again, like Hashem's question to Bil'am earlier on ("Who are these men with you?"), we have a question to which the answer is obvious! Of course, he hit the donkey for disobedience! But Bil'am is supposed to understand that he is being told something by Hashem, who is speaking through his donkey.

Hashem had caused the donkey to turn aside three times, but Bil'am didn't take those hints. Now Hashem opens the donkey's mouth and causes it to ask a question to which it knows (and Bil'am knows it knows) the answer. Bil'am is not supposed to answer the question, he is supposed to just turn himself around and go home. But Bil'am still doesn't take the hint; he simply gives the answer: "Because you have disobeyed me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now!" Bil'am does not know as he says this that there is a sword in the *angel's* hand ready to kill him, but he will soon see.

Hashem opens Bil'am's eyes (the donkey sees before the "seer" sees, and also acquires speech before he acquires sight!), and he sees the angel. In a flash, he is apologetic and humble: "Hey, I didn't know You were upset about this trip I'm taking. If You really want, I'll just turn around and go right on home!" Although Bil'am's eyes are opened physically, he remains blind. He cannot see that a prophet would turn around without an explicit command, that Hashem's will is enough for the prophet. Bil'am is thinking about all that money.

The angel, echoing the donkey, emphasizes that Bil'am has been given three subtle warnings through his donkey, but that he has ignored all of them. And then the angel *repeats* this to Bil'am to give him *another* chance to decide to go home. But instead of just going home, Bil'am *asks* if he should go home. Bil'am will obey only a direct behavioral order. He is not interested in God's unexpressed will: "I cannot transgress the *word* of Hashem, my God" -- but he certainly can and does transgress the desire of Hashem. He is a sorcerer, not a prophet; a manipulator of the spiritual, not a man of God.

NOW REPEAT AFTER ME:

The angel then warns Bil'am once again that even as he continues his journey, he is to do exactly what Hashem tells him to do. Why is it necessary to deliver this warning once again?

A careful look will show that this warning is different than the earlier ones: before, Bil'am was warned not to disobey Hashem behaviorally. Now, he is being told that he must not act as a sorcerer at all, but instead as a prophet! He was hired as a sorcerer, to speak his own will and make God perform it: to curse. But Hashem tells him here that he is not to speak his own thoughts at all: "Only the thing that I speak to you shall you speak." Bil'am is being forced to act as Hashem's mouthpiece. He cannot curse the people, he can only report what Hashem has said.

The message sinks in: when Bil'am arrives at Balak HQ and Balak scolds him for delaying his arrival -- "Why did you take so long?" -- Bil'am responds: "Look, I'm finally here. And let me tell you: I no longer do that cursing stuff on my own. I just say what Hashem tells me to say. Whatever He tells me to say, that's what I'll say." Now, Balak probably doesn't catch the difference between the old Bil'am and the new, but he has just been told that Bil'am will act only as Hashem's mouthpiece. He has been expressly forbidden to do otherwise.

But Bil'am is still hoping that Hashem will change His mind and agree to curse the people! Twice, he has Balak prepare sacrifices to appease the Deity, and twice Hashem appears to him on schedule. But Hashem is not impressed with Balak's korbanot, and He sends Bil'am back to bless Bnei Yisrael.

BIL'AM'S EYES ARE OPENED:

As we know, Bil'am's first and second contacts with Hashem yield him only praises and blessings for Bnei Yisrael instead of the curses for which he had hoped. By the third time, Bil'am gives up. He has finally taken the hint: "Bil'am saw that it was good IN THE EYES OF HASHEM to bless Yisrael." He has not heard anything *explicit* from Hashem, but he decides of his own volition to stop pretending, to stop blinding himself to the Divine will. And he makes no further attempt to use sorcery to curse the people: " . . . and he did not go as he did in the previous times toward sorcery."

Bil'am has finally begun to listen to his own words, placed in his mouth by Hashem in his second vision: "Not a man is Hashem, to lie, nor a person, to retract. Would He say and not do, speak and not fulfill?" He sees that Hashem's will is iron, and he bends to it for the first time. He gives up the hope that Hashem will agree to curse the people, and he turns toward Bnei Yisrael to offer them a blessing of his own. This is why this third blessing is so repetitive of the second: he has taken Hashem's material and adopted it as his own. And Hashem, sensing his new approach, inspires him: "And there came upon him a spirit of God."

Bil'am for the first time prefaces his blessing with a self-description -- here and in the fourth vision, because he is now highly self-aware. He realizes that his eyes have been opened, and he is now the man who is "geluy eynayyim," "of opened eyes." Hashem has opened his eyes, and now he truly sees! He is now the "yode'a **da'at** Elyon," the one who knows not just what Hashem *tells* him, but also what Hashem *desires,* what His will is. And Bil'am finally becomes not a sorcerer, but a prophet.

[Of course, this does not make him a hero. Still hoping to collect Balak's reward money, but having realized that Hashem operates within a moral rather than magical/mechanical framework, he gives up his attempts to sabotage Bnei Yisrael through magic and turns to moral sabotage: he advises Balak to send the Moabite women out to tempt Bnei Yisrael into sexual immorality, betting that this will arouse Hashem's anger against them and enable Moav and Midyan to gain the upper hand in battle. He is partially successful, as Bnei Yisrael are drawn into the sexual trap and stricken by a plague, but Hashem maintains His fundamental support for them, and Bil'am is eventually killed by Bnei Yisrael in retribution for his key role in their stumbling.]

Shabbat Shalom

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 Pesachim 66a) to prove that the Pesah offering is brought even on Shabbat (i.e. when the 14th of Nissan falls on Shabbat). The reasoning goes as follows: Since the daily offering (by definition) is brought on Shabbat, in spite of the many necessary activities which would otherwise constitute a violation of Shabbat (e.g. stripping the skin, burning), similarly the Pesah is brought "in its time" (Nissan 14), even if it means slaughtering the animal etc. which would otherwise be prohibited.

The methodology known as Gezera Shava is formally limited to Midrash Halakhah. In other words, the Rabbis do not refer to this tool, by name, when making non-legalistic inferences and drawing comparisons. Nevertheless, the basic methodology is quite common in - and central to - all Midrashic literature.

For example, when the Rabbis identify a connection between Lot's flight from S'dom (B'resheet 19) and the David dynasty, they do so by noting the common word "M'tzo" (find) in both stories (B'resheet Rabbah 41:4).

The underlying concept here is that, of course, the Torah tells us much more than appears on the surface. One of the ways in which it imparts information is through allusion, common phrasing etc. which help to draw two (or more) narratives, characters, locations etc. together.

Sometimes, the Torah will draw them together for purposes of comparison - in order to highlight the significant differences between them. For instance, the Midrash notes that Haman, Esav, Y'rav'am, "the fool" [T'hilim 141], Hannah, Daniel, David and even the Almighty "speak to their heart". Yet, the Midrash immediately points out the salient difference: Whereas the first four speak "baLev" ["in the heart"], implying that each of them is enfolded, encircled and enslaved to his heart; the latter four speak "el (or al) haLev" ("to the heart"), implying that each is in control of the heart.

V. BIL'AM AND AVRAHAM

The first part of this week's Parashah involves Balak's hiring of Bil'am to curse the B'nei Yisra'el. Although he first refuses, apparently on "religious grounds" (see Bamidbar 22:13), he ultimately agrees (with what seems like reluctant Divine consent - see 22:20) and sets off to meet his employer, Balak, king of Mo'av.

Much as the details of his journey to Mo'av serve to generate the (unfavorable) comparison with Avraham, we are already

introduced to this association at the onset of the Parashah:

Compare Balak's message to Bil'am:

...for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed. - "et Asher T'vareikh M'vorakh va'Asher Ta'or Yu'ar" (22:6),

with God's charge to Avraham:

And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you - "va'Avarkha M'varakhekha uM'kalelkha A'or". (B'resheet 12:3).

Although the speakers are diametrical opposites (God as opposed to the Moabite king), and the theological underpinnings of the messages are similarly dissimilar (for Balak, Bil'am is the one who causes the blessing/curse; in Avraham's case, it is God who blesses and curses); nevertheless, there is a commonality both in phrasing and theme which draws these two temporally disconnected personalities together.

When we begin reading the story of Bil'am's journey to see Balak, we are immediately assaulted by a sense of dissonance and near-surrealism. Since the beginning of chapter 12 in B'resheet, the focus of the Torah has been exclusively devoted to the development of the B'nei Yisra'el and their ongoing relationship with God. Like a bolt from the blue, Parashat Balak is at once surprising and unnerving: Why is the Torah bothering to tell us this story at all? Besides the beautiful prophecies which make up the second half of the Parashah, why would the Torah concern itself with this Petorite prophet and his negotiations with our enemy - and why, above all, would the Torah outline, in painstaking detail, the story of Bil'am, his donkey and the angel?

As mentioned before, the Torah is telling us much more than a superficial reading lets on. In our case, besides the fundamental theological and socio-historical lessons about monotheism vs. pagan beliefs, the "Bil'am narrative" (as distinct from the "Bil'am prophecies" found in Chapters 23-24) also provide precious and valuable insights into another biblical character - Avraham!

VI. THE AKEDAH AND BI'LAM'S JOURNEY: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The pinnacle of Avraham's life - and the ultimate test of his greatness - is the tragi-heroic story of the Akedah (B'resheet 22:1-19). Since the Torah has already drawn these two personae dramatis together when we are introduced to each (via the "bless/curse" formula), let's see how these two journeys - Bil'am's trek to meet Balak and do his evil bidding and Avraham's pilgrimage to Mount Moriah - match up against each other:

And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Avraham, and said to him, Avraham; and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now your son, your only son Yitzchak, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you. And Avraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Yitzchak his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far away. And Avraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come back to you. And Avraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Yitzchak his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Avraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering; so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him; and Avraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Yitzchak his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Avraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of Hashem called to him from heaven, and said, Avraham, Avraham; and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me. And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Avraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son. And Avraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of Hashem it shall be seen. And the angel of Hashem called to Avraham from heaven the second time, And said, By myself have I sworn, said Hashem, for because you have done this thing, and have not withhold your son, your only son; That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand

which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed my voice. So Avraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to B'er-Sheva; and Avraham lived at B'er-Sheva. (B'resheet 22:1-19)

And God came to Bil'am at night, and said to him, If the men come to call you, rise up, and go with them; but only that word which I shall say to you, that shall you do. And Bil'am rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Mo'av. And God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of Hashem stood in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Bil'am struck the ass, to turn it to the way. But the angel of Hashem stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. And when the ass saw the angel of Hashem, it pushed itself to the wall, and crushed Bil'am's foot against the wall; and he struck her again. And the angel of Hashem went further, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of Hashem, it fell down under Bil'am; and Bil'am's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with a staff. And Hashem opened the mouth of the ass, and it said to Bil'am, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? And Bil'am said to the ass, Because you have mocked me; I wished there was a sword in my hand, for now would I kill you. And the ass said to Bil'am, Am not I your ass, upon which you have ridden ever since I was yours to this day? Was I ever wont to do so to you? And he said, No. Then Hashem opened the eyes of Bil'am, and he saw the angel of Hashem standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed down his head, and fell on his face. And the angel of Hashem said to him, Why did you strike your ass these three times? Behold, I went out to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times; if it had not turned aside from me, surely now also I would have slain you, and let her live. And Bil'am said to the angel of Hashem, I have sinned; for I knew not that you stood in the way against me; now therefore, if it displeases you, I will go back again. And the angel of Hashem said to Bil'am, Go with the men; but only the word that I shall speak to you, that you shall speak. So Bil'am went with the princes of Balak. (Bamidbar 22:20-35)

These two narratives are clearly associated - the "arising early in the morning", the "saddling of the donkey", the entourage, made up of two lads, the encounters with the angel of Hashem, and so on.

This is, shall we say, the first step in utilizing Midrashic tools: Identifying the association between stories/personae/events etc.

Now that the association has been identified, let's take the next step: Noting how differently these two characters act - and react - within their given set of circumstances.

Avraham responds to God's initial call - terrifying though it may be - and arises early the next day to begin his pilgrimage; Bil'am, on the other hand, "comes back" to God a second time, to ask again for permission to go with the Moabite princes.

Avraham moves towards greater levels of isolation, first taking only Yitzchak and his two servants - then leaving the servant behind; Bil'am takes his two servants and then catches up with the entourage of princes before reaching Balak.

Avraham nearly slaughters his son, following the Divine command; Bil'am threatens to slaughter his donkey, who is the one responding to the Divine presence (the angel).

Avraham is praised by the angel; Bil'am is threatened with death by the angel.

Avraham says nothing to the angel, merely following the Divine command of "staying his hand"; Bil'am is cowed by the presence of the angel and offers to return home.

Most significantly - Avraham sees everything whereas Bil'am sees nothing.

This last one requires some explanation. Parashiot of Tanakh usually feature a "Milah Manhah" - a guiding phrase or word. This is often an unusual word or phrase, or one that shows up in an inordinately high frequency. As is obvious, our own understanding of the significance of a narrative, prophecy, psalm etc. is enhanced if we can successfully identify the "Milah Manhah".

[An example of a Milah Manhah is the word "Et", meaning "time", as it appears in the prophecy of Haggai. Although the

entire book of Haggai is 38 verses long, this relatively uncommon word shows up 7 times within those verses. This becomes a - or the - Milah Manhah and helps define the entire purpose and undercurrent of his message. See Haggai 1:2 against the background of Yirmiyah 29:10]]

The "guide-word" in Parashat ha'Akedah is clearly a combination of the two roots: Y*R*A and R*A*H; the first meaning "fear" and the second relating to "vision". No less than seven occurrences of these roots can be found in this brief section of 19 verses. Indeed, the two names given to the place where Avraham ascends - Moriah (see Divrei haYamim II 3:1) and "Hashem Yir'eh" (see Sh'mot 23:17)

A central part of the message of the Akedah is Avraham's vision - his ability to see the place and all it implies - and to recognize the substitution ram for his son. His vision is closely tied in to his fear of God, as it is his recognition of his place in this world that is driven by his awareness of God's grandeur and awe.

When this story is "played" against the apparently similar trek made by Bil'am, we see that Bil'am, the great visionary, the one who feels he can outfox the Ribbono shel Olam, sees absolutely nothing. His donkey sees more clearly than he and, when finally forced to face his angelic adversary, he retreats. The cowardice and blindness are as inextricably wound together, just as Avraham's vision and fear (very far, morally and spiritually, from "cowardice") are of one piece.

VII. BACK TO THE QUESTIONS

Earlier, we noted that three qualities are ascribed to students (i.e. followers of the path) of Avraham and three opposite qualities to the students of Bil'am.

We have answered the key question: Bil'am is "faced off" against Avraham by virtue of the many textual associations in these two key Parashiot. The Torah, beyond telling us about the trip a certain Petorite prophet made, in which his mission was turned upside-down by the Ribbono shel Olam, also tells us much about our beloved father Avraham. We appreciate his vision, his valor and his moral greatness much more when seen against the backdrop of the self-serving, morally blind and cowardly Bil'am.

How do we know that Avraham had a "good eye" and that Bil'am had an "evil eye"? We have already seen that clearly presented in these two Parashiot.

How do we know that Avraham had a humble spirit? "I am dust and ashes" is Avraham's stand in front of God (B'resheet 18:27); Bil'am, on the other hand, believes himself able to overrule the Divine decision of who should be blessed and who should be cursed - demonstrating his haughty spirit.

How do we know that Bil'am had an overambitious soul? Note that his willingness to challenge the Almighty grows as his potential reward - both financial and political - become greater. If Avraham is the epitome of everything that Bil'am is not - then Avraham is blessed with a "lowly soul", which is demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice everything to fulfill the Divine command.

Bil'am went to become enriched and lost everything; Avraham went to lose everything and became enriched for generations.

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