

# PARSHAT CHUKAT -- BALAK

July 4, 2020 – 12 Tammuz 5780  
Annual (Numbers 19:1-25:9): Hertz p. 652  
Haftarah (Micah 5:6-6:8): Hertz p. 682

## Torah Portion Summary -- Chukat

God instructs Moshe and Aaron about the ritual of the red cow, whose ashes were to be used to purify people who had become ritually impure through contact with a corpse. Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. Once again, the Israelites lack water and turn to Moshe and Aaron with complaints and recriminations. God tells Moshe to take his rod, and then, with Aaron, to assemble the community and order a rock to produce water. Moshe strikes the rock with his staff and the rock produces enough water for the Israelites and their animals. But God is displeased and tells Moshe and Aaron that they will not enter the land He is giving to the Israelites. Moshe sends messengers to the king of Edom, asking for permission to cross his territory. The king refuses and sends an armed force to prevent the Israelites from entering his land. The people take a different path and come to Mount Hor. Aaron dies on Mount Hor and Moshe invests Aaron's son Elazar as the new high priest. The people mourn for Aaron for 30 days. The Canaanite king of Arad attacks the Israelites and is defeated at Chormah. The people begin complaining yet again and God sends poisonous snakes to punish them. The Israelites approach Moshe, saying they realize they have sinned and asking him to intercede with God for them. God tells Moshe to make a copper serpent and place it on a pole so that anyone bitten by a snake could look at it and be cured. The Israelites continue their journey through the territory east of the Jordan. They ask Sichon, the king of the Amorites for permission to cross his land, but he refuses and attacks. The Israelites defeat the Amorites and take possession of their land. The Israelites also defeat King Og of Bashan and his people, taking their land as well. The Israelites camp in Mo'av, across the Jordan from Jericho.

I. Moshe did as the Lord had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. Moshe stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Elazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moshe and Elazar came down from the mountain, the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days. (Numbers 20:27-29)

1. "All the house of Israel" The men and the women, for Aaron used to pursue peace and bring love among men of strife and between a husband and his wife. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. "All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron" – whereas for Moshe only men wept, because he rendered judgment strictly according to the truth and used to rebuke people besides. But Aaron never said to a man or to a woman, "You have acted offensively." More! He sought peace, as is said, "He walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (Malachi 2:6). What is meant by the words that follow in the verse: "And did turn many away from iniquity"? These words teach that when Aaron would walk along the road and meet a wicked man, he would greet him warmly. The next day, when that man was about to go and commit a transgression, he would say to himself: Woe is me, how could I ever raise my eyes and face Aaron? I would be too embarrassed by the man who greeted me so warmly. The result: That wicked man would refrain from further transgression. Likewise, when two men quarreled, Aaron would go, sit with one of them, and say, "My son, look how your friend beats his breast and tears his hair out as he says, 'Woe is me, how can I raise my eyes and face my friend? I would be too embarrassed, for it is I who acted offensively toward him.'" Aaron would sit with him until he removed all rancor from his heart. Then Aaron would go and say the same thing to the other man. Later, when one met the other, they would hug and kiss each other. Hence, it is said, "All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron." (Avot D'Rabbi Natan 12; Yalkut Shimoni, Chukat, #764)
3. [T]he people deeply loved Aaron and deeply felt his death. They mourned for him even more than they did later for Moshe; for the latter only a part of the people shed tears, but for Aaron, everyone. Moshe, as a judge, was obliged to mete out justice to the guilty, so that he had enemies among the people, men who could not forget that he had pronounced them guilty in court. Moshe, furthermore, was sometimes severe with Israel when he held up to them their sins, but never Aaron. (Rabbi Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, Volume III, p. 328)
4. A king had cups made of delicate glass. The king said: If I pour hot water into them, they will [expand and] burst; if cold water, they will contract [and break]. What did he do? He mixed hot and cold water and poured it into them, and so they remained unbroken. Likewise, the Holy One said: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, its sins will be too many; if with justice alone, how could the world be expected to endure? So I will create it with both justice and mercy, and may it endure! (B'reishit Rabbah 12:15)

## Torah Portion Summary -- Balak

Balak, the king of Moav, sees that the Israelites have defeated the neighboring Amorites and he is afraid. He joins forces with the Midianites to hire the prophet Bil'am. His job would be to curse the Israelites and so ensure their defeat. Bil'am receives the delegation from Moav and Midian and asks them to spend the night so that he can receive God's instruction. God tells Bil'am he may not go with them; he must not curse the Israelites, who already are blessed. Bil'am sends the delegation away. Balak sends a second delegation, promising Bil'am great riches for his services. Once again he asks them to wait overnight, and this time God tells Bil'am that he may go if he wants to, but he will be able to do only what God commands. Bil'am sets out riding on his ass, and an angel appears, blocking the road. Bil'am doesn't see it but his ass does and refuses to move. Bil'am beats the animal, but it still refuses to move. After three beatings, the ass speaks, complaining that it doesn't deserve this treatment. God then allows Bil'am to see the angel, who rebukes him for beating the ass but permits him to continue on his journey with the warning that he may say only what God tells him. Bil'am asks Balak to build seven altars and to provide animals for sacrifices. After Bil'am makes his offerings he speaks the words God gives him, praising and blessing Israel. Balak is furious, but Bil'am explains that he can speak only as God commands him. Twice more Bil'am offers sacrifices and then praises and blesses Israel. Balak sends Bil'am away; he leaves after describing the defeat of several other nations.

While the Israelites are camped at Shittim, Moavite women entice Israelite men into illicit sex and worshiping their god, Baal-p'or. God tells Moshe to have the ringleaders executed publicly. An Israelite man brings a Midianite woman to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and engages in public sex. Pinchas, the son of the high priest Elazar, grabs a spear and stabs them both, ending the plague that had resulted from God's wrath.

### I. How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! (Numbers 24:5)

1. He saw that their doors were not directed one opposite the other, lest one look into the tent of his fellow. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. People are naturally curious and are interested in knowing about the comings and goings of their neighbors. This is exactly why our forefathers, during their forty years in the desert, encamped in such a manner that would ensure the greatest amount of privacy. We have an obligation to respect the right to privacy of others. When passing someone's window, we must resist the temptation to look in. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Love Your Neighbor, p. 359)
3. The person who utters foul language commits a great transgression and becomes despised in the eyes of others, for that person has abandoned the traits of decency and modesty that are the distinguishing marks of his people Israel and walks the path of an insolent and defiant person. (Menorat HaMaor--Rabbi Isaac Aboab, 14th century, Spain)
4. Everyone knows why the bride enters the bridal chamber, but if anyone speaks obscenely about it, even if seventy years of happiness have been decreed for him on high, the decree is changed for him into evil. (Talmud Ketubot 8b)
5. A disciple of the wise should be modest at eating, at drinking, at bathing, at anointing himself, at putting on his sandals; in his walking, in dress, in the sound of his voice, in the disposal of his spittle, even in his good deeds. (Derekh Eretz Zuta 7)

### Sparks for Discussion

The arrangement of the tents praised by Bil'am accomplished two things: it made it more difficult for people to snoop, and it prevented people from becoming inadvertent witnesses to their neighbors' offensive, inappropriate, or private behavior. Most people associate the word tzniut, modesty, with Orthodox women's clothing, and modest dress – for men as well as women – is part of it. But modesty applies to all aspects of behavior. Modesty means avoiding behavior that distracts the people around you or screams “look at me!” Today it is rarely possible to avoid immodesty – seeing people engaged in “public displays of affection” that inspire the thought “get a room,” hearing the details of others' medical problems or intimate relationships as they conduct cell phone conversations in public, being inundated with all types of inappropriate language and images in the media and on the internet. How do you feel when you are confronted with inappropriate behavior or language in a public place? Do you say something or do you simply turn away? Is modesty a lost cause, a relic of an earlier age, or is it worth fighting for. How do we learn to be more modest in our own behavior?