

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Chukat - Balak
July 1, 2023 *** 12 Tammuz, 5783

Chukat - Balak in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2219/jewish/Chukat-Balak-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Chukat," means "Statute [of the Torah]" and it is found in Numbers 19:2. The name of the Parshah, "Balak," refers to Balak, king of Moab, and it is found in Numbers 22:2.

Moses is taught the laws of the Red Heifer, whose ashes purify a person who has been contaminated by contact with a dead body.

After 40 years of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies and the people thirst for water. G-d tells Moses to speak to a rock and command it to give water. Moses gets angry at the rebellious Israelites and strikes the stone. Water issues forth, but Moses is told by G-d that neither he nor Aaron will enter the Promised Land.

Aaron dies at Hor Hahar and is succeeded in the High Priesthood by his son Elazar. Venomous snakes attack the Israelite camp after yet another eruption of discontent in which the people "speak against G-d and Moses"; G-d tells Moses to place a brass serpent upon a high pole, and all who will gaze heavenward will be healed. The people sing a song in honor of the miraculous well that provided the water in the desert. Moses leads the people in battles against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og (who seek to prevent Israel's passage through their territory) and conquers their lands, which lie east of the Jordan.

Balak, the King of Moab, summons the prophet Balaam to curse the people of Israel. On the way, Balaam is berated by his donkey, who sees the angel that G-d sends to block their way before Balaam does. Three times, from three different vantage points, Balaam attempts to pronounce his curses; each time, blessings issue instead. Balaam also prophecies on the end of days and the coming of Moshiach.

The people fall prey to the charms of the daughters of Moab and are enticed to worship the idol Peor. When a high-ranking Israelite official publicly takes a Midianite princess into a tent, Pinchas kills them both, stopping the plague raging among the people.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Michah 5:6 -6:8

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/895314/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah makes mention of the incident of Balak the king of Moab hiring the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people — the main topic of this week's Torah reading.

The prophet Micah prophesies about what will occur after the war of Gog and Magog, the war which precedes the coming of the Messiah and the Final Redemption.

"And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples — like dew sent by G-d, like torrents of rain upon vegetation that does not hope for any man and does not wait for the sons of men." The prophet describes how G-d will remove the idols and sorcerers and how He will destroy the Jews' enemies.

The prophet Micah then goes on to rebuke the Jewish people for not observing G-d's commandments, calling as witness the "mountains and hills" — a reference to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs — and reminding them of the great things G-d had done for them. He took them out of Egypt and replaced the curses that Balaam son of Beor wanted to utter against them with blessings.

The Jewish people respond by saying that they do not know how to serve G-d and ask for guidance. The prophet reminds them of the Torah, and that all they need to do is contained within it: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Healing the Trauma of Loss – Chukat by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/healing-trauma-loss/>

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

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

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

heart follows the deed.”[3]

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

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

The commentators debate exactly what he did wrong. Was it that he lost his temper with the people (“Listen now, you rebels”)? That he hit the rock instead of speaking to it? That he made it seem as if it was not God but he and Aaron who were responsible for the water (“Shall we bring water out of this rock for you?”)? What is more puzzling still is why he lost control at that moment. He had faced the same problem before, but he had never lost his temper before. In Exodus 15 the Israelites at Marah complained that the water was undrinkable because it was bitter. In Exodus 17 at Massa-and-Meriva they complained that there was no water. God then told Moses to take his staff and hit the rock, and water flowed from it. So when in our parsha God tells Moses, “Take the staff ... and speak to the rock,” it was surely a forgivable mistake to assume that God meant him also to hit it. That is what He had said last time. Moses was following precedent. And if God did not mean him to hit the rock, why did He command him to take his staff?

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

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

water ceased.

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

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

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

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

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

mixed with the ash of cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and dissolved in “living water,” are sprinkled over one who has been in contact with the dead so that they may enter the Sanctuary.

This is one of the most fundamental principles of Judaism. Death defiles. For most religions throughout history, life-after-death has proved more real than life itself. That is where the gods live, thought the Egyptians. That is where our ancestors are alive, believed the Greeks and Romans and many primitive tribes. That is where you find justice, thought many Christians. That is where you find paradise, thought many Muslims.

Life after death and the resurrection of the dead are fundamental, non-negotiable principles of Jewish faith, but Tanach is conspicuously quiet about them. It is focused on finding God in this life, on this planet, notwithstanding our mortality. “The dead do not praise God,” says the Psalm. God is to be found in life itself with all its hazards and dangers, bereavements and grief. We may be no more than “dust and ashes”, as Abraham said, but life itself is a never-ending stream, “living water”, and it is this that the rite of the Red Heifer symbolises.

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

Those we loved and lost live on in us, as we will live on in those we love. For love is as strong as death,[6] and the good we do never dies.[7] [1] Moed Katan 27b.

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

[What Makes God Laugh – Balak by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/what-makes-god-laugh/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/balak/what-makes-god-laugh/>

There is an old saying that what makes God laugh is seeing our plans for the future.[1] However, if Tanach is our guide, what makes God laugh is human delusions of grandeur. From the vantage point of heaven, the ultimate absurdity is when humans start thinking of themselves as godlike.

There are several pointed examples in the Torah. One whose full import has only recently become clear occurs in the story of the Tower of Babel. Men gather together in the plain of Shinar and decide to build a city and a tower “that will reach to heaven.” As it happens, we have archeological confirmation of this fact.

Several Mesopotamian ziggurats, including the temple of Marduk in Babylon, have been found with inscriptions saying that they reach heaven.[2]

The idea was that tall buildings – man-made mountains – allowed humans to climb to the dwelling place of the gods and thus communicate with them. The Mesopotamian city states were among the first places of civilisation, itself one of the turning points in the history of human life on earth. Before the birth of agriculture, the ancients lived in fear of nature: of predators, of other tribes and bands, and of the vicissitudes of heat and cold, drought and flood. Their fate depended on matters beyond their control.

Only with the spread of domesticated animals and agriculture did people gather in towns, then cities, then empires. A tipping point occurred in the balance of power between nature and culture. For the first time humans were not confined to adapting to their environment. They could adapt their environment to suit them. At this point they – especially the rulers – began to see themselves as gods, demigods, or people with the power to influence the gods.

The most conspicuous symbol of this was buildings on a monumental scale: the ziggurats of Babylon and other Mesopotamian cities, and the pyramids of Egypt. Built on the flat land of the Tigris-Euphrates valley and the Nile delta, they towered over their surroundings. The great pyramid of Giza, built even before the birth of Abraham, was so monumental that it remained the tallest man-made structure on earth for four thousand years.

The fact that these were artificial mountains built by human hands suggested to their builders that humans had acquired godlike powers. They had constructed a stairway to heaven. Hence the significance of the phrase in the Torah's account of the tower, "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built." This is God laughing. On earth, humans thought they had reached the sky, but to God the building was so infinitesimal, so microscopic that he had to come down even to see it. Only with the invention of flight do we now know how small the tallest building looks when you are looking down from a mere 30,000 feet.

To end their hubris God simply "confused their language". They no longer understood one another. The entire project was turned into French farce. We can visualise the scene. A foreman calls for a brick and is handed a hammer. He tells a worker to go right and he turns left. The project foundered in a welter of incomprehension. Men thought they could climb to heaven but in the end they could not even understand what the person next to them was saying. The unfinished tower became a symbol of the inevitable failure of vaunting ambition. The builders achieved what they sought but not in the way they intended. They wanted to "make a name for themselves" and they succeeded, but instead of becoming a byword for man's ability to reach the sky, Babel became babble, an

emblem of confusion. Hubris became nemesis.

The second example was Egypt during the early plagues. Moses and Aaron turned the water of the Nile into blood, and filled Egypt with frogs. We then read that the Egyptian magicians did likewise to show that they had the same power. So concerned were they to show that they could do what the Hebrews could do, that they entirely failed to realise that they were making things worse, not better. The real skill would have been to turn blood back into water, and make frogs not appear but disappear.

We hear the Divine laughter especially in the third plague: lice. For the first time, the magicians tried and failed to replicate the effect. Defeated, they turned to Pharaoh and said, "It is the finger of God." The humour comes when we remember that for the Egyptians the symbol of power was monumental architecture: pyramids, temples, palaces and statues on a massive scale. God showed them His power by way of the tiniest of insects, painful yet almost invisible to the eye. Again hubris became nemesis. When people think they are big, God shows them they are small – and vice versa. It is those who think themselves small – supremely so Moses, the humblest of men – who are truly great.

This explains the otherwise curious episode of Bilam's talking donkey. This is not a fanciful tale, nor simply a miracle. It arose because of the way the people of Moab and Midian thought of Bilam – and perhaps, by extension, the way he thought of himself. Balak the Moabite king, together with the leaders of the Midianites, sent a delegation to Bilam asking him to curse the Israelites: "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me ... for I know that whom you bless is blessed, and whom you curse is cursed."

This is a pagan understanding of the holy man: the shaman, the magus, the wonder-worker, the person with access to supernatural powers. The Torah's view is precisely the opposite. It is God who blesses and curses, not human beings. "I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse," God said to Abraham. "They shall place my name on the children of Israel and I will bless them," he said about the priests. The idea that you can hire a holy man to curse someone essentially presupposes that God can be bribed.

The narrative is admittedly obscure. God tells Bilam not to go. Balak sends a second delegation with a more tempting offer. This time God tells Bilam to go with them but say only what he instructs him to say. The next morning Bilam sets out to go with the Moabites, but the text now states that God was "angry" with him for going. That is when the episode of the donkey takes place.

The donkey sees an angel barring the way. It turns aside into a field but Bilam hits it and forces it back to the path. The angel is still barring the way and the donkey veers into a wall, crushing Bilam's foot. Bilam hits it again, but finally it lies down and refuses to move. That is when the donkey begins to speak. Bilam then looks up

and sees the angel, who had been hitherto invisible to him.

Why did God first tell Bilam not to go, then that he should go, and then was angry when he went? Evidently God could read his mind and knew that Bilam did really want to curse the Israelites. We know this because later, after the attempt to curse the Israelites failed, Bilam succeeded in causing them harm, advising the Midianites to get their women to seduce the Israelite men, thus provoking the anger of God (Num. 31:16). Bilam was no friend of the Israelites.

But the story of the talking donkey is another instance of Divine laughter. Here was a man reputed to be a maestro of supernatural forces. People thought he had the power to bless or curse whomever he chose. God, the Torah tells us, is not like that at all. He had two messages, one for the Moabites and Midianites, another for Bilam himself.

He showed the Moabites and Midianites that Israel is not cursed but blessed. The more you attempt to curse them the more they will be blessed and you yourself will be cursed. That is as true today as it was then. There are movements throughout the world to curse the state and people of Israel. The greater the malice of Israel's enemies, the stronger Israel becomes, and the more disasters its enemies bring upon their own people.

God had a different message for Bilam himself, and it was very blunt. If you think you can control God, then, says God, I will show you that I can turn a donkey into a prophet and a prophet into a donkey. Your animal will see angels to which you yourself are blind. Bilam was forced to admit:

How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?

Hubris always eventually becomes nemesis. In a world in which rulers engaged in endless projects of self-aggrandisement, Israel alone produced a literature in which they attributed their successes to God and their failures to themselves. Far from making them weak, this made them extraordinarily strong.

So it is with us as individuals. I have mentioned before a beloved friend, no longer alive, about whom it was said that "he took God so seriously that he didn't need to take himself seriously at all." Pagan prophets like Bilam had not yet learned the lesson we must all one day learn: that what matters is not that God does what we want, but that we do what He wants. God laughs at those who think they have godlike powers. The opposite is true. The smaller we see ourselves, the greater we become.

[1] The John Lennon version is: "Life is what happens while you are making other plans." [2] The tower of Babel is referred to in the Enuma Elish as "Esagila," which means "the house of the lifting up of the head." Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar both repaired this building, inscriptions to which say that they "raised high the head" of the tower "to rival the heavens." Nahum Sarna, Understanding Genesis, p.73.

Chukat – Balak: Seeing Ourselves Through the Eyes of Others by Rabbi Beth Janus

<https://truah.org/resources/beth-janus-balak-moraltorah2023/>

Convinced I was going to medical school, I took a Christian Spirituality class for fun. I reflected on my own spiritual journey through discussions and papers. The Catholic chaplain teaching the class told me that I should become a rabbi. Shocked, I dismissed her immediately. Three years later, in my rabbinical school application essay, I credited Chaplain Liz Carr for the inspiration to become a rabbi. She saw what no one else had.

There is a parallel with the king of Moab, Balak. Balak is scared. The Israelites marched close to his land and defeated other nations. And there were lots of them. (**Numbers 22:3**) Balak looks at the Israelite nation but is blinded by his fear. He can only see a multitude, whose numbers are so vast that Balak cannot even see the ground on which they stand. (**Numbers 22:5**) He hires a pagan prophet, Balaam, to curse the Israelites, so that Balak can successfully battle them.

Balaam has his own limitations with sight. Balaam commits to only doing what God wants, but God obscures Balaam's view so that he does not see the angel of God blocking his donkey's path. After Balaam beats the donkey three times, because he thinks it is mocking him, God uncovers his eyes. Balaam now has true vision.

Balak and Balaam travel together to Kiriath-huzoth, where they make sacrifices and prepare for the curses. The verse then says that "he could see a portion of the people." (**Numbers 22:41**) While it is unclear who the "he" is, it seems it is Balak, whose vision is imperfect. On the third attempt to curse the Israelites, Balaam "turned his face... and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe." (**Numbers 24:1-2**) His sight is clear, and he blesses Israel.

Here in our sacred text we have a pagan prophet who gives us four beautiful blessings from *our* God. This is told as a story between Balak and Balaam. The Israelites are not the main characters here. We do not even hear Israelite voices. We only know them through the eyes of Balak and Balaam, two non-Jews. Yet we include this story in the Jewish Torah.

In today's America, most of us are surrounded by people just like us. As a liberal Jew, I spend my time mostly with other liberal people. We challenge each other, but often we see the world in a similar way. With all the hatred and violence around us, we know that we need to associate with those with other perspectives. We aspire to break down the misunderstandings and assumptions we each hold. But many times when we do manage to speak to others with different viewpoints, we do so only in order to convince them to see the world as we do. This story is showing us that being with others can help us see *ourselves* more clearly. It took two non-Jews for us to discover how great we were! Balak needed convincing as well. He thought of us only as the enemy. He saw our numbers and feared us.

Balaam saw the same Israelite nation but flipped the meaning of what he saw. He declared us *tov*, or good. Our throng was reinterpreted as positive and worthy. Did we know that we are favorable because Balaam told us? Possibly, we already felt this from being God's chosen people. Or maybe we did not. We certainly complained about our lot when we were wandering in the desert. I like to imagine that Balaam's words changed us and shook us out of our complaining so that we could see ourselves in a fresh way. These words clearly are important, as we made them some of the first words we say every day when entering the synagogue.

What would happen to our community if we reached across divides to connect with others who are different from ourselves? Would we hold a mirror to others so that they could see themselves more clearly? Would we shift our own views of ourselves as we learn what we look like from the outside? Would we connect more deeply, so we could ally ourselves with other groups whom we assume do not share our views? Could we see groups like evangelicals as fellow God-centered people who might fight alongside us in helping the vulnerable in our world, such as refugees?

I often have thanked Liz Carr for showing me something that was hidden from myself. I thank Balaam for revealing our greatness. And I push all of us to seek those voices and those perspectives that allow us to see ourselves anew.

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[Chukat: Water Consciousness by Rabbi Yonatan Neril](https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/07/06-chukat-water-consciousness)

<https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/07/06-chukat-water-consciousness>

This week's parsha, Chukat, is yet another piece in the narrative of the Jewish people and water. The word *mayim* (water) is mentioned twenty-two times. The portion begins with the *para aduma*, Hashem's command to mix water with the ashes of a red cow for purification. Miriam then dies, and the well that provided Bnei Yisrael with water (based on Miriam's merit), disappears.[1] The Jewish people quarrel with Moshe, complaining, "There is no water to drink!"[2] Moshe and Aharon then strike the rock and Hashem brings forth water. Additionally, Moshe asks the Edomites to pass through their land, with a promise not to drink their water,[3] or alternately, to buy it from them.[4] The Jewish people travel by way of the Sea of Reeds (where Hashem had split the sea for them) and, on their desert journey, complain again about lacking water. They finally arrive near the East Bank of the Jordan and sing an exultant song about their appreciation to Hashem for water.[5]

Bnei Yisrael's experiences with water in the desert can be understood as a

spiritual training to cultivate appreciation for Hashem's goodness. Hashem takes the essential, tangible resource of water (without which we cannot live for more than a few days) and gives it to us in an environment where we do not have it. We learn to appreciate water and to know who really provides it by taking it for granted, losing it, and then having it granted once again by Hashem; the see-saw experience of having water and then losing it develops the spiritual muscles of appreciating Hashem.

While there is a lesson to be learned from this cycle, it is easy to feel frustrated with Bnei Yisrael when reading about their ingratitude during their constant struggles with water. We can understand Moshe's anger, expressed as he strikes the rock, an action for which he is punished harshly.[6] How, after water was miraculously provided for them so many times, could Bnei Yisrael take it for granted?

Considering our own experience with water, perhaps it should be easier to sympathize with Bnei Yisrael. Today, indoor plumbing is incredibly convenient; it frees us from gathering and lugging our water from streams and cisterns to our homes. A significant portion of America is dealing with severe drought, but our water system remains strong—many could not tell you where the water that comes out of their taps actually comes from.[7]

We also lose sight of how much energy goes into bringing every gallon to our faucet. In many areas of the United States and around the world, electricity-producing generators supply power to pumps that raise water hundreds or even one thousand feet. Elevating the water from underground aquifers to tanks at the top of local mountain ranges, eventually making its way to our homes.[8] It is estimated that the energy used in the water supply accounts for almost 5% of America's total energy use, and likewise 5% of the total carbon emissions. This shows that misusing water is also wasting energy and can contribute unnecessarily to climate change.[9]

Climate change is causing sea levels to rise, projected to impact sandbars like Long Beach (New York), and islands like Manhattan, as well as causing more intense storms and floods. [10] Even though all water is part of the same global cycle, as long as water continues to flow from our faucets at the desired rate, we are not forced to look to its source. Like Bnei Yisrael, when we have water, it is easy for us to take it for granted, and therefore when it disappears, it is easy to consider this necessity as something that is owed to us, something to be demanded.

It is perhaps this sympathy that underlies Hashem's response to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem instructs Moshe to coax water from the rock by speaking to it, a patient demonstration of Hashem's dominion and the miracle of water. Hashem wants to work in harmony with nature to teach Bnei Yisrael to be appreciative, even though

Moshe's performance of His instructions is much less harmonious. While Bnei Yisrael do not learn the lesson immediately, complaining once more and being punished with fiery snakes, their song towards the end of the parsha finally reflects this message: "Spring up O well – sing to it –"[11]

The Torah is a blueprint for spiritual living in a physical world. It enables us to transform our daily, mundane behaviors into holy acts. If we can preserve our connection to Hashem's sustaining power in our world of great abundance, we can transform our lives and the world in holy ways. This is our challenge. And in light of mounting global environmental issues, what might also be called, a revolutionary moment in our history. The great sage, Rabbi Tarfon, teaches that "The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great and the Master is pressing." [12] Perhaps our issue of water is quite parallel - the climate is changing, the seas are rising, and the glaciers are melting, but the reward is great. Every tenth of a degree of warming we can mitigate, every community that we can provide water for, and every moment of appreciation we can find in nature is a reward in and of itself, paving the way for a better future and better world. *(Rabbi Yonatan Neril is the founder and director of Jewish Eco Seminars and the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development. He holds an MA and BA from Stanford University and engaged in Jewish learning for seven years at multiple institutions of Jewish studies in Israel. He lives with his wife and son in Jerusalem.)* [1] Rashi on Bamidbar 20:2, Ta'anit 9a [2] Bamidbar 20:3 [3] As per Targum Onkeles (Israel, 2nd century) to 20:17 [4] As per Rashi (France, 11th century) to 20:17 [5] Bamidbar 21:17-18 [6] Bamidbar 20:12 [7] For information on the current state of drought in America, see [here](#). [8] To understand where household water in America comes from, start [here](#). [9] See [this report](#). [10] Read the [IPCC report on sea level rise](#), and this [explanation of a Rutgers report](#) for a look into what Sea Level rise might mean for New Jersey. [11] Bamidbar 20:12 [12] Pirkei Avot 2:15, translation from www.chabad.org/library

[Bilam or Moshe by Vered Hollander – Goldfarb](#)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/117_UnX0CKj3JaNF1D1Q48NwPNEItVI6E/view

This is the perfect haftarah for the combination of the parashot of Hukat and Balak, as they are read this week outside of Israel. In Parashat Hukat we take the first steps towards ending our time in the desert. Ahead lies the transition necessary to move into a settled land with shifts in many areas of life. It is in this parashah that Moshe and Aaron are told that they will not enter the land. Miriam dies and so does Aaron, leaving Moshe to do the last miles without the team he has had since God "lifted you out of Egypt" (Micah 6:4) In Parashat Balak, even Moshe is missing from the story, but it is difficult not to notice the similarities between Moshe and Bilam the sorcerer. Both are masters of orators; both have the potential of changing the world through speech.

In this haftarah, Moshe, Aharon and Miriam are juxtaposed with Bilam and Balak.

Moshe, Aharon and Miriam are the symbol of the good that God had bestowed upon the people. They were sent ahead to lead when God raised us out of Egypt. The prophet Michah suggests that to rise up from a situation of subjugation, "house of bondage" as Egypt is called, we needed individuals who were able to change the people's mentality from that of a slave to that of a free, independent, and responsible person. It took Moshe, Aharon and Miriam forty years to develop a generation that had changed sufficiently to enter the land and take care of themselves.

Among the various adversaries that the people meet along the way to independence, Balak and Bilam stand out. They do not fight with conventional warfare, they try to enlist God to curse the people of Israel. In the Tanakh a curse is a weapon, a powerful one that is treated by laws as potentially lethal. Even after being warned that the people are blessed and presumably are immune to curses, Bilam goes ahead with his mission. Perhaps he does so out of hatred, we know how blinding hate can be, or perhaps out of greed, another powerful motivator. Putting Moshe side by side with Bilam, Michah highlights the difference in choices these great orators made. While Moshe used his talents to create a people, Bilam used his powerful talents to attempt to destroy the very same people.

This haftarah is a rebuke to the people of Israel who are ungrateful despite all the good God has done for them. Ironically, when the people are faced with the angry God, they resort to sacrifices to try to appease Him. They are choosing the path of Bilam, believing that God wants gifts, that God can be brought under human spell by an offering. Michah, in the closing verse of the haftarah, tells us to return to ideas that are at the basis of the spirit of freedom: Justice, kindness, humility before God. The traits of Moshe, not Bilam. *(Vered Hollander-Goldfarb teaches Tanach and Medieval Commentators at the Conservative Yeshiva and is a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly message on the weekly Torah portion. She received her M.A. in Judaic Studies and Tanach from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and studied at Bar-Ilan University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Before making aliyah, Vered taught at Ramaz School and Stern College in New York.)*

Yahrtzeits

Lenny Levin remembers his father Emanuel Levin on Tuesday July 4th.

Barry Ostrowsky remembers his father Abe Ostrowsky on Wednesday July 5th.

Ronni Klein remembers her mother Bette Liebowitz on Wednesday July 5th.