

Parsha: Chukat-Balak

This week's Torah reading consists of two parshiot: Chukat(Numbers 19:1-22:1) and Balak (22:2-25:9).

The Parshah of Chukat ("the decree of") opens with the law of the Red Heifer, which purifies a person from the tumah (ritual impurity) engendered by contact with death.

And G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: This is the chok of the Torah which G-d has commanded.

Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring to you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and upon which never came a yoke.

And you shall give her to Elazar the priest, that he may bring her outside the camp, and she shall be slaughtered before him.

And Elazar the priest shall take of her blood with his finger, and sprinkle of her blood towards the front of the Tent of Meeting seven times.

The entire heifer--"her skin, her flesh, her blood, even her dung"--is burnt, together with a piece of cedar wood, and bundle of hyssop, and a scarlet thread. The ashes are then collected.

This is the law: when a man dies in a tent, all that come into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days...

They shall take for the impure person of the ashes of the burnt purification offering, and living water shall be put upon it in a vessel.

And a ritually pure person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the impure person on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall... wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be pure at evening...

This shall be to you an everlasting decree.

And he that sprinkles the water of sprinkling... and he that touches the water of sprinkling shall be unclean until the evening....

Waters of Strife

After 40 years of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies and is buried there; "and there was no water for the congregation."

The people complain to Moses and Aaron: "... Why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink."

G-d instructs Moses to "gather the congregation together, you and Aaron your brother; and you shall speak to the rock before their eyes, and it shall give forth its water."

When they are thus gathered, Moses admonishes the people: "Hear now, you rebels! Shall we get you water out of this rock?"

And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice.

And the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.

G-d speaks to Moses:

"Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation in to the land which I have given them."

These are the Waters of Strife; because the children of Israel strove with G-d, and He was sanctified by them.

The Death of Aaron

Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom, asking permission to pass through his land in order to reach the Land of Canaan. "We will not pass through the fields," he promises, "or through the vineyards, nor will we drink of the water of the well; we will go by the king's highway, we will not turn to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed your borders."

The Edomites refuse, and mass their armies to block Israel's passage. "And Israel turned away from them."

They journey from Kadesh to Hor HaHar ("mount upon a mount"), where G-d says to Moses and Aaron:

Aaron shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter into the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against my word at the Waters of Strife.

G-d instructs Moses to take Aaron, and Aaron's son Elazar, up to the top of the mountain. There he should dress Elazar in Aaron's priestly garments, and there Aaron will die.

And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had died, they wept for Aaron, thirty days, all the house of Israel.

The Brass Serpent

Canaanites from Arad in the Negev attack the children of Israel. The Israelite pray for G-d's help and pledge the war spoils to the Sanctuary; and the attackers are defeated and their cities despoiled.

The children of Israel journey on, circumventing the Land of Edom; "and the soul of the people was discouraged along the way."

And the people spoke against G-d, and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, nor is there any water; and our soul loathes this insubstantial food."

And G-d sent venomous serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died.

And the people came to Moses and said: "We have sinned, for we have spoken against G-d, and against you; pray to G-d, that He take away the serpents from us." And Moses prayed for the people.

And G-d said to Moses: "Make you a venomous serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looks upon it, shall live."

And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, and he looked upon the brass serpent, he lived.

The Song of the Well

The people of Israel are now in the final stages of their journey to the Holy Land. They stop at Ovot, Iyei Avarim ("Desolate Passes"), the Zered Brook, the far bank of the Arnon River. Their next encampment is at Be'er ("The Well"), so named after "the well of which G-d spoke to Moses: Gather the people together, and I will give them water." A song was composed to commemorate the Miracle of the Well:

Then Israel sang this song:

Spring up, O well; sing to it
The well that the princes dug out
That the nobles of the people delved
With the scepter, with their staves.

Leaving the desert, they camp at Mattanah ("The Gift"), Nachaliel ("Heritage of G-d") and Bamot ("The Heights") before arriving at "the plain that is in the country of Moab, atop the cliffs which looks out towards the desert."

War and Conquest

The people of Israel now send messengers to Sichon, king of the Emorites, requesting permission to pass through his land. Sichon gathers his armies and attacks the Israelites. The Emorites are defeated and their land is occupied.

When Og, the King of Bashan, also masses his people against the Israelites, he too, is defeated, and his lands, too, are occupied.

And the children of Israel journeyed; and they camped in the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho.

Balak and Balaam

"And Balak the son of Zippor," begins the 2nd Parshah of this week's reading, which bears the name of the Moabite king, "saw all that Israel had done to the Emori. And Moab was seized with dread because of the children of Israel."

Balak sends the "elders of Midian and the elders of Moab" to the prophet and sorcerer Balaam the son of Beor, with the following message:

Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt; they cover the face of the earth, and they sit opposite me.

Come now therefore, I entreat you, and curse me this people, for he is mightier than me... For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.

Balaam tells them that he'll give his response the next morning, "as G-d shall speak to me." "Do not go with them" says G-d to Balaam that night. "Do not curse the people, for they are blessed."

Balak sends a second delegation of dignitaries "more numerous and more prestigious than these" with promises of even greater rewards. Balaam responds:

"If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of G-d my G-d, to do less or more.

"Now therefore, I ask you, tarry you also here this night, that I may know what G-d will say further to me."

This time G-d permits him to go: "If these men came to call you, rise up, and go with them; but only that word which I shall say to you, so shall you do."

Balaam's Donkey

And Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

G-d's anger burned that he is going, and an angel of G-d stood in the way as an adversary against him. He was riding upon his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

The donkey saw the angel of G-d standing in the way, his sword drawn in his hand, and the donkey turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Balaam smote the donkey, to turn her into the way.

But the angel of G-d stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. When the donkey saw the angel of G-d, she pressed herself to the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; and he struck her again.

When the angel further obstructs the way, forcing the animal to complete halt, Balaam strikes her a third time.

And G-d opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam: "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

And Balaam said to the donkey: "Because you have mocked me; I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you."

And the donkey said to Balaam: "Am not I your donkey, upon which you have ridden all your life to this day? Was I ever wont to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

Then G-d opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of G-d standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed down his head, and fell on his face.

"Why have you struck your donkey these three times?" the angel admonishes Balaam. "Behold, I went out to waylay you, because your path is perverse before me... Had she not turned from me, I would now have slain you, and saved her alive."

"If it is evil in your eyes, I shall return" says a humbled Balaam.

"Go with the men," says the angel. "But only the word that I shall speak to you, that you shall speak."

A People that Dwells Alone

Balak comes to receive Balaam at Moab's border, repeating his promises of honor and glory; Balaam reiterates that, "The word that G-d places in my mouth, that I will speak."

The next morning, Balak takes him to the Heights of Baal, from which the edge of the Israelite camp is visible. Balaam instructs him to build seven altars, and sacrifice a bull and a ram on each. Balaam then goes off to meditate.

"And G-d happened upon Balaam... and G-d placed a word into Balaam's mouth...." And Balaam begins to speak:

From Aram does Balak the king of Moab bring me
From the mountains of the east, saying:
Come, curse me Jacob
And come, provoke wrath upon Israel

How shall I curse, whom G-d has not cursed?
How shall I evoke wrath, against whom G-d has not raged?

For from the top of mountains I see him
from the hills I behold him
It is a people that dwells alone
And is not reckoned among the nations.

Who can count the dust of Jacob
And number of the seed of Israel?
Let me die the death of the righteous
And let my last end be like his!

"What have you done to me!" cries Balak. "I brought you to curse my enemies, and, behold, you have blessed them altogether."

But I can say only that which G-d places in my mouth, replies the prophet.

Bidden to Bless

Balak suggests trying from a different vantage point "From you shall see but the utmost part of them, and shall not see them all. Curse them for me from there."

They go to Sdei Tzofim ("Lookout Field"). Again seven altars are raised and seven bullocks and seven rams are offered, and Balaam ventures out to meditate. Soon he returns with more Divinely-placed words in his mouth.

And he took up his discourse, and said:

Arise, Balak and hear
Hearken to me, you son of Zippor

G-d is not a man, that He should lie
Nor a son of Adam, that He should regret
Has He said, and shall He not do?
Has He spoken, and shall he not fulfill it?

Behold, I am bidden to bless
He has blessed; and I cannot turn it.

He sees not iniquity in Jacob
And He perceives not trouble in Israel
G-d his G-d is with him
And the trumpet blast of a king is among them...

For there is no enchantment in Jacob
And there is no sorcery in Israel
In time it is said to Jacob and to Israel:
"What has G-d wrought?"....

"If you will not curse them" says Balak, "at least don't bless them!" Once again Balaam reminds him that he can only say what G-d puts in his mouth.

The Goodly Tents

The king and the prophet make one more attempt, selecting yet a third vantage point from which to look upon the Israelite camp: "The head of Peor, that looks out towards the desert." Again they build seven altars and sacrifice seven bullocks and seven rams.

And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding according to their tribes; and the spirit of G-d came upon him.

And he took up his discourse, and said...:

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob
Your dwellings, O Israel!

As winding brooks
As gardens by the river's side
As aloes which G-d has planted
As cedars beside the waters.

He shall pour the water out of his buckets
His seed shall be in many waters
His king shall be higher than Agag
And his kingdom shall be exalted.

G-d brought him out of Egypt
He has as it were the strength of a wild ox
He shall eat up the nations his enemies
Shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.

He couched, he lay down like a lion
And like a great lion; who shall stir him up?
Blessed is he that blesses you,
And cursed is he that curses you.

"I called you to curse my enemies," cries Balak in anger, "and, behold, you have altogether blessed them these three times. Therefore now flee to your place; I thought to promote you to great honor, but G-d has kept you back from honor."

"Did I not speak also to your messengers," responds Balaam, "which you did send to me, saying: If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of G-d, to do either good or bad of my own mind, but what G-d says, that will I speak?"

The End of Days

"And now," continues Balaam, "I go to my people. Come therefore, and I will advise you what this people shall do to your people in the end of days."

I see him, but not now
I behold him, but he is not near
There shall shoot forth a star out of Jacob
And a scepter shall rise out of Israel
And shall smite the corners of Moab
And rule over all the children of Seth...
And Israel shall do valiantly...

"And Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place: and Balak also went his way."

Promiscuity and Zealotry

Balaam failed to destroy them with curses; but the children of Israel could still bring calamity upon themselves with their deeds, as they now did when "the people began to go astray after the daughters of Moab."

And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods: and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods.

And Israel joined himself to Baal Peor; and the anger of G-d was kindled against Israel.

A plague ensues, which kills 24,000; Moses orders those responsible to be executed. Still, the debauchery and idolatry continue, reaching its peak when,

Behold, a man of the children of Israel came, and brought to his brethren a Midianite woman before the eyes of Moses, and before the eyes of all the congregation of the children of Israel; and they stood weeping before the doorway of the Tent of Meeting.

One man is moved to action.

And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it. He rose up from among the congregation, and took a spear in his hand.

And he went after the man of Israel into the chamber, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly.

And the plague was halted from the children of Israel.