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To: parsha@groups.io
From: Chaim Shulman
<cshulman@gmail.com>

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Chukas — The Sin of Moshe

Adopted from **Nechama Leibowitz** 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 תביאו את הקהל הזה 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 וראייתה 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 Merivas 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: מי 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 מעלתם בי, לא האמנתם בי, how many fit

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 והאמת יעשה דרכו, 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 האמנתם בי, 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 במשה בעבורם (106:32), and Moshe himself said בגללכם (Devarim 1:37). How can The Ramban 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 מים לכם, as on every previous occasion where divine authorship was made explicit: בתת ה' לכם בערב בשר לאכל (Shemos 16:8). By saying יוציא מים, 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. And מעלתם fits too: just as one who derives benefit from hekdesh 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 וצוך 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, 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 אל דברתם 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 את המטה, 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, המן הסלע הזה, 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: ודברתם 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 ודברתם אל הסלע לעיניהם, speak to the rock before their eyes. But speech is perceived by the ear, not the eye; it should have said לעיניהם. 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 אנהו. The word לעיניהם 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 מרייתם 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, נוציז, 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 מרייתם means exactly what it says: והברתם 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.

from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** ryfrand@torah.org to: ravfrand@torah.org date: Jun 25, 2026, 9:50 PM subject: Rav Frand **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." (Koheles 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 לויית חן www.hebrewbooks.org/42890

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: *משל פרעה 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: 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 אלף 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: *מרחוק ותתצב אחותו מרחוק* "His sister stood from afar." The word *ותתצב* 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.

מרחוק, ותתצב אבל היא מרים, ותתצב But she was Miriam, and she stood firm. 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, "ותחצב", 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 haftarah 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** <rabiyy@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

from: Michal Horowitz <michalchorowitz@gmail.com>

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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 tovah*, 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 tovah* — 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 tovah* 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.

from: Rabbi Efreim Goldberg <reg@rabbiEFRIMgoldberg.com>

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 עמ — "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 עמ — 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 עמ. 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.

from: **Alan Fisher** afisherads@yahoo.com

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.

Alan A. Fisher American Dahlia Society 1 Rock Falls Ct.
Rockville, MD 20854 USA AFisherADS@Yahoo.com