

# OHR NET

SHABBAT PARSHIOT CHUKAT-BALAK · VOL. 16 NO. 36

OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL: FOR THE WEEK ENDING 12 TAMMUZ - JULY 4 · IN ISRAEL: CHUKAT 5 TAMMUZ - JUNE 27 BALAK 12 TAMMUZ - JULY 4

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### Chukat

## HOCUS POCUS

*“This the decree of the Torah...” (19:1)*

It always amazes me that people who claim to be hardened atheists will open up a newspaper and start reading their horoscopes.

A non-Jew once quizzed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai about the purification process of the Para Aduma in this week’s Torah portion, “This stuff you do looks like a bunch of hocus-pocus to me. You get a cow and burn it. You pulverize it and make it into dust. If one of you is impure from touching a cadaver you sprinkle a couple of drops over him and say ‘You’re pure!’”

Rabbi Yochanan asked him, “Have you ever been possessed?”

The non-Jew replied “No.”

Said Rabbi Yochanan, “Have you ever seen someone who was possessed?”

The non-Jew answered, “Yes.”

“What do you do with him?”

“Well, we put smoking roots underneath him, sprinkle him with water and the evil spirit runs away.”

Rabbi Yochanan said to him, “Let your ears listen to the words of your mouth!”

After the non-Jew had left, Rabbi Yochanan’s students said to him, “Rabbi, you pushed this fellow off with a reed, but what do you say to us?”

He said, “By your lives, the dead do not make impure. Neither does the cow purify, nor the water. Rather the Holy

One, Blessed be He says, ‘A statute I have instituted. A decree I have decreed. Yours is not to transgress my decrees, as it says *‘This is the decree of the Torah...’*”

People often say, “Look Rabbi, what is all this mumbo-jumbo, putting funny black boxes on your body, not wearing a mixture of wool and linen, not cooking milk and meat together, and putting little metal cases on your door-posts? It’s just a load of hocus-pocus, isn’t it?”

So I say to them, “Have you ever used a cellular telephone?” “Yes.” “Do you understand how it works?” “Well, not really; it picks up radio signals that travel through the air.”

“How does it do that?”

“Well, it’s got a receiver inside it.”

“What’s a ‘receiver’?”

“Well, it’s on a chip. And there are thousands of small circuits on this chip and... Well it receives the signal... You know, Rabbi, you’re right, I don’t really understand exactly how a cellular phone works.”

“Does that stop you using it?”

“No.”

“It’s the same thing with *mitzvot*. I don’t have to know how a mitzvah works in order to do it. As long as G-d knows how it works that’s fine by me.”

• Sources: *Midrash Tanchuma, Rabbi Mordechai Perlmán*

### Balak

## SMASHING!

*“...and the friendship of the King is in him.” (23:21)*

I have a vivid memory of short film I must have seen as a child. The screen is filled with gossamer sparkling shards of glass, like floating pine needles and small silver shields. They tumble past one another in a languorous slow-motion ballet.

I notice that they seem to be drawing closer inexorably to

one another. They spin and turn faster and faster until quite suddenly all the shards come together and in an instant form a shining electric light bulb.

What I was viewing was a high-speed camera recording a light bulb shattering — in reverse.

There are three names with which you can describe a

*continued on page five*

### Chukat

The laws of the *para aduma* — the red heifer — are detailed. These laws are for the ritual purification of one who comes into contact with death. After nearly 40 years in the desert, Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. The people complain about the loss of their water supply that until now has been provided miraculously in the merit of Miriam's righteousness. Aharon and Moshe pray for the people's welfare. G-d commands them to gather the nation at Merivah and speak to a designated rock so that water will flow forth. Distressed by the people's lack of faith, Moshe hits the rock instead of speaking to it. He thus fails to produce the intended public demonstration of G-d's mastery over the world, which would have resulted had the rock produced water merely at Moshe's word. Therefore, G-d tells Moshe and Aharon that they will not bring the people into the Land. *Bnei Yisrael* resume their travels, but because the King of Edom, a descendant of Esav, denies them passage through his country, they do not travel the most direct route to Eretz Yisrael. When they reach Mount Hor, Aharon dies and his son Elazar is invested with his priestly garments and responsibilities. Aharon was beloved by all, and the entire nation mourns him 30 days. Sichon the Amorite attacks *Bnei Yisrael* when they ask to pass through his land. As a result, *Bnei Yisrael* conquer the lands that Sichon had previously seized from

the Amonites on the east bank of the Jordan River.

### Balak

Balak, king of Moav, is in morbid fear of *Bnei Yisrael*. He summons a renowned sorcerer named Bilam to curse them. First, G-d speaks to Bilam and forbids him to go. But, because Bilam is so insistent, G-d appears to him a second time and permits him to go. While en route, a *malach* (emissary from G-d) blocks Bilam's donkey's path. Unable to contain his frustration, Bilam strikes the donkey each time it stops or tries to detour. Miraculously, the donkey speaks, asking Bilam why he is hitting her. The *malach* instructs Bilam regarding what he is permitted to say and what he is forbidden to say regarding the Jewish People. When Bilam arrives, King Balak makes elaborate preparations, hoping that Bilam will succeed in the curse. Three times Bilam attempts to curse and three times blessings issue instead. Balak, seeing that Bilam has failed, sends him home in disgrace.

*Bnei Yisrael* begin sinning with the Moabite women and worshipping the Moabite idols, and they are punished with a plague. One of the Jewish leaders brazenly brings a Midianite princess into his tent, in full view of Moshe and the people. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, grabs a spear and kills both evildoers. This halts the plague, but not before 24,000 have died.

## ISRAEL Forever

### Chukat

## SERPENTS THEN AND NOW

“Does the serpent kill or give life?” ask our Talmudic Sages in regard to the account in this week's Torah portion of the copper serpent which Moshe placed on a high pole so that the Jews bitten by a serpent could stare at it and be cured.

The answer they give is that it was not the biting serpent that caused death nor the copper one that saved life. It was rather a matter of Jews, who had brought the serpents upon them with their unreasonable complaints against Heaven, looking upwards to Heaven and submitting themselves to

their Father in Heaven. This would be the difference between life and death.

The important lesson to be learned from this is that whenever Jews are threatened by serpents in human form their best remedy is to look Heavenward and commit themselves to serving G-d. There is no shortage today of such serpents threatening Jews in Israel and elsewhere. Even without a copper serpent to inspire us, we must apply the lesson of the Torah to secure Israel forever.

### Balak

## LOVE VERSUS HATE

What is the secret of the survival of the Jewish People in the face of so much hatred from their enemies? The answer lies in a *midrash* cited by Rashi in his commentary on this week's Torah portion.

Bilaam, on his way to curse the Jewish People, is described as personally saddling the animal upon which he would ride. Although such menial preparations were below his dignity, his profound hatred of Jews caused him to behave out of character.

The Divine response to his action was: “Wicked fellow,

their Patriarch Avraham beat you to it when he personally saddled his animal for the journey to where he would offer his son as a sacrifice to Heaven.”

Avraham was so consumed with love for G-d that he personally saddled his animal. It was this love that overcame the effects of Bilaam's hatred.

Increasing our own love of G-d is the best weapon we have for overcoming the hatred of our enemies and thus securing Israel forever.

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## PARSHA Q&A ?

### Chukat

1. "Take a perfect *para aduma* (red heifer)." What does the word "perfect" — *temima* — mean in this context?
2. How many non-red hairs disqualify a cow as a *para aduma*?
3. A man dies in a tent. What happens to the sealed metal and earthenware utensils in the tent?
4. What happens to the one who: a) sprinkles the water mixed with the ashes of the *para aduma*; b) touches the water; c) carries the water?
5. Why was the *mitzvah* of the *para aduma* entrusted to Elazar rather than to Aharon?
6. Why does the Torah stress that *all* of the congregation came to *Midbar Tzin*?
7. Why is Miriam's death taught after the law of *para aduma*?
8. During their journey in the *midbar*, in whose merit did the Jewish People receive water?
9. Why did Moshe need to strike the rock a second time?

10. When Moshe told the King of Edom that the Jewish People would not drink from the well-water, to which well did he refer? What do we learn from this?

### Balak

1. Why did Moav consult specifically with Midian regarding their strategy against the Jews?
2. What was Balak's status before becoming Moav's king?
3. Why did G-d grant prophecy to the evil Bilam?
4. Why did Balak think Bilam's curse would work?
5. When did Bilam receive his prophecies?
6. G-d asked Bilam, "Who are these men with you?" What did Bilam deduce from this question?
7. How do we know Bilam hated the Jews more than Balak did?
8. What is evidence of Bilam's arrogance?
9. In what way was the *malach* that opposed Bilam an angel of mercy?
10. How did Bilam die?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

### Chukat

1. 19:2 - Perfectly red.
2. 19:2 - Two.
3. 19:14,15 - The metal utensils are impure for seven days, even if they are sealed. The sealed earthenware vessels are unaffected.
4. 19:21 - a) Remains *tahor*; b) He, but not his clothing, contracts *tumah*; c) He and his clothing contract *tumah*.
5. 19:22 - Because Aharon was involved in the sin of the golden calf.
6. 20:1 - To teach that they were *all* fit to enter the Land; everyone involved in the sin of the spies already died.
7. 20:1 - To teach that just as sacrifices bring atonement, so too does the death of the righteous.
8. 20:2 - Miriam's.
9. 20:11 - After he hit it the first time, only a few drops came out since he was commanded to *speak* to the rock.
10. 20:17 - To the well that traveled with the nation in the *midbar*. This teaches that one who has adequate

provisions should nevertheless purchase goods from his host in order to benefit the host.

### Balak

1. 22:4 - Since Moshe grew up in Midian, the Moabites thought the Midianites might know wherein lay Moshe's power.
2. 22:4 - He was a prince of Midian.
3. 22:5 - So the other nations couldn't say, "If we had had prophets, we also would have become righteous."
4. 22:6 - Because Bilam's curse had helped Sichon defeat Moav.
5. 22:8 - Only at night.
6. 22:9 - He mistakenly reasoned that G-d isn't all-knowing.
7. 22:11 - Balak wanted only to drive the Jews from the Land. Bilam sought to exterminate them completely.
8. 22:13 - He implied that G-d wouldn't let him go with the Moabite princes due to their lesser dignity.
9. 22:22 - It mercifully tried to stop Bilam from sinning and destroying himself.
10. 22:23 - He was killed with a sword.

- Charging less if payment is made in advance
- Down-payment and special loan arrangements
- When promises of compensation are not binding
- The concepts of *asmachta* and *kitzuta* in business deals
- Forbidden arrangements between investor and agent
- Permitted partnerships in animals which can work and multiply
- Usury in relationship to a non-Jew
- The danger of usury to economic security
- Priority in extending loans
- Limitations on a widow as a hostess or dog owner
- All the guilty parties in a usury transaction
- Can a non-Jew serve as an agent

## BRIDGES FOR THE POOR

What happens to the money one earns in unjust fashion? The answer has been given by the wisest of men, King Shlomo.

“He who increases his wealth through forbidden usury gathers it for one who will use it to benefit the poor.” (Mishlei 28:8)

Although the message is clear that the money one earns in an improper manner will end up benefiting others rather than himself, it is not clear who the actual beneficiaries will be.

The Sage Rav explains that an example of this is the

money that the Persian king Shvor Malka took from Jews to support his own people who are called poor because they are devoid of *mitzvot*.

In his commentary on *Mishlei*, Rashi quotes the midrash of Rabbi Tanchuma that this is a reference to the illicit money confiscated by the government from Jews and used for building bridges and roads which the poor will use.

*Maharsha* points out that the mention of bridges fits in with the account (*Mesechta Avodah Zarah 2b*) of the Persians claiming on Judgment Day that they deserve credit for the Torah study of the Jews because they built bridges that enabled them to travel from place to place.

• *Bava Metzia 70b*

## What the SAGES Say

“Whoever lends money on interest will see his fortunes collapse.”

• *Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar - Bava Metzia 71a*

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- Lending money with no witnesses present
- When employee or employer backs out of an arrangement
- The foreman who misrepresents to employees the employer’s offer of payment
- Variations on labor relations
- Responsibility of one who rents an animal

## WITNESSING A LOAN

When one lends money he is obligated to do so in a manner which enables him to prove in court that the loan took place. The rule as stated in our *gemara* by Rabbi Yehuda in the name of the Sage Rav is that the loan must take place before witnesses. The commentaries, however, point out that it is sufficient to record the loan in a document.

The purpose of insisting on such evidence is to avoid a situation in which the borrower may be tempted to deny that he ever received the money. Not only will the lender then be guilty of causing a Jew to sin by lying, but he will also invite upon himself the curses of people who accuse him of falsely

demanding payment.

How far this fear extends is illustrated by the response of the Sage Ravina to a request by Rabbi Ashi for a loan. He insisted that the latter bring witnesses who would sign a document recording the loan. When Rabbi Ashi expressed surprise at such a caution even in regard to someone of his stature, Ravina explained that because he was so immersed in Torah study there was all the more reason to fear that he might forget that he borrowed the money.

This story demonstrates that the need for witnesses is not based on a fear that the borrower will intentionally deny his obligation, but rather that he may forget it and sinfully deny it.

• *Bava Metziah 75b*

## What the SAGES Say

“If the creditor is aware that the debtor lacks the money to pay him, it is forbidden for him to intentionally pass before him, for the Torah warns (*Shemot 22:24*), ‘Do not act towards him as a creditor’ (by pressuring him through your embarrassing presence – Rashi).”

• Rabbi Dimi - *Bava Metziah 75b*

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

*continued from page one*

friend. The first level is a *yedid*. *Yedid* is made up of the Hebrew word for ‘hand’, twice – *yad yad*. If you alter the vowels this becomes *yedid*. *Yedidut* is the entry level of friendship, for two hands, though they may meet and join, remain separate.

The next level of a friend is a *chaver*. *Chaver* is connected to the word *chibur*, which implies being stuck together, joined.

The highest level is a *re’ah*.

In this week’s Torah portion, Bilaam describes the relationship between G-d and the Jewish People thus, “...and the friendship of the King is in him.” — “*U’tre’ut Melech bo.*”

It’s difficult to understand the connection of *re’ut*, the

highest and deepest level of friendship, with the verse in Tehillim (2:9), “*You will smash (Te’roeim) them with an iron rod...*”

What is the connection of “smashing” to the greatest level of friendship?

G-d created this world *zeh l’umat zeh* – a world of exact opposites.

The reverse of that exact same power and degree of destruction described as “smashing” — that breaking into a thousand irreconcilable fragments — defines the closeness of this highest level of friendship.

The light bulb becomes whole.

• *Source: Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen Mi’Lublin*

## FREE FALL BACK

**From: Anthony**

*Dear Rabbi,*

*I want you to know that I really enjoy your column and have come to appreciate it even more of late. I'll tell you why. I am currently recovering from a serious fall and have been lying on my back in bed for six weeks. I have had a lot of time to read your articles and other material on the web to keep me busy. This has been for me a great source of interest and inspiration, but it has also caused me to ask a lot of questions. Until my fall, I was so busy "accomplishing" in life that I never really thought about life. I mean, the value of life in general, and the direction of my life and my goals. Now I'm wondering, since I'm getting better and will soon get back to "accomplishing", whether I should go back to that right away, or whether I should take time out to explore more about life from our Jewish heritage. I guess my question is, as a rabbi, can you tell if there might be a sign from Above that this is what I should do?*

Dear Anthony,

First of all, let me wish you a complete and speedy recovery. If you've been laid up for so long, you must have had a bad fall, and the fact that you're alive and getting well is something to be very thankful for. I presume that's part of what's sparked your interest in G-d and Judaism.

Now regarding your fall, or the time out which it afforded you to rethink things, it is certainly possible that this is a sign from G-d. Of course these things happen, and often it's because of our or other's carelessness or negligence. But even in these cases, and certainly in cases where things were beyond our "control", the Jewish take is that, ultimately, everything is from G-d, and this is G-d's way of communicating with us if we would just be sensitive enough to listen.

The problem is that there is just too much competing noise in most people's lives to hear the subtle messages coming from G-d. Sometimes, for whatever reason, it might be very important to Him that a particular person hears a particular message until G-d changes His whisper to a shout. These extreme cases are naturally alarming. They wake us from our daydreaming through life, causing us to come to terms with reality. We can slip back into the daydream of passivity, or actively capitalize on this new orientation. Each person has to follow the truth in his own heart.

What I find amazing is the following: Not only is our column of more interest to you of late, your question is of more interest to me as of late. I'll explain why, and perhaps this should be seen as a sign as well. In the last six weeks, I have talked to two different people who, upon free falling on their

backs, rebounded to Judaism.

In one case, a young man totally estranged to traditional Judaism was studying in our yeshiva short-term with the intention of returning to America and a host of interesting, philanthropic and valuable, but distinctly non-Jewish, opportunities and responsibilities. His experience here was so valuable, though, that he decided to stay on for another month – but too much rested on his shoulders, he felt, to stay any longer than that. On the day he was originally scheduled to leave, he literally fell off a cliff in a deadly freefall into a deep gorge. While falling, he recalled that for his whole life he felt his life was in his own hands, but now he was totally helpless and in the hands of something else. He remembered thinking before hitting rock bottom that this was G-d's sign that He wanted him to stay. Miraculously, he lived and "merely" broke his back. He had to be airlifted out of the gorge on a stretcher by military helicopter. During the weeks of painful recuperation, when he was totally dependent on others and while things back home were "somehow" taken care of without him, he decided to stay in yeshiva on an open ticket.

In the other instance, a man who was quite successful in business and had everything he wanted — a lovely wife, cars, a beautiful large house and an enjoyable lifestyle — started noticing that this was not fulfilling. And worse, he started suffering mishaps that grew in intensity including the unfortunate loss of his wife to sickness and culminated in his own falling from a window. During his very long and painful recovery, he started to question the true value in life and the priorities he had set. He "stumbled" upon Jewish content on the web and found it very meaningful and comforting. One day, in excruciating pain from which medications offered little relief, he experienced bouts of fainting. Despite never having prayed in his life, he found himself pleading with G-d for respite from the pain. When he fainted the last time, he saw a figure of a pious old man appear before him in his dream. The figure sweetly smiled at him, gazed upon him with loving eyes and then faded into darkness, leaving him with the impression that this was a departed, saintly relative. When he awoke, he started feeling better until gradually the pains he had been suffering for so long disappeared. When he told his family of the figure and impression, it came out that his great-grandfather was a holy rabbi in Jerusalem of old. He took this as a sign that all that had happened was G-d's beckoning him to return to his Jewish roots, and when he fully recuperated he came to find a yeshiva in Jerusalem.

So Anthony, given the circumstances, your situation being the third I've heard in six weeks of people rebounding from serious falls back to Judaism, I think it's safe to view your thoughts as a sign.

So allow me to modify my blessing: May you have a complete and speedy recovery and return.

Chukat

## NOISY RADIO NUISANCE

**Question:** During a recent ride on a bus in Israel the driver had the radio blaring away at a volume that I and other passengers found very disturbing. What is the right thing to do in such a situation?

**Answer:** A bus company in Israel was recently fined 15,000 Shekels because one of its drivers refused to lower the volume on his radio after being asked by a pas-

senger to do so.

This shows that passengers have a right to protest and that the offender faces punishment.

You must, however, take into account that the driver uses the sound of the radio to keep him alert and not to disturb passengers. It is proper, therefore, to politely ask him to lower the volume and to report him to the authorities only if he stubbornly refuses to do so.

Balak

## WALKING OUT ON THE SPEAKER

**Question:** I recently found myself part of an audience listening to the Torah lecture of a distinguished rabbi who gave an inspiring but rather lengthy talk. Upon looking at my watch I realized that if I did not immediately leave I would be late for an appointment. On the other hand I hesitated to embarrass the speaker by publicly walking out on him. What is the right thing to do?

**Answer:** If you anticipated before entering the hall where the lecture took place that you might have to leave before it ended, you should have taken a seat near the exit from where your departure would not be conspicuous.

If your departure was, however, obvious both to the speaker and his other listeners you had no choice but to remain to the end and come late to your appointment.

The great Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, otherwise known as "Chazon Ish", was once asked by a rabbi what to do in a case where remaining to the end of a Torah lecture would necessitate his missing the opportunity to say his afternoon Mincha service together with a minyan. The response of this Torah giant was that conspicuously leaving would constitute a public embarrassment of the speaker, which is strictly forbidden by the Torah, and consideration of his honor took precedence even above praying Mincha at all.

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## THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

Chukat

### I'LL DANCE AT HER WEDDING

The parents of a young girl severely wounded in a traffic accident came to the home of the great Rabbi Chaim Kaniefsky to ask him and his wife to pray for her recovery as she lay unconscious in the hospital. Two weeks later they came to give the good news that the 14-year old girl had finally come out of her coma.

What were the first words she uttered? "Ima, how long was I unconscious?"

Why did she have to know?

Because a while back she had made a resolution to each day learn two laws of *Shmirot Halashon* (Guarding the

Tongue) and she wanted to know how many days she had to make up.

When this was emotionally reported to the Kaniefskys, the rebbetzin declared, "I'll yet dance at her wedding!"

While having such a highly respected woman dance at her wedding would be a great honor, there was little likelihood of this severely wounded girl getting married after undergoing the many operations in store for her. But recover fully she did in the most miraculous fashion – and Rebbetzin Kaniefsky kept her promise and happily danced at her wedding.

Balak

### TRUE NOBILITY

Before her passing the wealthy widow told her daughter that she would inherit her considerable fortune but her condition was that she must go to a particular yeshiva and ask its head, the rosh hayeshiva, to match her in marriage with his best student.

The young woman did as told and the rosh hayeshiva without hesitation identified Reuven as his number one student. After a couple of meetings Reuven and the young woman were engaged. But soon some rumors reached the young woman that the report she received about Reuven being the best student in the yeshiva was exaggerated and that in reality it was Shimon who deserved that title. The girl began to have second thoughts as to whether she was fulfilling her mother's wish and her bad mood showed on her. Reuven

became aware of the reason for the change in their relationship and graciously allowed her to break their engagement.

A short while after her marriage to Shimon the rosh hayeshiva who had recommended Reuven was approached by the head of another yeshiva who was looking for the best student to whom he wished to offer a prestigious position as a teacher. Of course it was Reuven whom he recommended, but Reuven refused to accept this once-in-a-lifetime offer. His explanation was that should his ex-fiancee hear that he received this much sought after position because he was really the top student, she might feel pain at having lost the opportunity to marry him because she refused to believe the rosh hayeshiva. Even such a position, he said, was not worth causing such pain to another.

## LOVE OF THE LAND- THE PLACES

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

Chukat

### EMEK REPHAIM – VALLEY OF THE GIANTS

The largest valley in Jerusalem is called Emek Rephaim in which the neighborhoods of Katamon, Mekor Chaim and Baka are located.

The name Rephaim comes from the name of a people that inhabited the land before Jews entered it. They



were exceptionally large and the very sight of them caused people's hands to become weak – *ropheh* in Hebrew – hence their name Rephaim.

In ancient times this valley served as farming land for Jerusalemites.

Balak

### GAZA OR AZA?

Gaza is a name very much in the news because of the control of the Gaza Strip in the hands of the Hamas terrorists. But the original name for this area is Aza, which is mentioned in our sources as one of the Philistine cities.

Tradition has it that it became known as Gaza



when the Greeks settled there because of its commercial importance. They believed that great treasures were to be found there and therefore called it Gaza – the Greek word for treasure.

Gaza or Aza – the purported treasure has turned into a headache for Israel and the world.