

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Balak

How good are your tents, O Ya'akov; your dwelling places, O Yisrael! (24:5)

Chukat and Balak are always read on separate Shabbatot in Israel. Outside Israel, they are combined (not this year) during the years where Shavuot falls on Friday.

Why, in such circumstances, are Chukat and Balak joined, instead of any other combination - for example Sh'lach and Korach? What is the connection between the two Parshiot?

One possibility is that it is the stick: the stick appears prominently in both Parshiot. In Chukat, Moshe struck the rock with his stick, and was forbidden to enter the Promised Land by Higher Authority in consequence. And in Balak, Bil'am struck his ass with a stick when she strayed from the highway, whereupon G-d 'opened the mouth of the ass' (22:28).

When Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it as G-d commanded, he failed to 'make G-d holy' (20:12) in the eyes of Israelites. As Rashi puts it, had he spoken to the rock, the Israelites would have learnt the following lesson. If the rock, which neither speaks nor hears obeys the Word of G-d, then how much more should we do likewise! Therefore, decreed G-d on Moshe: 'You shall not

bring (the Israelites)... into the land I [promised to] give them' (20:12). So the stick brought Moshe one spiritual level downwards...

In contrast, Bil'am striking the ass with his stick led to something positive - a communication from G-d. In response, he showed a degree of humility when he confessed 'I have sinned', and he was prepared to 'return' if it would be 'bad' in G-d's 'eyes' (22:34). And when G-d told him to 'go with the men and say whatever I will tell you to say' (22:34), he did precisely that. Even though it was to cost formidable reputation, personal prestige, and high salary. So the stick brought Bil'am one spiritual level upwards...

The connection may be made with the opening section of Parashat Chukat: 'The kohen shall take a stick made of cedar, hyssop, and a scarlet thread, and throw them into the burning of the cow...' The stick of cedar used in the purification from the defilement from contact with a human corpse is an integral part of that process. As the text shows, it paradoxically 'defiles the pure' (a ritually pure man shall gather the ash of the cow... and is defiled until evening) and 'purifies the defiled' (he shall purify himself with [the ashes of the red cow] on the third day and on the seventh day, [then] he will be pure)...

Homiletically then, the stick reappears twice in Chukat-Balak. In Chukat, it 'defiles the pure' - Moshe striking the

rock, and in Balak it 'purifies the defiled' - Bil'am striking the ass... It is that which connects the two parshiot.

Another explanation that connects Chukat with Balak may be based on a very striking claim made by the Gemara: "Better the curse with which Achiya of Shiloh execrated the northern kingdom of Israel (under Yeravam ben Nevat: Melachim Alef 14:15-16), than the blessings by which the wicked Bil'am wished on them" (Sanhedrin 105b). This, the Gemara explains, exemplifies: "The wounds that come from the person that loves you are trustworthy, yet the kisses of the people who are enemies are profuse and tiresome" (Mishlei 27:6). The rebuke and correction coming from those who truly love you, even though painful and distressing at the time, are valuable. They draw attention to your shortcomings and to how you can improve. In contrast, the cheap, insincere praise with very likely ulterior motives are chanifut, tiresome flattery: chanifut because what the people that say it really feel and want is the complete opposite. As Bil'am: he wanted the fall of Israel, and he only gave the blessings because G-d didn't give him any choice in the matter. As far as he was concerned, they were words of flattery, enforced by G-d. And at the end of the day, he got what he wanted with 24,000 dead resulting from the plague from Baal Peor, which he himself initiated (31:16).

Thus G-d punished Moshe after striking the rock. Yet it did not take away from the final impact that Moshe himself made in the very last days before his death. As he was to leave the people, it would have made an even greater impact, for all time. It was done out of love...

Yet in contrast, the blessings that Bil'am gave led to trouble. Unable to curse them according to Balak's instructions, he sought to get them out of G-d's favor through enticing them with the daughters of Moav (25:1; 31:16), in which he succeeded... At the end, he got the better of them. 🌿📖