

SHABBAT SHALOM. Today is 12 Tammuz, 5786, corresponding to June 27, 2026.

Chukat-Balak
Numbers 19:1

(p. 652 Hz) (p. 898 S) (p. 584 Hi) (p. 838 AS)
By Rabbi Edward Davis

1. The perplexing chapter dealing with a Red Cow begins this Parshah, and it truly is incomprehensible. Many commentators literally explain the issue, but give up on understanding it. The main issue is that the person who is Tamei, impure, through contact with a dead body becomes pure, while at the exact same time, the Kohen who administers this ritual becomes impure. I did read a commentary that takes a different approach. The entire chapter is to tell us to distance ourselves from death. Death will come to us all, and it holds an attraction to us as well. We have attempted to contact the dead through all forms of methods, including sorcery and the like. The Torah makes it explicit. You won't understand it. And when a person dies, that is the end of the story. Don't dwell on it. It will only depress you more.

2. After chapter 19, there is a gap of 38 years before chapter 20 begins. The Torah does not mention this gap at all. Hashem maintains His status quo with the traveling Jewish nation, but He remains silent, even with His prime disciple Moshe. In one way this can be acceptable to us. No news is good news. Hashem still took care of His Chosen People. The Mannah. The Clouds of Glory. The Well. They are all in fine working order. Whatever failings the people had were all dealt with in the first year or two after leaving Egypt. These 38 years sound as if they were boring as can be. The people followed the cloud which guided them to travel or to rest. And every Erev Tisha B'Av, the people would dig a grave and sleep in the grave, and around 15,000 men would not awaken the next morning. This way that generation would naturally die as Hashem decreed. Now Hashem will begin again with a new cast of characters.

3. Chapter 20 begins with the news that Miriam died. In verse 2, the Torah tells us that there is no water to sustain the nation. From here we deduce that Miriam was the reason that the traveling well provided water, in her merit. Our Sages inform us that Bnei Yisrael received three items in the merit of their three major leaders. Miriam provided the well to give them water. Aharon gave them the Clouds of Glory which protected them from the harsh conditions of living in the desert. And Moshe provided them with the Mannah. Miriam died on the 10th of Nissan, and the well would

reappear in the merit of Moshe. Likewise when Aharon died on the 1st of Av, the Clouds disappeared, but also returned in the merit of Moshe. It was the leaders who provided them their physical needs in the desert.

4. Many commentators mention that Moshe was punished because he hit the rock, to provide water. In my opinion, Moshe did create a miracle that sanctified Hashem's name. Hitting the rock might have made a bigger impression than speaking to the rock. Hence there are other commentators who sought a different sin to hit Moshe with. Maybe it was because Moshe called the people rebels. Moshe became angry with the people, and his anger was the sin that he committed. We need to remember that the people at this time were the next generation. These were the children of those who were the ones who demonstrated a lack of faith in Hashem close to 40 years before. This fact might have played a role in Moshe's punishment. His role of leader had become weakened over time.

5. After Aharon died, the king of Arad attacked Bnei Yisrael. What provoked him to attack at this time? Some say that when he heard that Aharon died, and the protective Clouds disappeared, he figured that the people were now more vulnerable. Or he could have seen the bigger picture. Years ago, the people displayed a severe lack of faith. They were punished with a long trek in the desert. Now the next generation is on the scene, and their major national leaders were beginning to die off. There is a new picture of this new Jewish nation who are a different and weakened body of people. Maybe they also began lacking the hope of actually conquering the 31 kings of Canaan.

6. A side incident occurs in the Bilaam story when Bilaam's donkey speaks to his master. The Torah gives play to a minor occurrence. In Pirkei Avot, our Sages give the story more attention when it states that this donkey was created right before Shabbat during the first week of Creation. Is it such a big deal, especially when seemingly no one witnessed the event? The Rambam wrote that it never happened. It was a dream that Bilaam had while traveling. What's wrong with a minor miracle to spice up the story. More important is to note the message that we see here. Hashem was telling Bilaam that your power was in your mouth, whether it is in the form of a blessing or a curse. Big deal. Hashem can place words in anybody's mouth, both a human or an animal. Back in Bereishit, Rashi's states that Hashem created the human with the power of speech and reason. He can put that ability anywhere. Hashem was saying to Bilaam: You are not special!

7. The Abravanel asked the question: If Hashem blesses Bnei Yisrael and then Bilaam curses them, whose words are mightier, Hashem or Bilaam? Bilaam's words are meaningless in the eyes of the world. So who really cares what Bilaam has to say! But Bilaam's words are not meaningless. They would impress the non-Jewish world. They would impress the entire world. By Hashem forcing Bilaam to bless the Jewish people, that will influence the world to pay attention to Bnei Yisrael. This was the intention in Hashem's plan as they now were on the eve of conquering Canaan and turning it into a true productive, and magnificent country. Look at what the State of Israel has been able to accomplish with an ancient piece of swamp-land. This is Hashem's work in our day!

8. MIDRASH. Bilaam stated that Israel will dwell alone. Balak said to Bilaam: If you cannot curse them when they are by themselves, maybe we can mix them up with other nations, you will be able to curse them. That's when Bilaam said that they will not mix with other people.

QUESTIONS FOR PARSHIYOT CHUKAT-BALAK 5786

I. From the Text

1. Who was designated to be the Kohen who administered the ritual of the Red Cow? (19:3)
2. After Miriam died there was a lack of water. What did Hashem tell Moshe to do to supply water? (20:8)
3. Where did Aharon die and where was he buried? (20:23)
4. How many sacrifices to Hashem did Balak ultimately offer?
5. What part of Bilaam's blessing of Bnei Yisrael do we say in our prayers? (24:5)

II. From Rashi

6. Who slaughtered the Red Cow? (19:3)
7. A Canaanite king led his country into battle with Bnei Yisrael, but he wasn't a Canaanite. (21:1). Where were he and his army from?
8. Balak was the king of Moav, but he wasn't a Moabite. Where was he from? (22:4)
9. Why did Hashem give Bilaam, a non-Jew, prophecy? (22:5)
10. Who hated the Jews more, Bilaam or Balak? (22:11)

III. From the Rabbis

11. How many Red Cows have there been in our history, including Moshe's? (Mishnah Parah)
12. What verse of Bilaam's is recited as one of the verses in the Shofarot section of Mussaf on Rosh HaShanah? (23:21)

13. The Moabites and Midianite women involved the Jewish men in immoral acts. How did they differ in their approach? (Alshich)

IV. Midrash

14. Balak offered many animals as sacrifices to Hashem. What reward did he receive for this?

V. Haftarah

15. What three leaders did Hashem supply Bnei Yisrael during their journey in the desert?

VI. Relationships

16.
 - a) Avraham- Nachor
 - b) Esav - Adah
 - c) Yaakov - Yehudit
 - d) Noach - Aram
 - e) Amram - Yitzhar

ANSWERS FOR CHUKAT-BALAK 5786

1. At that time, it was Elazar, Aharon's son. In the future, it would be the High Priest's assistant.
2. To SPEAK to the rock.
3. Mt. Hor
4. 42. (3x14)
5. "Mah Tovu... How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov..."
6. Any man, but he the Vice Kohen Gadol supervised him.
7. They were from Amalek.
8. He was from Midian.
9. In order not to give the non-Jewish world the opportunity to proclaim: Had we be given prophets from Hashem, we would have been loyal and good people.
10. Bilaam.
11. Nine
12. Lo Heebeet Aven B'Yaakov... u Teru'at Melech Bo.
13. The Moabites women approached the regular Jewish men. The Midianite women went after the national leaders.
14. He was an ancestor (through Ruth) of King David and the Mashiach.
15. Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam.
16.
 - a) Brothers
 - b) Husband- Wife
 - c) Brother-in-Law and Sister-in-Law
 - d) Grandfather Noach (through Shem)
 - e) Brothers

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