

Torah Portion Preview for Chukat and Balak

Sabbath beginning June 30, 2023

This week, we read a double portion again to keep pace with Orthodox readings. In Chukat (law), we read of ritual purification following the touch of a corpse and the ensuing deaths of Moses' honored siblings, Miriam and Aaron in the wilderness. Miriam's death coincides with Israel's water deprivation. When God instructs Moses to get water by speaking to a rock, he instead strikes it, claiming, "We will provide water." His chutzpah in attributing the miracle to himself rather than glorifying God leads to his being barred from the promised land. The Israelites kill Amorite's warriors.

In Balak, Moab's king Balak called the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam rode his donkey, only to be stopped by its balking and verbal rebuke, followed by the appearance of God's angel. The angel instructed Balaam to say only what God tells him. Taking Balak to a peak overlooking the Israelite camps, Balaam utters his famous song (Ma-tovu): "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel." Next, some Israelite men cohabit with Moabite women, even worshipping their idols. A plague follows, and when a tribal leader brings a Moabite woman to his tent, the priest Pinchas kills them both, ending the plague.

Death is the ultimate life-cycle event. These portions allow us to see how our dealing with the death of others develops. We begin by following orders or traditions, depersonalizing the dying, like we do with national enemies. Consorting with survivors, whether Moabites or moderns, allows comparisons with our own families and faith. It is not until we learn the highs and lows of another's life, like the Torah tells of Aaron and Miriam, that lasting memories form. Ultimately, we discover new insights when we listen deeply to the deeds of people we esteem, whether Moses or our mates.