

Chukat-Balak Aliyah Summary

General Overview: This week's Torah reading, *Chukat-Balak*, begins with a discussion regarding the laws of the Red Heifer. Miriam and Aaron die. When the Jews are in need of water, Moses strikes a rock and waters stream forth; but Moses is banned from entering Israel. Amalek battles the Israelites and is defeated. Edom and Moab refuse the Israelites passageway to Israel. The Israelites battle Sichon and Og, and are victorious. King Balak of Moab retains the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jewish people. Instead of curses, only blessings come out of his mouth—including prophecies concerning the Messianic redemption. Moabite women entice some of the Israelites to sin, resulting in a plague amongst the Jews. Phinehas zealously kills two of the high-ranking offenders, and the plague comes to an end.

First Aliyah: The most severe of all ritual impurities is *tum'at met*, the impurity contracted through contact with a human corpse. This section details the purification process for an individual or object which has contracted this form of impurity. A red heifer is slaughtered and is burned together with a few added ingredients. Water from a stream is added to the ashes. On the third and seventh day after contracting *tum'at met*, this mixture is sprinkled upon the individual or object. After immersion in a *mikvah* (ritual pool) the person or object is freed of this impurity. The impure individual may not enter the Tabernacle or Temple until the purification process is completed. Miriam dies in the fortieth year of the Israelites' sojourn in the desert. With Miriam's death, the waters which flowed from the miraculous "Well of Miriam" dried up. The people complain bitterly about the lack of water.

Second Aliyah: G-d tells Moses and Aaron to take a staff and gather the people in front of a certain rock. They should speak to the rock, and it would give forth water. Moses strikes the rock and it gives forth water. In the course of this episode he commits a grave error, the conventional explanation being that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it. This caused G-d to punish Moses and Aaron, barring them from leading the Jews into Israel. Moses sends messengers to the King of Edom requesting permission to pass through his land (which is south of Canaan) on the way to the Promised Land. Edom refuses the Jews passage. The Jews are therefore forced to circumvent the land of Edom, and approach Canaan from the east.

Third Aliyah: The Jews arrive at Mount Hor, where Aaron then passes away and is mourned. The Amalekites, disguised as Canaanites, attack the Jews. The Jews pray to G-d and are victorious. When the Jews complain about the manna, G-d dispatches serpents into the Israelite encampment, and many Jews die. Following G-d's instructions, Moses fashions a copper serpent and places it atop a pole. The bitten Jews would look at this snake and be healed. The Jews journey on, making their way towards the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Encrypted in this section is a great miracle which occurred when the Jews passed through the Arnon valley. Tall cliffs rose from both sides of this narrow valley, and in the clefts of these cliffs the Emorites, armed with arrows and rocks, were waiting to ambush the Jews. Miraculously, the mountains moved towards each other, crushing the Emorite guerrilla forces. This section ends with a song of praise for the well which sustained the Jews throughout their desert stay — and whose now-bloodied waters made the Jews aware of the great miracle which G-d wrought on their behalf.

Fourth Aliyah: The Jews approach the land of the Emorites, on the east bank of the Jordan River. They ask Sichon, king of the Emorites, for permission to pass through his land en route to Canaan. Sichon refuses and instead masses his armies and attack the Jews. The Jews are victorious and occupy the Emorite lands. Og, king of Bashan, then attacks the Jews. The Jews are triumphant again, killing Og and occupy his land, too. Balak, king of Moab, worries that his nation would be the Israelites' next victim. He sends messengers to the Land of Midian, to Balaam, a famed non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer, asking him to come and curse the Jews. G-d appeared to Balaam that night and instructed him not to go to Moab. "You shall not curse the people because they are blessed!"

Fifth Aliyah: Balak sends more prestigious messengers to Balaam, promising him great riches in return for his services. Once again G-d appeared to Balaam. This time allowing him to go — provided that he only speak the words which G-d dictates. G-d sends an angel with a drawn sword to block Balaam's path. While Balaam couldn't see the angel, the she-donkey he was riding did, and refused to move onwards, causing Balaam to strike her. The donkey miraculously speaks, admonishing Balaam for striking her. Eventually, G-d "opens Balaam's eyes," and he sees the angel. A conversation between Balaam and the angel ensues, wherein Balaam is chastised for his behavior towards his donkey, and again he is reminded only to say what G-d dictates to him. After this humbling episode, Balaam arrives in Moab.

Sixth Aliyah: Upon Balaam's instructions, Balak builds seven altars and offers sacrifices to G-d. G-d "chances" upon Balaam, and dictates to him the words he should repeat to Balak and his ministers: "How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the L-rd has not been angered?..." Balaam then proceeded to shower the Israelites with blessings and praises. When Balak responds angrily to the blessings, Balaam reminds him that he can only say that which G-d tells him to say. Balak takes Balaam to another location, hoping that this new venue would be more inauspicious for the Jews. They again build altars and offer sacrifices, and again G-d dictates blessing for the Jews which Balaam repeats.

Seventh Aliyah: Balak takes Balaam to yet another place. For a third time they build altars and bring offerings, and for a third time, only blessings issue from Balaam's mouth: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! ... G-d, who has brought them out of Egypt with the strength of His loftiness He shall consume the nations which are his adversaries..." Balak despairs of accomplishing his goal, and sends Balaam on his way. Before leaving, Balaam prophesies about the end of days: the Messianic Redemption as well as the eventual destruction of Esau, Amalek and Assyria. Following Balaam's unsuccessful attempt to curse the Jewish nation, Moabite and Midianite women seduce many Jewish men. In the course of their seduction, they also entice the Jewish man to worship the *Baal Peor* deity. G-d commands Moses to execute the guilty people, and simultaneously a lethal plague erupts amongst the Jews. A Jewish leader, Zimri, publicly displays the Midianite princess with whom he was consorting. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, kills them both, and the plague is halted.

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