

TorahFax: Chukas-Balak

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Tuesday, Tammuz 8, 5783 (Hakhel Year) June 27, 2023

Each Shabbat since the holiday of Shavuot, the Torah readings in Israel and the Diaspora were different. In Israel, they are one Parsha ahead of us. However, this Shabbat we will become equal with Israel, as we in the Diaspora will read the two Parshiot of Chukat & Balak, while in Israel (where they already read Parshat Chukat) they will read only Parshat Balak. After this Shabbat, the readings will be the same.

In Parshat Chukat, the Torah relates about the passing of Miriam and her brother, Aaron. It took place during the final year in which Jews were in the desert. Aaron passed away four months after Miriam. Moshe passed away almost one year after Miriam.

Aaron, Moshe, and Miriam were the three leaders of the Jewish people from the time of the Exodus from Egypt and throughout the 40 years in the desert.

Miriam was five years older than Moshe and two years older than Aaron. She passed away at the age of 125. Aaron passed away at 123 and Moshe at the age of 120. During their forty years in the desert, G-d supplied the Jewish people with, manna from heaven; water that flowed from a rock; clouds of glory that surrounded their camp to protect them.

The manna came in Moshe's merit. The water came in Miriam's merit. The clouds were in Aaron's merit.

In this Parsha the Torah tells us that when Miriam passed away, the rock stopped giving water. When Aaron passed away, the clouds were gone.

When the water stopped, the people gathered and complained to Moshe that they had no water and were going to die. G-d told Moshe and Aaron to speak to the rock and it will give water again. Instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe hit the rock. Eventually, the water began flowing again, but Moshe and Aaron were punished, and they were not allowed to enter into the Promised Land. Thus, Miriam, Aaron and Moshe all died and were buried in the desert.

Miriam's great grandson, Betzalel, was the master builder in charge of building the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and all of its contents.

The Talmud tells that Miriam, who was five years older than Moshe, was instrumental in Moshe's birth. When Pharaoh decreed that every newborn male be thrown in the river, Miriam's father, Amram, divorced his wife. He didn't want any more children. It was Miriam, who was less than five, who told her father that his decree is in a way worse than Pharaoh's. She said, "Pharaoh's decree only affects males, but yours is also on the girls, who will not be born as a result of your divorce, from which others will learn and copy." Amram realized that his daughter was right. He re-married Yocheved and as a result, Moshe was born. Thus, Miriam gets recognition for Moshe's birth.

The Talmud says, "The angel of death had no control over six people: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moshe, Aaron & Miriam. G-d Himself took their souls through a kiss."

Thursday, Tammuz 10, 5783 (Hakhel Year) June 29, 2023

Parshat Balak, which we will read this Shabbat in Israel and in the Diaspora, is about the story of Balak, King of Moab, who hired Bilam to curse the Jewish people.

Balak wanted to wage war against them but was afraid after seeing how they killed the two mighty kings, Sichon and Og. He sent for Bilam, a gentile prophet, with spiritual powers, to curse the Jews, thus, he would win his war against them.

The Torah relates in detail how Bilam attempts three times to curse the Jewish people. But G-d continuously puts words of blessing in his mouth and instead of cursing them he blesses them.

In one instance, Bilam looked out from the top of a mountain and saw the Jewish people resting peacefully, tribe by tribe. He exclaimed, "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel... He [Israel] will lay down like a lion and like a lioness [in the land] who shall rouse him up? Blessed are those who bless you and cursed are the ones who curse you."

Although these words came from Bilam's mouth, yet they were G-d's holy words which He placed in Bilam's mouth.

In fact, our sages incorporated the words, "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel," in the daily morning prayers.

Q. Why are there two expressions: "tents" and "dwellings"?

A. The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, was miraculously freed from Russian prison seventy-six years ago, where he was jailed and sentenced to death for his "sin" of teaching Torah in the Soviet Union. He gives the following explanation: A "tent" is a temporary home, while a "dwelling" represents a permanent home.

Throughout Jewish history, we Jews have rotated between tents and dwellings.

"How good are your tents O Jacob" - tells us that even when living in tents - throughout exiles and persecutions, the Jewish people achieved and produced the greatest scholars and leaders and adhered to the ways of the Torah. Oil which gives light and illumination, is produced from the olives only after squeezing and pressing the olives. So too, during the most difficult times we managed to produce our greatest scholars and luminaries.

The daily prayers were established after the destruction of the Temple when Jews were in exile. We begin the Morning Prayer with the "Mah Tov" - "How good are your tents, O Jacob." Yet, at the same time we haven't lost hope that very soon we will be back in "Your dwellings, O Israel," with the coming of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Third Holy Temple.