

Parashiyot Khukat – Balak 5780

Shabbat Shalom!! This Shabbat we have a double portion: Khukat and Balak together. There is a lot to say about both portions. I will touch upon a few points in the first portion.

In the first *parasha* we find a number of themes, but I see a unifying element in them. It starts out with the famous ritual of the “Red Heifer” *parah adumah* in Hebrew (by the way, in Hebrew the adjective always comes after the noun, unlike in English, so *parah* is “heifer” and *adumah* is “red”). This ritual is famous primarily because it’s so inscrutable. However, it’s purpose is clear. The purpose is to ritually purify those people who are rendered ritually impure due to their contact with death.

The next major event that happens is Miriam, Moses’ older sister, one of the women in the Bible who are specifically referred to as a prophet, dies. Next the people have no water. The people are so upset, that they gang up against Moses and Aaron complaining about the situation. What are they so upset about? That they are going to die of thirst! Next major event is that G!d tells Moses to take his staff and in the presence of all of the assembled community of Israel, Moses shall speak to the rock and it will bring forth water to satisfy the thirst of all the people. As we know the story, Moses is very angry and tells the assembled people: “Listen you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” And he struck the rock twice!!

What’s going on for Moses? I think that Moses is near the end of his rope. The people are near the end of the journey to the Promised Land. Moses has endured so much in this forty year process. Basically everyone that left Egypt and stood at Sinai is no longer alive. It’s a completely different generation than the one that Moses brought out of Egypt – a generation for whom the two major cataclysmic events that defined and formed the people are now matters of legend and tradition. Also, the person who saved his life as an infant, who accompanied him through so much, his sister Miriam, has just died.

One of the striking things about the Torah is that the personalities that people it are very human. Even the greatest figures have their flaws, including Moses. I think we see Moses in a very upset state. Not only are the people complaining to him, but he has just lost his beloved sister. It seems that he has also lost his patience with the people. He had enormous patience before, but it has slowly been chipped away. Here we see him referring to the people as “rebels.” This extraordinarily compassionate and patient man has gotten close to being “burnt

out.” And then, if we pay close attention to the verses that describe the incident, Moses says: “shall *we* bring forth water from this rock,” as though it’s *his* action that will achieve this, rather than G!d’s. That’s why the following verse says: “But Ad!nay said to Moses and Aaron, Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”

As a response to this event, neither Moses nor Aaron will be able to enter the Promised Land. What does this mean in effect? That they’re both going to pass away soon. Aaron does pass away about 10 – 12 verses later. Aaron’s son Elazar replaces him as Kohen.

Because of the lack of water that the people suffer with immediately after Miriam’s death, there is a rabbinic tradition that associates Miriam with wells of water in the desert. The name Miriam contains within it the letter that spell “water” (*mayim – mem, yud, mem*) and also the word for “sea” (*yam*) which are the last two letters in her name. In recognition of this rabbinic tradition, some people have, in addition to Elijah’s cup of wine at their seder, a cup of water that is Miriam’s cup.

By the way, a Kohen is not supposed to have contact with death unless it’s his immediate family. They become ritually impure because of that and then cannot function as a Kohen for a week and then they have to go through a ritual purification (Mikveh – immersion in the ritual bath). But we are told in the Torah that we are supposed to be a nation of priests and a holy people. This is part of the purpose of the ritual purification of the red heifer.

The next major event of the Parasha is the continuation of the journey to the Promised Land. They’re getting close. They try to avoid conflict with the different tribes whose land they ask to pass through. However sometimes they’re not able to. What’s the underlying theme in this? Once again life and death.

One of my favorite sayings from Pirkei Avot, The Chapters of our Ancestors, which contains many ethical teachings and life advice is Chapter 2:15 and 2:16. In Pirkei Avot 2:15 Rabbi Tarfon says: “the day is short and the work is abundant” (I’m sure everyone recognizes that feeling). (It goes on, but for my purposes I’ll skip the rest of 2:15) Then in the next entry Tarfon says: You are not obligated to finish the task, neither are you free to abstain from it.” I find that particularly poignant and quite relevant to today’s Torah portion. In it Miriam dies as does Aaron a number of verses later.

Miriam and Aaron have, along with their brother Moses, led the people out of Egypt. The three of them have been the central figures in this entire enterprise leading them out of Egypt to the border of the Promised Land and none of them are able to enter into it. Miriam, who is the oldest of the three, dies first. Aaron and Moses are both told that they will not be able to enter the Promised Land because of the incident with the rock. None of them will finish the job, the *m'lakha*, that they started. But the job is never done. Even if they entered the land they would then have to establish themselves there. The task goes on and on.

I know many people are upset that Moses cannot enter the Promised Land. It feels like way too harsh a punishment for what he did. I understand that feeling very well, but at the same time I think Moses' not entering the land of Israel, but getting to see it from a mountain peak that affords him a view of the entire land, is a recognition that he can no longer be the leader in this new chapter of our people's history, that it's time for a new generation to take over. It is not for him to "finish" the job. In fact this "job" has no end. It may always be difficult to say "*dayenu*" this is enough for us.

Shabbat Shalom.