

## **Derashos for Parshas Chukas & Parshas Balak**

*Rabbi Sender Haber – B'nai Israel Congregation, Norfolk, VA*

### **Like A Rolling Stone - Lessons From Miriam's Well**

When Miriam was very young, she predicted that her brother Moshe would grow up to be a great person. Even after he was thrown into the Nile, Miriam stayed behind hidden in the reeds to see what would happen to him and see if there was anything she could do to help. As a reward for staying behind at the water, Miriam was given the "Well of Miriam".

Rashi explains that that the Well of Miriam was actually a stone. It rolled with the Jewish people in their travels and miraculously gave water. During the all of the time that the Jewish people were travelling in the desert they were able to stay hydrated only because of this well of Miriam. When Miriam passed away, the well stopped giving water. When the Jewish people came to Moshe and complained about the lack of water, Moshe turned to Hashem who gave him very precise instructions. Moshe was to bring a stick, talk to the stone, and command it to give forth water. Moshe gathered the people and got the stone to start supplying water again, but instead of talking to the stone he hit it.

Moshe was criticized harshly for hitting the stone. It was one of the reasons why he was not allowed to enter the land of Israel. Many reasons are given for this criticism, but I would like to add my own two cents:

Miriam's well was a reward for her kindness to her brother Moshe. It is very significant that the reward for her kindness was the opportunity to do more kindness. She could have been blessed with long years, health, a new car, or respect. Instead she was rewarded with a well that would keep the Jewish people hydrated in the desert.

Miriam understood that the greatest reward for kindness is kindness itself. When we fulfill the will of Hashem we are doing what we were created and designed to do. There is no better feeling than that.

We find a similar idea when Miriam (together with her mother Yocheved) defied Pharaoh's orders to abort all of the Jewish children. Their reward for saving the Jewish children was that the Jewish children continued to multiply. The act itself was enough reward. They didn't need anything else.

When Miriam passed away it was important that this lesson be preserved. Hashem told Moshe to speak to the stone and have it burst forth with water. There is no 'stone heaven' and the stone had nothing to gain by giving the water. By listening to the word of Hashem the stone would be giving forth water only because that was the will of its creator. This was to be an important lesson to the Jewish people. They

were not to look for reward and punishment, but to act because their creator required it.

When Moshe hit the stone, he lost an important part of that message. Now, the stone gave water because it had been hit. It was reacting to reward and punishment, but not to its ultimate role in this world. The Jewish people still learned an important lesson, but not the lesson of serving Hashem for its own sake with no regard for immediate gratification or consequence. (Sources: Taanis 9a and Rabbeinu Bechayei as cited in “Teachings” by Rabbi A. Brander)

### **What Type of Vessel Are You?**

There are two types of vessels that have two different sets of laws as they relate to purity and imputity: There are metal utensils (kli mateches) which become impure from outside contact with sources of impurity and There are earthenware vessels (kli cheres), which only become impure from the inside.

In the case of the earthenware vessels (kli cheres), actual contact between the vessel and the impure item is not needed. Even if a rodent is suspended inside the kli cheres, the utensil becomes impure.

The Kotzker Rebbe, zt”l, explains the difference: Metal itself is a precious commodity. Therefore as soon as contact is made — even on the outside — it becomes impure.

An earthenware, kli cheres, however, is made from material that is almost valueless. The whole value and importance of the vessel is determined by its functionality — what it can contain. Therefore, the vessel can only be made impure by attacking its functionality — from within the walls of the vessel.

The Kotzker declares that people can also be compared to earthenware vessels. Man’s value is not based on his component elements and minerals. The value of these elements is negligible. The value of a human being is based on what is inside.

Sometimes we make the mistake of getting so caught up in the outward qualities of human beings — how they dress or what kind of car they drive — that we forget this lesson. The value of a human being is like that of an earthenware vessel — it is based on the internals.

Just as that which is put inside the earthenware vessel can make it impure, so too, the thoughts and desires that are put into a human being can sometimes make the person impure.

The value of a person is not based on what’s outside but on what’s inside.

We must be very thoughtful and careful about what we put into both our vessels and our children's vessels.

### **Stay the Course**

The Jewish people complained to Moshe that they had no water and Hashem told Moshe Rabbeinu to speak to a rock. Moshe, we are told, did not do exactly as he was commanded, rather than speaking to the rock he hit the rock.

Why didn't Moshe speak to the rock as commanded? After all, Hashem had said 'vedibartem el haselah' "speak to the rock"?

Rashi explains that Moshe did try speaking to the rock. He spoke to the rock in front of all of those complaining Israelites – but nothing happened. Moshe had to reconsider. This was an awful moment. The Jews were complaining and threatening to go back to Mitzrayim. He was trying to convince them otherwise, and it wasn't working.

Moshe decided that when Hashem said to speak to the rock he had meant to speak with it in rock language. After all, you can't have an effect on a rock by speaking to it. He took his staff – which Hashem had told him to bring – and hit the nearest rock. Sure enough, water came out.

Imagine that you are trying to get soda out of a soda machine. You put in your money but nothing comes out. You might start by calling the number on the machine and davening softly, but eventually you will just give in and kick the machine. We all do it.

Rav Elimelech Resnick of the Mir Yeshiva explains that Moshe Rabbeinu should never have given in. Hashem said, "I am punishing you because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me". Moshe should have stuck with the word of G-d.

Someone once came to Rav Elyashiv and quoted the Gemara that says that a person who has bad middos can't learn Torah properly. He explained that he knew a Torah scholar with bad character traits and suggested an alternate explanation of the Gemara.

Rav Elyashiv said: You may have the wrong understanding of a Torah scholar or the wrong understanding of good character traits, but the Gemara is right. You can't just find an alternate explanation because the one you know of doesn't seem to be working. You need to have a little more Emunah, a little more faith.

I was in the kosher section of Farm Fresh yesterday. There was a woman walking up and down the aisles was clearly not Jewish and not a regular Kosher eater. I didn't know if she was looking for Gefilte Fish or Kishke or just the proper way to spell

Keneidel. When she became aware of the rabbi in her midst she approached me for help.

She was looking for hamentachen. There were none in Farm Fresh, but I helpfully suggested that she make some on her own. I told her to use an upside down glass to cut the dough into circles and to put jelly in the middle of each circle. She looked at me like I was crazy. “No”, she said, “they are supposed to be fruit filled triangles; not jelly filled circles”. I tried to explain, but she walked away.

I tried to think about why it bothered me so much that this woman was going to make her hamentachen wrong. She was making them for a church group in the middle of June. Why was I being so frum about them?

I realized that it was probably because I felt like I had the true tradition in Hamentachen. The process and methodology that I shared with her came from my mother and presumably my grandmother and great-grandmother. We’ve been making hamentachen for thousands of years and will not take kindly to some woman in Farm Fresh reinventing the wheel (or the triangle).

Hamentachen are not very important, but so much of our tradition is. We have mitzvos and words of wisdom that have come from hashed, changed the world and withstood the test of time. Sometimes we get discouraged and frustrated, even embarrassed. We need to think of Moshe talking to the rock with all of the Jewish people grumbling. Nothing was happening but he should have stayed the course and continued talking.

On Succos we ask Hashem to send us rain in the merit of Moshe who hit the rock and found water. Although it wasn’t done properly it did work and we ask that Moshe’s merit stand by us forever.

We need to remember not to lose faith and to remain strong in following the ways of Hashem. We also need to thank Hashem for making it work and helping us out even when we falter.

Good Shabbos.

## **Perspective**

One thing that Bilaam changed was his perspective on the Jews. At first, he referenced a G-d who took them out of Egypt. He even tried to curse from a place where he could see all of the Jews, including those who were not good.

Hashem set Bilaam straight on that one. It’s not about all the Jews. Unity is amazing. But Hashem would help us even for one Jew who needs help.

I read a story several years ago about a fellow who lost his tefillin in Williamsburg. They reviewed the cameras and you could see the Tefillin fall off the shelf and into the garbage. A few minutes later, you could see someone else tie up the bag and take it out.

They checked the dumpster, but it was already gone. They called the company but were told that the trash had been transported by train to a landfill upstate. So they went upstate. Tens of Chassidishe guys combing through tons of garbage, trying to isolate the Williamsburg garbage, the Shul garbage, and finally the Tefillin.

It sounds crazy. Stuff gets thrown out. But they were the man's tefillin. He had worn them every day since his Bar Mitzvah. They definitely didn't belong in the dump.

This is how Hashem looks at us individually. It's so easy to throw our hands up and blame everyone around us for why things 'aren't right'. What Bilaam learned is that it doesn't have to be about all of us doing the right thing. It's about one of doing the right thing. And that one will merit Hashem's blessing and protection.

## **Still Travelling**

Bilaam and Balak did not see eye to eye. Balak needed someone to get rid of the Jews and found that the way to do it was by cursing them and that the best person to curse them would be Bilaam. Bilaam refused.

Although Bilaam later had a change of heart, it is worth understanding what it was that scared him at the beginning. What did he see that Balak did not?

Rav Moshe Feinstein points out a small but significant difference in Bilaam's perception of the Jews vs. Balak's perception of the Jews. Balak characterized the Jews as a "Nation who had left Egypt"; Bilaam characterized them as "a nation leaving Egypt".

Balak knew about everything that Hashem had done for the Jews in Mitzrayim, but he was only concerned with the current status of the Jews: a nation that was grabbing all of the lands that it passed through. "And Balak saw all that the Jews had done to the Emori". He didn't even mention the miracles in Mitzrayim and at the Yam Suf.

Bilaam understood that the Jews were different. They were on the warpath and winning only because they were on their way out of Mitzrayim. Later, when he explained why he could not curse the Jews he reiterated, "the G-d who is taking them out of Mitzrayim is strong as a bull". Leaving Mitzrayim is an ongoing event.

Life is full of ups and downs. We start books and projects and then we lose our resolve before we finish them. Reb Chaim Shmuelewitz gave a piece of advice to

yeshiva Bochurim experiencing ups and downs: When you get back to learning always start from where you left off. Never, ever, start again from the beginning. Balak believed that our strength was dependent on Prayer and Curses. Bilaam realized that our success was based on the fact that the present is only one small part of our Journey. When we judge ourselves we need to take into account where we came from and where we are going.

## **Speechwriter**

One thing that we have all learned about politics is that everyone's got a speechwriter. It's almost uncanny to have the world discuss in intricate detail every word uttered by public figures on a week when we see so clearly that we are not in control of what we say. Bilaam was determined to curse us and was paid a lot of money to do it, but he couldn't get the words out. The donkey - the character that was least expected to open his mouth - actually emerges as the most effectively speaker in the parsha.

So we need to ask ourselves, who was Bilaam's speechwriter?

Bilaam began by going up on a mountain so that he could look down and see how isolated and alone we were. We weren't surrounded or protected by other nations and allies. We weren't looking over our shoulders to see what others were thinking. He intended to curse our nation for our singular and stubborn allegiance to Hashem.

But instead of a curse, Bilaam gave us a blessing. He said "Hein am Lebadad Yishkon" - This nation is one of a kind. They do not get discouraged and they are not bound by "what is usually done". Every one of them has something unique to offer and they are willing to make their unique contribution to the world.

What did we do to deserve those kind words?

We know that had a well in the merit of Miriam and the Purim Story in the merit of Ester. We had clouds of glory in honor of Aharon and it was in Moshe's merit that the earth opened up and swallowed Korach and his people. But I could not find one word explaining why we deserved to have donkey open her mouth or why deserved to have Bilaam change his curse in to a blessing.

Indeed, in the haftorah, Micha tells us "remember what Balak wanted to do to you and what Bilaam ended up doing - so that you will know the righteousness of Hashem".

Hashem did this "just because". He helped us and helped everyone see the good in us because He is who He is we are who we are. That's it.

A thought for the three weeks: When Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, he asked all of the Egyptians to leave. He did this to save his brothers from embarrassment. The problem is that as the story progresses it seems like everyone

knew immediately exactly what had transpired in the room. At best he saved a moment of embarrassment, and this at the expense of risking his life. The last time the brothers saw Yoesef they had tried to kill him.

I once heard that the power of twelve people who were so diametrically opposed getting together was so awesome that Yosef did not want anybody else there. They were literally inviting G-d in and making a Holy of Holies right there where they were standing. Just like in the Holy of Holies, nobody was allowed in.

The Holy of Holies was destroyed because we couldn't get along. Hashem's presence comes through Shalom and coming together in peace. We can literally bring the Shechina here to our conversations and homes and shul just by staying focused on peace. That is our way of building the Beis Hamikdash and bringing only good things upon us. May we be zoche to see only the good in each other, and may we hear only good things said about us.

### **The Fourth!**

A happy July 4th of July to all. We are very fortunate to live in the United States of America. If we forget how fortunate we are all we need to do is to speak to people who were around during World War II. They will tell you that despite quotas and apathy of the government there was no more coveted destination than the United States of America. We can look around Europe today and feel very thankful to live in a country where we are respected and can walk around looking like Jews with hardly a second thought. Even when I lived in Australia, which is considered a very tolerant country, it was a given that someone would yell a racial slur out of a car window at us at least once a week.

The United States of America is famous for having a Separation of Church and State or, more accurately, Religion and State. For the most part, that has worked well for us but sometimes it has not.

When John Locke and Thomas Jefferson wrote about separating Religion from Government, it wasn't because they disliked religion. Exactly the opposite. They held that the government has neither the right nor the ability to dictate and control our conscience. In other words, religion is too important to be in the hands of the government. Unfortunately, if you read the opinions of the Supreme Court Justices this week, you will see that that very concept may have come into question. Some people feel like the government actually can tell us what is right and wrong. We know better. We have a law in the land and we need to follow it (Dina D'malchusa Dina), but the final arbiter of right and wrong is G-d and His Torah. That doesn't mean that we have to spend our lives judging people. Everyone has their challenges. The Torah uses the word abomination to describe dishonesty as well. People forget that. But we do need to be proud of our Torah and we need to realize that, at this point, the country is depending on religious people to defend religious values because nobody else is going to do that.

We find a fascinating idea at the end of this week's parsha. Bilaam, after his failed attempt to curse the Jews decided that he would change strategies and cause the Jews to sin. He said, "The Jewish G-d hates incest". Egypt at the time was at the top of the linen industry. They wore linen, they buried people in linen, and they used linen as a currency. Since linen is made from flax, it was hard to come by in the desert and the Jewish people missed their linen. (Perhaps that is why they were called Mislonenim). Bilaam had the Midianites set up tents where linen could be sold. The good bargains were deep inside the tents and waiting deep inside those tents were Midianite women. The Midianite women enticed the Jewish men and in the passion of the moment they asked the men to worship their deities. In just a few hours the Jew's were being punished by Hashem in ways that Bilaam and Pharaoh could only dream of. (Sanhedrin 106a)

This is strange. The Jewish people lived in Egypt, which was hardly a bastion of morality, for hundreds of years and yet they never succumbed to the Egyptians. Out here in the desert they suddenly lost their ability to resist.

The difference is very simple. In Egypt, the Egyptians treated us terribly, but there was never a conscious effort to get us to sin. Bilaam was the first to come up with a plan to make us sin. The plan worked. (Maharal)

Thank G-d we live in a society where there is no effort to get us to sin. We are respected for being religious and we are depended upon to defend the Torah. We need to remember that. No government has the ability to tell us what is moral and what is not moral. We are not the Jews in the desert who were subject to an evil plan. We are blessed to live in a country where we can and should feel proud of our religion, which includes both compassion for all people and a knowledge of where to draw the line between right and wrong.

When I was a kid in Buffalo, there was a man who was obsessed with death. He wanted nothing more than to join the Chevra Kadisha, to open a funeral home, and to tend the cemeteries. The only problem was that he was a Kohein. Should we feel compassionate for such a man? Of course we should, he wants nothing more than to follow his heart and to help others in a Chessed Shel Emes. But that doesn't make it permissible. The Torah transcends all trends and cultures and even love. It defines the role of a Kohein, the importance of a day of Shabbos, the way that we talk about one another, and also marriage. Our great country is now depending upon us to represent that and be proud of it, because it is possible that nobody else will.

## **Good Eyesight**

When we begin our meal on Friday night we are joined by two angels. One is good and one is bad. If they find the house lit up and the table set and everything arranged, the good angel says, 'May it be the Will that next Shabbat will be like this.' The bad angel is forced to answer 'Amen.'



If G-d forbid the house is not ready for shabbos, the bad angel says, 'May it be the Will that next Shabbat will be like this.' And the good angel is forced to answer 'Amen.'

The Degel Machane Efrayim writes that the same thing happened to Bilaam. He was hired to curse the Jewish people, to say terrible things about us and to bring about our destruction, but he couldn't. He took a look at us and was forced to say nice things.

In Rabbi Schwartz's email he refers to it as a moment of 'Wow'. Sometimes we are able to feel removed, detached, even resentful and hateful of something or someone, but then we see them in action. We have a moment of 'wow'.

Every day, every hour we have to deal with the people around us. We see things that are truly wrong and human beings that are truly flawed. Sometimes we feel like people have no hope. Hashem helps us out and shows us something nice about these people. He gives us something good to think about whenever we are thinking something bad; something constructive to think about whenever we are ready to lash out and destruct.

We need to seize those moments and treasure them. They might not come again.

We want to be the good angel who only sees good, but at the very least we can be that bad angel who recognizes something nice and is forced to say 'Amein'.

I could stop here, but I'd like to take things one step further and flip them around. We were the ones who gave Bilaam his wow moment. He looked at our tents and our homes and our shuls and said "Mah Tovu Ohalecha Yaacov". That is a power that we have.

We can create a moment in which everything changes.

I once heard a story about the Lubavitcher rebbe that stuck in my head. There was a general with a long and difficult name that once came to see the rebbe. Perhaps his name was kogissofilevich. The rebbe met him years later and greeted him by the same name. The general started to cry. "Everyone tries to avoid saying my name", he said. "Nobody can pronounce it and they don't even make the effort. It is so refreshing for someone to remember and call me by my own name".

I have a proposition for everyone here. We are going into the summer months. People leave for a few days, for a few weeks, sometimes longer. Some people leave and don't come back. Some are sick, some are busy.

Pick up the phone and give them a call. Just say "Good Shabbos". "Norfolk isn't the same without you". "Hope you're doing ok".

A call like that can change a relationship. It can make someone's day or someone's life. They say that Shlomo Carlbach made a random call to a phone number that he found in his pocket. Turns out that the fellow hadn't been called in weeks. He was about to hang himself.

That story may or may not be true, but the ease with which we can pick up the phone and the power of the impact that we can make is undeniable.

Don't just start the three weeks with a fast. Start the three weeks by seeing the good in others, and give others a chance to see the good in you.

Good Shabbos

### **Like Lions!**

הֵן-עַם כְּלָבִיא יָקוּם, וְכֹאֲרֵי יִתְנַשֵּׂא; לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד-יֵאכֹל טָרֶף, וְדָם-חַלְלִים יִשְׁתֶּה.

"Behold a Nation. like a young lion it will rise and like an older lion it will carry itself. It will not rest until it devours its prey and drinks the blood of its victims"

What an odd verse. We are all familiar with the association of the lion with nobility and grandeur, but do we really want to be like lions, eating our prey and drinking their blood?

We are told to wake like a lion each morning. I used to live a few blocks away from the Buffalo zoo. I heard the lions wake up. If I rose out of bed like them my mother would have begged me to go back to sleep.

When I was in Eretz Yisroel one of my roommates was Chaim. He was an iluy, which is a nice way of saying "absent minded professor". He would leave the apartment to learn and return roughly thirty-six hours later for a nap. I don't know if he knew which bed was his. He would lie down in his hat and jacket and shoes and fall fast asleep. When he awoke he would find some leftover food and start the cycle again. He would stop by the apartment on Friday afternoon to shower or change his clothes. He was a great guy and a big Talmid Chacham, but he was a mess.

My other roommate was Moshe. This was a guy who always has the same expression on his face, a perfectly pressed shirt and a perfect shave. He would go to sleep at the same time every night and he would take off his shoes when he did so. When he woke up in the morning his shoes would be right at the foot of the bed right where he left them.

It was painful to watch Moshe and Chaim interact. It was like Bambi and Godzilla or a Riot and a Tea Party. It was awful.

One day Moshe asked Chaim where he eats on shabbos. It was a fair question. Chaim responded that he ate “by the old man”. He wasn’t sure what his name was or how they found each other, but the old man would make shabbos in his home in a hole in the wall in Meah Shearim and Chaim would eat there. He invited Moshe to come along. And he did.

That changed everything. Moshe came back to the apartment singing Chaim’s praises. Apparently, disorganized Chaim had found an old man that nobody knows about and nobody cares about. He served in the Hagana and he became a Meah Shearimnik and he has all sorts of stories, but no relatives. Chaim helps him make shabbos, buys his groceries, and eats all of the meals with him. Chaim was a mess, but he was worthy of respect.

Now both Chaim and Moshe are grown up and married with lots of kids, but the interaction between the two of them stuck with me forever.

It is really hard to be a student. Young people are like those young lions just full of energy and too excited to focus on any one assignment or schedule or rule for too long. Their principals are busy trying to get them to settle down, to get organized, to get serious about life. There is such potential for conflict.

The beautiful thing is when it works perfectly and each one is able to appreciate the other. When the educator has respect for the youth and energy and disarray of his or her students and understands them and, more importantly, when the students can look up to the mature organized educator with respect. In that relationship there is opportunity for beautiful growth. Both are working to better the world. One brings the vigor of youth and one brings the maturity and wisdom of experience.

The Ohr Hachaim explains that this is what the verse teaches us about the young lions and the old lions. We all start off as young energetic and excited lion cubs, but as we grow up we watch our teachers and parents and learn how to channel that energy and originality and creativity and use it in a regal, responsible and organized fashion.

May we all merit to take our maturity to the next level even as we use our youth and energy and passion to enhance our communities and to better all of Klal Yisroel.