

Where to begin with these two action-packed Torah portions, each of which offers enough for pages of commentary? Parashah Chukat recounts a rapidly unfolding series of events with implications for the future: The people continue to complain, Miriam and Aaron both die, Aaron's son Eleazar becomes High Priest, Moses is told he will not lead the people into the Promised Land, and the people successfully wage war against groups of Canaanites who inhabit the land. Most of Parashah Balak tells the story of Bilam, a successful, independent prophet who is engaged by the king of Moab to curse the Israelites but is prevented by HaShem from doing so. It ends with the Israelites being led astray by the Moabite women, and the revenge taken by Pinchas, Eleazar's son – more on that next week.

Through it all runs the thread of human fallibility. Unlike most of the civilizations they encounter, the Israelites maintain a strict separation between human and divine. While others deify their kings and other important people, blurring the lines between man and god, we freely acknowledge the frailties of even our most powerful and important leaders. Miriam, Moses' elder sister protects him from the beginning of his life but speaks ill of his Cushite wife and is punished with leprosy. Aaron engages in the Golden Calf debacle. And even Moses, the humblest of all men, finally loses his temper when the people once again complain of thirst. HaShem tells him to speak to the rock, but provoked by months of pent-up frustration, he lashes out at the people, calling them rebels, and strikes the rock twice. For this lack of trust, he too may not enter the Promised Land. Our patriarchs, matriarchs, and their offspring are portrayed unadorned as the multifaceted, imperfect human beings they are, and we can readily see aspects of ourselves in their stories. We do not worship them; we worship only our invisible, indescribable Creator whose very name we are unable to pronounce. And we are not immortal. All earthly creations die, from bacteria and blades of grass to hippopotamuses and humans; we all have a beginning and an end. Only HaShem is immortal, and only HaShem is capable of creating life. This is illustrated in the enigmatic story of the red heifer, which opens Parashah Chukat. An unblemished young female cow, red like the blood that is the essence of life, and that has not yet been yoked, is killed, and completely reduced to ash. Mixed with water, the ashes serve to purify those who have come in contact with a corpse. We humans are "dust and ashes," aware of our mortality, and – hopefully – aware that life is a gift from HaShem. That is why the story of the red heifer precedes the stories of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron and the impending death of Moses. We all are finite, but the deeds of some of us live on in memory, for better or for worse.

And so, this group of mortals slogs on through the desert, still complaining, still being punished. They encounter hostile inhabitants, defeat them, and finally settle in the plains of Moab, terrifying and disgusting its residents. The stage is set for the strange episode of the Moabite king Balak and Bilam, the prophet-for-hire he enlists to curse the Israelites. Balak must fancy himself something more than human because he neatly paraphrases HaShem's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3), "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse," flattering Bilam with the words, "... for I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed." Who is this Bilam? His name implies that he is a man without a people (*bilu-am* – Talmud, Sanhedrin 10:2), he gives the impression of being a man of God but he still negotiates with Balak's ambassadors, and he must be a powerful shaman if Balak chooses him for this task. Rabbinic sources acknowledge his greatness, but ultimately revile him, accusing him of having incited the Midianite women to seduce the Israelites. And yet we recite his words in nearly every service: *mah tovu ohalecha Jakob* – quite a paradox!

Perhaps the most important lesson we can derive is to compare Bilam and Moses. Our sages consider them both to be great, but there is a marked difference: Moses lives and strives for his people, first with Pharaoh, then with HaShem. And he is fiercely loyal to HaShem, even as he pleads and cajoles to protect the Israelites from HaShem's wrath. Bilam is a man alone, loyal to no group, individual or deity, a talented mercenary who serves whomever he pleases. Like Moses, he is a fundamentally moral person, but lacking affiliation, he can never truly be a leader. His deeds are impressive, but not trailblazing. Living only for himself, he is the antithesis of the Jewish ideal. Moses and Bilam: Gifted, fallible human beings and polar opposites. Most of us have a little of each of them in our personalities. It's up to us to maintain a healthy balance between loyalty to ourselves and loyalty to our family, friends, nation, fellow humans, and planet. In the words of the poet John Donne, "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; ..."

Shabbat shalom!