

These two action-packed Torah portions offer a wealth of subjects for commentary. Here is an overview. Parashah Chukat relates a rapidly unfolding series of events with profound implications for the future: The people continue to complain, Miriam and Aaron 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, the renowned, independent prophet whom HaShem renders powerless to curse the Israelites, as he was hired by the king of Moab to do. It culminates in the Israelites being led astray by the women of Moab, and Eleazar's son Pinchas taking bloody revenge – a titillating story to be continued 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 human and divine, we freely acknowledge the human frailties of even our most powerful and important leaders and worship only HaShem. Miriam, Moses' elder sister who protects him from the beginning of his life, makes ambiguous comments about his Cushite wife and is punished with leprosy. Aaron engages in the Golden Calf debacle and justifies his actions to Moses with a shockingly lame explanation (Exodus 32:22-24). And now 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 a rock to cause it to bring forth water, but provoked by months of pent-up frustration, he lashes out at the people, calling them rebels, and striking the rock not once, but twice. For this lack of trust, which in essence means that in front of the entire people he has failed to honor HaShem, he too may not enter the Promised Land. (20:7-12) Indeed, 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. How could we possibly worship them? We are not immortal. All earthly life dies, from bacteria and ants to whales and humans. Only HaShem is immortal, and only HaShem is capable of creating life. If we human beings are incapable of creating *ex nihilo*, i.e., creating something from nothing, then it stands to reason that we should only worship the Creator, the Source of All. This is the underlying message of the enigmatic story of the red heifer that 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 slaughtered and completely reduced to ash. Mixed with fresh water, these ashes serve to purify those who have come in contact with a corpse. But paradoxically, the ritually clean person who gathers the ashes of the cow and places them in a clean place outside the camp becomes ritually unclean until the evening. In other words, the water containing the ashes of the burnt cow along with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool that are burned with it, cleanses someone who is ritually unclean because of having come into contact with a corpse, but in doing so, renders the person who prepares the water unclean. Although this ritual ceased a few centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, its significance is profound. First of all, like the prohibition against mixing dairy and meat and against wearing clothing made from a mixture of wool and linen, it is a *chok*, a statute that brilliantly illustrates our human limitations. It is HaShem's saying "Some things are beyond human comprehension, so just do it because I told you to." In addition, the ritual of the red heifer symbolically negates any notion that we can ever be perfect. The incredibly hard work necessary to obtain a perfect score on a test or achieve a perfect musical performance is eloquent proof, and usually this kind of perfection simply means that one has successfully avoided making any mistakes, and that often requires a certain amount of luck as well. But realistically, these are empty achievements, since they give no indication that the person who writes a perfect test has the ability to apply the learned material to anything beyond that test, nor do they include artistry, which is measured more by impact on the emotions than by technical prowess. Seeking perfection is an exercise in self-deception. So is seeking immortality, which is another form of perfection. Death represents the futility of aspiring to such goals, and it also represents a transition from the known world to the unknown. The living cannot penetrate that inviolable boundary separating life from death, so we have invented countless rituals that reflect our helplessness and confusion when we encounter a border we are unable to cross. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught that a dead person doesn't cause impurity, and that the water does not make impurity pure, and added that rituals like the red heifer simply provide transitions from one state of being to another. (Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah). The dichotomous status of the person who prepares and disposes of the cleansing water represents the threshold between the worlds of life and death. That is why the story of the red heifer precedes the stories of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron and the announcement of Moses' impending death. We are all finite and imperfect, but we can hone and wisely use the abilities HaShem has given us, and that is enough.

Shabbat shalom!