

TIMELESS TORAH

CHUKAT BALAK: THE POWER OF WORDS - FROM MOSHE TO BILAAM

Receptive Rock

A recurring theme running through the double parshah of Chukat-Balak is the power of speech. The words we use impact ourselves and our environment and can have ramifications that last for generations. Perhaps the most obvious example of this in Parshat Chukat is the episode of the striking of the rock. Moshe and Aharon were instructed to approach the rock that had until then produced water for the nation and speak to it, upon which the rock would renew its flow of water. However, instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe and Aharon struck it. Although the rock continued its miraculous production of water, they were punished by being disallowed entry to Eretz Yisrael.

The verse emphasises that the underlying issue with failing to speak to the rock was that it was a missed opportunity to sanctify Hashem's Name: *'L'hakdisheini l'einei Bnei Yisrael* – To sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel (20:12). Rashi explains that the image of the rock heeding the words of Moshe would have impressed upon the people the notion of obedience; if even an insentient rock listens to the word of Hashem, how much more should they do so. Clearly, a rock has no free will whereas a human being is able to choose whether to act in a certain way. But the essential message here is that there should have been a demonstration of the power of the Word of Hashem, and it was this that Moshe neglected to facilitate.

The Kli Yakar (d.1619) cites a Midrash which, in his words, should obviously be understood allegorically. The Midrash contrasts this episode of the rock with the narrative in Parshat

Beshalach, when the rock first began to produce water. instructed to hit the rock and not to speak to it. The Midrash explains that forty years earlier, the rock 'would not have understood words'. Now, however, the rock was already 'grown-up', and inspirational words would have been more appropriate. The Midrash is graphically conveying a fundamental point here. The concept of a message conveyed through force is only for someone who lacks intelligence, but for someone who has maturity of understanding, verbal instruction is far more effective. By hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, Moshe failed to encourage the people to develop a sensitivity towards the positive impact that words can have. This lesson was so crucial that the consequences for not doing so were immediate and far reaching.

Praying for Self-Confidence

A second lesson in the power of words is found in a short and cryptic passage (21:1-3) that describes how a Canaanite king launched an attack on the Jewish people from across the Jordan. The people prayed to Hashem and vowed to dedicate the spoil from this battle to the Mishkan. The battle was eventually concluded without casualties on the Israelite side, although a maidservant was captured. On a factual level, Rav Hirsch (d.1888) explains that since this was a Canaanite king, the cities that the Jewish people promised to designate to the Mishkan must have been on the west bank of the Jordan, and it would be several years until they would reach that area. This is why the verses are so vague; the complete subjugation of the people in question would only take place at some point in the future.



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However, despite the apparent ambiguity of these verses, the key point seems to be the prayer and the vow made by the Jewish people. The Meshech Chochmah (Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, d.1926) explains the significance of this episode. Until this point, the Jewish people had been living a life of open miracles: when they were meritorious, they saw supernatural victories and attainments, and when they strayed from the path, they were immediately humiliated and suffered defeat. While living with such close recognition of Hashem's presence is inspiring, the people – with an eye on their imminent entry to the Land of Israel – felt that there was an identifiable drawback to this. When a nation is provided with everything they need, this detracts from the national pride of self-achievement, leaving a feeling of vulnerability in its wake. The people, therefore, prayed to be victorious in a natural way, through which they would gain a sense of confidence and self-respect. The prayer they uttered here was, in the Meshech Chochmah's interpretation, a precedent for the people's future relationship with Hashem. They prayed to live with an awareness of Hashem's guiding Hand in their hearts, yet succeed in battle in a normative way.

Transition to Blessings

The idea of the power of words is, of course, at the heart of Parshat Balak, which details at length Bilaam's attempts to curse the Jewish people. Although he was not in fact successful, it seems that Bilaam's words were capable of causing serious harm if not for Divine intervention. Yet Bilaam's power, according to the Seforno, was limited to curses. His negative outlook prevented him from being able to use his words for blessings.

Indeed, the Sefer HaChinuch (unknown authorship, circa 13th century) sets out three reasons why we are commanded not to curse people. Two of them are practical: a bad word, even when spoken in private, will very possibly become publicised and cause distress, and even if this does not happen, speaking negatively encourages a negative attitude and thought patterns. The third reason the Chinuch gives is metaphysical. A person's speech is a Divine gift, as the commentators explain (see Targum Onkelos, Bereishit 2:7), endowed directly by Hashem. When someone communicates with another person, they are expressing the thoughts of the soul. Speech, explains the Chinuch, has a real effect on the world we live in. This is why it is so imperative that we keep our words positive.

Based on an idea of the Maharal of Prague, we can develop this message further in relation to Bilaam's talking donkey. The Mishnah (Pirkei Avot 5:6) teaches that the jawbone of this donkey was created during the twilight period between the sixth day of Creation and Shabbat. This was a time when physical creation had come to a close, but the true rest of Shabbat had yet to begin. In this in-between period, the tool of speech, the jawbone, was created, emphasising the notion that speech itself lies on the boundary of transcendence. Within this moment of transition between the holy and mundane lies our power of speech - with its acute potential to profoundly affect ourselves and the people around us.

NEXT WEEK - PINCHAS: Succession, Vision, and Continuity