

THE CHUKAT

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Chukat



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

NUMBERS 19:1-22:1

Parashat Chukat / פרשת חקת

In this weeks guide...

COMMENTARY..... 1

Rabbi Jason examines two verses that are situated right next to each other, but seemingly unrelated. *What if...?* Yes! A wealth of insight and revelation awaits us as we journey deeper into the link between Miriam's death and Israel's lack of water. This incredible article is going to introduce Jewish perspectives that also tie into Paul's work in the New Testament—a poignant example of our “full inheritance” in *Yeshua*!

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

Let's take a closer look at another story in this week's Torah portion, the episode of the bronze serpent. There are connections to what the New Testament teaches us about sin, as well as the profound symbolism of the serpent being lifted on the staff. However, there's also an insight that is tucked away in an obscure story that was recorded centuries after this tragedy in the wilderness.

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

The “Law.” These three simple letters can feel like a “four-letter-word” to Gentile believers. But what if this word is a window into a world of grace? Let's journey deeper together into the reality that inspired the longest chapter in God's Word (a classic Bible trivia question!). From parenting to the red heifer ceremony in Ezekiel, we cover all the bases!



The heavy-handed themes continue in *Chukat*, the Hebrew word for “decree.” It begins with regulatory details but quickly shifts to include descriptions of the deaths of two prominent characters in the Exodus story. Possibly worse than that, we also read about Moses' disastrous decision to strike the rock (for a second time) at *Meribah*. The consequences of that singular moment are especially challenging to comprehend. In addition to describing a couple of military victories, this portion also contains the story of the brazen serpent.

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Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Chukat* / פרשת חקת | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

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COMMENTARY

It's not a coincidence that Numbers 20:1 describes Miriam's death and in the next verse, Israel lacked water. The connection between these consecutive verses is that Israel received the miraculous water-giving rock that followed them in the wilderness *on account of Miriam*. Rashi, the famous Jewish commentator, arrived at this conclusion due to the juxtaposition of Miriam's death and Israel's grumbling. The Talmud elaborates on this point when it says,

R. Jose the son of R. Judah says: Three good leaders had arisen for Israel, namely: Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and for their sake three good things were conferred [upon Israel], namely, the Well, the Pillar of Cloud and the Manna; the Well, on account of Miriam; the Pillar of Cloud on account of Aaron; the Manna on account of Moses. When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is said, "And Miriam died there," and immediately follows [the verse], "And there was no water for the congregation; and it returned for the merit of the [latter] two." – b. Ta'anit 9a

What is the connection between these three individuals (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam) and these particular gifts (the Manna, the Pillar of Cloud, and the Well)? They personify and are analogous to the three pillars on which the world stands: Torah, Divine Service (*Avodah*), and Deeds of Kindness (*Gemilut Chasidim* / Avot 1:2). As the giver of the Torah, Moses had the merit to provide manna for the people, freeing them from the need to earn a livelihood in the desert. Consequently, they had the nourishment needed to study the Torah. Thus, Moses provided Israel with both their spiritual and physical food.

Aaron was the embodiment of priesthood and *avoda* (worship and spiritual service). His extraordinary devotion in serving God through his sacrificial service enabled the *Shechinah*—the “manifest presence” of the Lord—to dwell among the Children of Israel. God gave the Clouds of Glory to Israel because of Aaron.

Miriam was the personification of deeds of kindness, the third pillar. From the time she was a small girl, the Jewish sages tell us, she worked for the welfare of the Jewish people. She watched over her brother Moses, assisted the courageous midwives, and fed the poor. Because of her *chesed* (loving-kindness), God provided the Children of Israel with miraculous, life-giving waters.

However, all of this does not explain why the Well disappeared after Miriam's death. Was her merit not significant enough to ensure its continued presence among the people she dedicated her life to help? The Kli Yakar (R. Ephraim Lunshitz) answers this mystery, "This came as punishment for their failure to properly mourn Miriam's passing . . . They felt no loss with her passing. Therefore, *Hashem* [the LORD] removed her well from their midst, thus showing them that the water came in their merit."

COMMENTARY

We can learn from this episode to respect, honor, and value our women leaders as much we do as our men. According to the New Testament, this Well that Jewish tradition associates with Miriam points to the Messiah. It almost certainly formed the background for Paul's *midrash* in 1 Corinthians 10 which claims that Messiah was the true source of water:

For I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea. They all were immersed into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. And all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink—for they were drinking from a spiritual rock that followed them, and **the Rock was Messiah**. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert.
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 (*emphasis added*)

I believe it is for this reason that the New Testament's first reference to "living water" (*mayyim hayyim*) is in connection to a woman:

Then the Samaritan woman tells Him, "How is it that You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (For Jewish people don't deal with Samaritans.) *Yeshua* replied to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."
- John 4:9-10

This Well that Israel drank from—and Messiah offered to the Samaritan woman—will be entirely made manifest in the Messianic Kingdom:

Then the angel showed me a river of the water of life—bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city's street. On either side of the river was a tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in the city, and His servants shall serve Him. - Revelation 22:1-3

When Messiah returns, He will again cause streams of life-giving water to flow to all Israel and the Nations that bring healing and blessing (*cf.* Revelation 22:1-2; Joel 3:18).

New Testament Tie-In

One of the most indelible images found in this Torah portion is the bronze serpent. In Numbers 21, the Israelites made a vow to the Lord and subsequently enjoyed a mighty victory over the Canaanite king, Arad. The next thing we read? They grew impatient and “spoke against God and Moses.” This incident is the first time we read of the Children of Israel addressing the Lord directly in their complaints. They had been “reasonable enough” to limit their grumblings to Moses (or the “privacy” of their tents). The Israelites detested the manna God had supernaturally and faithfully provided—a sobering thought, as so many of us are prone to take God’s grace for granted. As Paul reminds us, “[God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that he also shall reap](#)” (Galatians 6:7). As Israel sowed seeds of complaint, they reaped a harvest of death in the form of “fiery serpents.”

Paul used another metaphor for the cause-and-effect nature of sin when he wrote, “[For the wages of sin is death](#)” (Romans 6:23 NRSV). In this sense, Numbers 21 records Israel’s “payday.” It serves as a type and shadow for the deeper spiritual reality all people must face. The good news is that this passage also describes the second half of Paul’s thought in Romans (“[...the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord](#)”). Rescue came to the dying Hebrews as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole, and the suffering obediently looked on it in faith.

We are rescued from the “wages of sin” as we look to *Yeshua* in faith (who was lifted up); we receive that “free gift.” He made this tie-in explicit in John 3:14, “[Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.](#)” And *Yeshua*’s declaration—recorded later in the same Gospel—alludes to the event in this week’s *parsha* also: “[And as I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to Myself.](#)” (John 12:32).

Unfortunately, the story of the bronze serpent didn’t end in the Judean wilderness. Consider the description of the righteous King Hezekiah, upon his ascension to the throne:

“He did what was right in *ADONAI*’s eyes, according to all his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the pillars and cut down the Asherah poles. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made—for up to those days *Bnei-Yisrael* were still burning incense to it—it was called *Nehushtan*.” - 2 Kings 18:3-4

At first glance, this seems outrageous and unbelievable. These many centuries later, Israel still had that artifact from the wilderness and was worshipping it? Augustine of Hippo states that this bronze serpent—*Nehushtan* (an excellent Bible trivia question!)—was “preserved intact in memory of the miracle.”¹ And maybe that’s the problem. In our carnality, we tend to focus on and memorialize the miracle rather than the Miracle Worker.

Warning: don’t let the miracles of the past become idols in the present. Remembrance is a tricky thing. A failure to remember well leads to worry, fear, ingratitude, and presumption. Selective memory can distort our history and draw our hearts away from what God is doing right now. There is a need to remember faithfully, focused on *Yeshua*. Doing so will empower us to press on, lay hold, and run with endurance.

Hebrew Word Study

chok [חֹק] / “enactment, statute, decision”

“Because I said so!”

All parents, at one time or another, utter these words to their children. Often, through gritted teeth and out of frustration, parents use this expression to communicate, “I have my reasons, and you are not mature enough to understand them.” This is how rules go sometimes. Whether between a parent and child or a government and its citizens, we do not always get a vote. A modicum of trust is needed because we often do not have the capacity or time to invest in understanding the underlying reasons for a decision. How much more is this true of the relationship between the Almighty and His people?

In the Gospels and Apostolic writings (New Testament), there is one word for “law”—*nomos* (νόμος)—but this is not the case in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). The Hebrew Scriptures use at least five different terms to speak of divine commandments, but one of the most intriguing of these is *chukim* (חֻקִּים / sing. *chok* / חֹק). *Chok* derives from the root *chakak* (חָקַק), meaning “to inscribe, engrave,” and is made up of the following three consonants:

- *chet* / ח (8)
- *kuf* / ק (100)
- *kuf* / ק (100)

Typically translated as “a statute” or “an ordinance,” *chok* appears in the Hebrew Bible 128 times and has four possible meanings:

1. a portion,²
2. a legal statute or ordinance,³
3. a boundary,⁴ and
4. an inscribing or engraving,⁵ as in a book.⁶

The most intriguing aspect of a *chok* by far is its “supra-rational” nature. Some examples of *chukim* are *kosher* laws,⁷ mixing of seeds and fabrics,⁸ the scapegoat on *Yom Kippur*,⁹ and *tumah* and *taharah*.¹⁰ Perhaps the most quintessential *chok* is the mixing of the ashes of the red heifer that purifies an individual from contact with a corpse.¹¹ The paradoxical nature of this *chok*¹² is its stipulation that the one who purifies from *tumah* (ritual impurity) will also receive a “transfer” of that *taharah* (purity).¹³ Although the sages identify this *chok* as a test of obedience and warn against attempting to find a rationale, we can suggest an explanation based on the revelation of our Prophets.

Consider this prophecy from Ezekiel regarding the redemption:

“For I will take you from the nations, gather you out of all the countries and bring you back to your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean from all your **uncleanness** [*tum'oteichem*] and from all your idols.” - Ezekiel 36:24-26

He used the language of “sprinkling” when speaking of purifying Israel from *tumah*. This detail seems to reference the *chok* of the red heifer.¹⁴ Given the parameters of the procedure, Ezekiel seemingly implies that the Almighty would receive the transfer of the *tumah* (i.e., uncleanness) to Himself. We could further suggest that *Yeshua* fulfilled this puzzling aspect of the prophecy as the Lord’s agent:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creation...[because] in Messiah God was reconciling the world to Himself...He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” - 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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HEBREW WORD STUDY
חֹק

חֹק / *chok*: N. MASC. **enactment, statute, decision; allotment, boundary.** *In its underlying meaning, indicates something prescribed, whether a rule or otherwise.*

The word *chok* overlaps most with other legal terminology when it indicates a divine enactment (Exod 12:24; Num 30:16), occasionally as a stand-in for the whole law (Lev 10:11) or covenant (Psa 50:16) or when it indicates a human mandate (Gen 47:26) or human provisions (Jer 32:11). God's rules (*chok*) are celebrated (e.g., Deut 4:6, 8), and when Israel breaks them, it is subject to judgment (Isa 24:5; Ezek 11:12). Often *chok* more broadly signifies something prescribed, not necessarily a rule. So it can mean "allotment" (Prov 30:8), whether given by humans (Gen 47:22) or by God (Lev 10:13–15), or "boundary," be it of time (Job 14:5), number (Job 28:26), or extension (Prov 8:29; Mic 7:11). In several instances, it is a prescribed custom (Judg 11:39) or norm (1 Sam 30:25). It can mean God's decisive work within history (Psa 2:4), the cosmos (Psa 148:6), or redemption (Jer 31:26). The related feminine noun חֻקָּה (*chukka*, "statute") is also common; there is no substantive difference in meaning.

taken from the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- Rabbi Jason referenced a rabbinic source that claims Israel lost the miraculous well for its failure to mourn Miriam's death properly. Wow! What do you think that failure reveals about Israel's attitude towards Miriam? How might we transpose this scenario into our lives and situations today?
- Consequences are real. As Paul stated (rather bluntly), "Do not be deceived—God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that he also shall reap" (Galatians 6:7). And yet...God is merciful! He will find a way to bless us despite our sin and rebellion. He finds mysterious ways to move us into His purposes for us. Be encouraged to press on this week!

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NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Balak* / פרשת בלק

TORAH

Sunday / Numbers 22:2-12

Monday / Numbers 22:13-20

Tuesday / Numbers 22:21-38

Wednesday / Numbers 22:39-23:12

Thursday / Numbers 23:13-26

Friday / Numbers 23:27-24:13

Saturday / Numbers 24:14-25:9

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

Micah 5:6-6:8

New Covenant Reading:

Matthew 21:1-11

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *Tree of Life Version*.

¹ Marco Conti and Gianluca Pilara, eds. *1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. vol. 5 of Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. ICCS/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 215.

² Genesis 47:22

³ Numbers 19:2; Psalms 119:8

⁴ Proverbs 8:26, 29

⁵ Proverbs 31:5; Isaiah 30:8

⁶ Isaiah 30:8; Job 19:23

⁷ For instance, see Leviticus 11. Although these are called a “*torah*” in 11:46, the sages understand that as a “motivation” for the rationale given in verse 47 (see also b.*Chullin* 27)

⁸ Deuteronomy 29:9-11

⁹ Leviticus 16:5-10

¹⁰ These terms roughly translate to “spiritual contamination” and “spiritual cleansing,” see Leviticus 10:10 and Ezekiel 22:26

¹¹ Numbers 19

¹² The sages have a tradition, based on Ecclesiastes 7:23, that this *chok* even confounded the wisest of all men, King Solomon

¹³ Numbers 19:7-10

¹⁴ Compare Ezekiel 36:24-26 and Numbers 19:4, 13