

CHUKAT-BALAK

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5786 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Chukat-Balak



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

Numbers 19:1-25:9

פרשת חוקת-בלק / *Parashat Chukat-Balak*

In this weeks guide...

COMMENTARY..... 1

Parashat Chukat-Balak explores the tension between mystery and obedience, reminding us that God's holiness is not always fully explainable, but it is always trustworthy. From the paradox of the red heifer to Moses striking the rock and Balaam's failed attempts to curse Israel, the parashah repeatedly shows that God's purposes cannot be manipulated or overturned.

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

The New Testament tie-in reflects on Moses striking the rock and Paul's identification of the rock with the Messiah in 1 Corinthians 10. Moses' failure demonstrates the seriousness of spiritual leadership and the responsibility leaders carry to represent God faithfully before others. The passage ultimately points to Yeshua as the true and perfect Deliverer and High Priest, the One who perfectly reveals the Father and whose pierced body becomes the source of life and redemption for the world.

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

The study of *parah adummah* (red heifer) highlights one of the Torah's deepest mysteries: a ritual that brings purification through paradox. The ashes of the sacrificed heifer cleanse those defiled by death, while those preparing the ritual become temporarily unclean themselves. This powerful imagery points to God's ability to bring restoration and life from places marked by death, impurity, and human limitation.



Parashat Chukat-Balak weaves together themes of mystery, leadership, blessing, and covenant faithfulness during Israel's wilderness journey. The parashah begins with the enigmatic ritual of the red heifer, moves through the deaths of Miriam and Aaron and Moses' failure at the rock, and culminates in Balak's attempt to curse Israel through the prophet Balaam. Yet every intended curse becomes a blessing, revealing that human schemes cannot overturn God's covenant purposes. At the same time, the parashah warns that while Israel could not be defeated from the outside, compromise and unfaithfulness from within remained a very real spiritual danger.

Fusion Global

Parashat Chukat-Balak / פרשת חוקת-בלק | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Staff Contributor

COMMENTARY

Parasha Chukat-Balak forces us to wrestle with a tension that runs through the entire Torah. The collision between mystery and revelation, between what God explains and what He simply commands.

It opens with the chok: the decree of the red heifer in Numbers 19. This is not a mitzvah that makes immediate sense. The ashes of a perfectly pure animal are used to purify those defiled by death, yet those who prepare the ashes become impure themselves. It is intentionally paradoxical. Even the sages of Israel called it the quintessential chok—a commandment that resists human logic. And that's the point.

Holiness is not always intuitive. Obedience sometimes precedes understanding. The kingdom of God is not built on what we can fully explain, but on what we are willing to trust.

That tension spills over into Moses' failure at the rock (Numbers 20). The same leader who spoke with God "face to face" strikes the rock instead of speaking to it. It seems small until you realize what's at stake. God's holiness must be represented accurately before the people. Moses allows frustration to distort obedience. And the consequence is severe: he will not enter the Land.

Leadership in the kingdom carries weight. When you stand as a representative of God, precision matters. Passion is not a substitute for obedience.

From there, the narrative moves into transition and loss. Miriam dies. Aaron dies. The generation that left Egypt is fading. The wilderness is not just a place of wandering; it is a place of refinement and, at times, of endings.

Yet even in judgment, God provides. When the people complain and are struck by serpents, God instructs Moses to lift a bronze serpent. Those who look upon it live (Numbers 21). It is a strange provision; healing comes through looking at the very image of the curse. Later, Yeshua draws a direct line from this moment to Himself: just as the serpent was lifted up, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (John 3:14-15).

Redemption often looks like confrontation before it looks like comfort.

Then we step into the account of Balak and Balaam. Balak, king of Moab, fears Israel and hires Balaam to curse them. But every attempt to curse turns into a blessing. God is making something unmistakably clear: what He has blessed cannot be undone by human schemes. Balaam, a prophet-for-hire, becomes an unwilling mouthpiece of divine truth. Even a pagan seer cannot override the covenant. God's faithfulness is not fragile. And yet, what Balaam cannot accomplish through curses, Israel stumbles into through compromise. The people fall into idolatry and immorality with the daughters of Moab (Numbers 25). This is the real danger: not external opposition, but internal compromise. Israel cannot be cursed from the outside, but it can corrupt itself from within.

The parasha closes with Pinchas's bold action, which stops the plague by confronting sin directly. It's jarring, even uncomfortable, but it underscores a reality we often want to soften: holiness is not passive. Covenant faithfulness requires decisive action.

Here's the thread that ties it all together: God's holiness is absolute, His faithfulness is unshakable, and our calling is to walk in obedient trust—even when we don't fully understand.

You cannot manipulate God, you cannot outmaneuver His purposes, and you cannot sustain covenant life while tolerating compromise.

What He has spoken stands. The question is whether we will align with it.

New Testament Tie-In

In Numbers 20, we discover one of the more obvious and well-known Messianic allusions: Moses striking the rock for a second time. This biblical text is foundational to a Messianic reading of 1 Corinthians 10.1–4,

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.

The story is tragic. After forty years of preparation in the Midian desert, a dramatic and intense liberation from Egyptian oppression, and years of leading these grumbling Israelites as they wandered in the Negev desert, Moses would not enter the Promised Land!

Perhaps upon reading this story, you've felt both the sting of disappointment and a touch of angsty confusion. Why would the Lord impose such a severe consequence on His servant?

The text tells us: "But *ADONAI* said to Moses and Aaron, '**Because you did not trust in Me so as to esteem Me as holy in the eyes of Bnei-Yisrael**, therefore you will not bring this assembly into the land that I have given to them'" (Numbers 20.12 emphasis added).

In addition to the failure to trust and esteem the Lord, verse 24 tells us that God would not let Moses and Aaron enter the land because their actions were rebellious. At the very least, this story makes it abundantly clear that "the leaders of Israel were meant to be scrupulous in exact obedience to the law and God's instructions."¹ We saw this intensity in the account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10.

The Lord holds the leaders of his people to the highest of standards. Why?

While the rock symbolized (or, in Paul's words, "was") the Messiah, there are other Messianic symbols in this story, namely Moses and Aaron. In these two men, we see beautiful and compelling images of *Yeshua*, the "true and better" Moses and Aaron.

Our Savior delivered us from slavery to sin (Romans 6) and the fear of death (Hebrews 2.14–15). The Lord is also our "great High Priest ... who was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin" and "has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant" (Hebrews 4.15; 8.6 NKJV).

This deliverer and great High Priest was "scrupulous in exact obedience." *Yeshua* Himself testified: "Amen, amen I tell you, the Son cannot do anything by Himself. He can do only what He sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (John 5.19). Hence, He could rightly say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14.9b).

God holds His leaders to high standards because He gives them to His people as images meant to reveal His very self! When Moses rebelled in Numbers 20, it was destructive on at least two levels. On the surface, all rebellion is sin, and sin leads to death. But on a deeper level, Moses violated the prophetic image of the "greater than Moses" (cf. Deuteronomy 18.18) whom the Father would send as "the exact imprint of his nature" (Hebrews 1:3a ESV).

And the flesh that the eternal Son (i.e., the "Rock") assumed in John 1 would be pierced whilst hanging on Golgotha's cross in John 19. And as John the Baptist proclaimed, He truly "takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1.29).

Let us join the ancient chorus, At the Lamb's high feast we sing Praise to our victorious King, Who has washed us in the tide Flowing from his pierced side. -*The Tide from His Pierced Side* (Ambrosian Hymn Writer)²

Hebrew Word Study

parah adummah [פרה אדמה] / "red heifer"

The Hebrew phrase פרה אדמה (*parah adummāh*), or "red heifer," is one of the Torah's most mysterious and symbolically important rituals, found mainly in Numbers 19. The word *parah* means a young cow and stands for life and potential, while *adummah*, meaning "red," comes from a root that links blood, earth (אֲדָמָה, *adamah*), and humanity (אָדָם, *adam*). This color is more than just a description; it points to the shared physical nature and mortality of people.

The ritual has strict requirements: "This is the statute of the Torah which Adonai has commanded, saying: 'Speak to Bnei-Yisrael, that they bring to you a flawless red heifer, in which there is no defect and on which a yoke has never come.'" (Numbers 19:2). The heifer is taken outside the camp, slaughtered, and completely burned along with cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet thread. The ashes are then gathered and mixed with "living water" (Numbers 19:17, TLV: "For the unclean, they are to take some of the ashes of the burnt purification offering and put them in a vessel of living water."). This mixture is sprinkled on those who have come into contact with death, restoring them to purity.

This ritual is full of paradox: those who prepare the ashes become temporarily unclean, but those who receive the ashes are purified. Here, purification is not a simple transfer of cleanliness. Instead, it is a complex process that moves through defilement to bring about cleansing. The redness stands for blood and life, even though the animal's death is what addresses the impurity caused by death. The link to *Adam* and *Adamah* highlights that people are tied to the earth and mortality, making contact with death unavoidable. The *parah adummah* does not deny this fact. Instead, it provides a way, given by God, for people to return to life and worship after such experiences. The ashes, left after everything is burned, become a tool for restoration when mixed with living water. This points to a deeper idea: what is reduced to dust can, through God's command, become a source of renewal.

The rite challenges a purely rational understanding of purity and calls for reverent obedience in the face of mystery. The community does not control the logic of the ritual but receives it as given.

The language of *parah adummah* indicates that God provides means of cleansing that move through, rather than circumvent, sites of rupture. The combination of ashes and living water symbolizes life emerging from what has been surrendered, and restoration mediated through elements marked by death.

The location "outside the camp" signifies a liminal space where impurity is addressed without affecting the core of communal life. From this margin arises the agent of reintegration.

The *parah adummah* thus points to a pattern in which God encounters His people at the boundaries of their defilement and provides a path for return. Holiness, according to this design, overcomes and restores, drawing those who are defiled back into the community.

FUSION

Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

פרה אדמה

פרה אדמה / Parah Adummah / n. red heifer

The ordinance of the red heifer stands unique in the Torah. A flawless animal, “without blemish or defect and that has never been under a yoke” (Numbers 19:2), is slaughtered outside the camp; its ashes mixed with water become a cleansing agent for those defiled by death (Numbers 19:9).

The paradox—an offering that renders the pure impure and the impure pure—anticipates the substitutionary work of the Messiah Yeshua, “who suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people by His own blood” (Hebrews 13:12). Early church writers saw in the red heifer’s ashes a type of the efficacious, once-for-all sacrifice of the Savior.

Taken from Lexical Summary at biblehub.org

fusionglobal.org

THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

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

- The commandment of the red heifer reminds us that not every aspect of obedience will make complete sense to us. Are there areas in your spiritual life where you have struggled to obey because you first wanted full understanding or explanation? What might it look like to grow in trust and faithfulness even when God’s purposes remain partially hidden?
- Balak and Balaam demonstrate that what God has blessed cannot ultimately be overturned by outside opposition. Yet Israel later stumbled through compromise from within. Why do you think internal compromise can be more spiritually dangerous than external attack? Are there areas where small compromises may be weakening your spiritual life or witness?

GLOBAL

NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Pinchas* / פרשת פינחס

TORAH

Sunday: Numbers 25:10-26:4

Monday: Numbers 26:5-51

Tuesday: Numbers 26:52-27:5

Wednesday: Numbers 27:6-23

Thursday: Numbers 28:1-15

Friday: Numbers 28:16-29:11

Saturday: Numbers 29:12-30:1

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

New Covenant Reading:

John 2:13-22

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

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 113.

² Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 11-21*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 327.