

Dvar Torah: Chukkat /Balak or Fantastic Biblical Beasts and where to find (some of) them.

Ruth Ben-Or, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020

The following double parasha contains sex, violence and disrespecting your elders. There is also a bit of a circus going on featuring \*drum roll\* the rarely seen red heifer! the miraculous brass serpent! and the incredible talking donkey!

To recap: Miriam dies and so does the water supply. Moses strikes the rock which miraculously turns out to be a new source. Our people have to fight, in quick succession, the kings of Edom and Arad, Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan. Meanwhile, Eleazar succeeds Aaron as Cohen haGadol. Nobody has even a moment to mourn Miriam but in the middle of all this, they weep for Aaron for 40 days. The Exodus generation, except for Moses is dead, or that is what our ancestors would have said, had they time to sit around the shiva house and repeat platitudes (small mercies!) Perhaps it isn't a punishment so much as time for the talent of the next generation, preferably a Joshua and not a Pinchas (I was coming to that). The mourners do find time to kvetch about food and water and to become smitten with another metallic beast, this time a copper, or brass serpent, which is meant as a kind of placebo but eventually ends up as another idol. If either the red heifer or the brazen snake remind you of the golden calf, it is probably a case of the hair or the heir, of the dog that bit you.

If the aforementioned reptile casts your mind back to the Garden of Eden, you can marvel at the curative powers it has acquired but the power of speech appears to have deserted it in favour of Balaam's loquacious ass. Balaam eventually heeds her and appears to be converted but although his curses turn into blessings of military might, he forgot about moral fibre and the parasha ends with harlotry and paganism with the daughters of Moab and Pinchas's gruesome vengeance on the Israelite man and Midianite woman. The Israelite women don't appear in these scenes of debauchery but let's not ask what the sons of Israel were doing. I have to admit I never cared much for Pinchas, he has the worst combined qualities of the zealot, being a bit of a prissy-pants and a voyeur in addition to the inability to control his own behaviour. Yes, everything is in this week's Torah reading, no wonder those Godless Hollywood types love the Bible so much!

Another odd resemblance to a previous episode struck me about Miriam's well. Was she supposed to be followed around by a mobile well or did she have a talent for finding water? Obviously she was associated with water since she set her brother afloat and waited for him to be rescued but perhaps she taught him the same skill so that he had no trouble finding the right rock but with the wrong technique? Long before Miriam, however, Hagar thinks she and Ishmael will die of thirst until God opens her eyes and she sees a well. Was this another disappearing/reappearing trick or had it been there all along while she was in too much of a panic to see it. Sometimes the lesson of a fantastical variety performance is not to be so blinded by fear that you can't see what is front of your eyes. Shabbat shalom.