

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
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19

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²This is the ritual law that the LORD has commanded:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ²זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְהוָה לֵאמֹר

The Generation of the Exodus: The March to Transjordan (continued)

PURIFICATION FROM CONTAMINATION BY A CORPSE (19:1–22)

Contamination that results from contact with a corpse is mentioned elsewhere in the Torah (see, e.g., Lev. 21:1–4; Num. 6:6–13). Here, the Torah prescribes the method of purification. In this rite, the blood of an all-brown (“red”) cow is not of-

fered on the altar; it is burned together with the cow’s body, so that the ashes may be used as an ongoing instrument of purification. As in all purification offerings, the man who burns the cow becomes impure himself.

In the course of this *parashah*, Miriam dies, Aaron dies, and Moses is sentenced to die without reaching the Promised Land. A transition of generations is taking place. The narrative’s center of gravity is moving farther from Sinai and closer to the challenge of conquering the Promised Land. Soon there will be no Israelites left who actually stood at Sinai, only Israelites who have heard about it from parents and grandparents.

CHAPTER 19

Before continuing with the narrative, the Torah offers us the strange ritual of the brown (“red”) cow. It is the classic example of a law that defies rational explanation. Indeed, the general tenor of the commentaries asks us to accept this law without understanding it, as a sign of love for and trust in God. The commentators hold that it would be almost unseemly to search for a rational explanation, implying that God’s word would be acceptable only if it fit our canons of reasoning. Human failure to understand a truth does not make it any less true. The Midrash pictures King Solomon, the wisest man in the Bible, saying, “I have labored to understand the word of God and have understood it all, except for the ritual of the brown cow” (Num. R. 19:3). “These laws are decrees from God and we have no right to question them” (Num. R. 19:8). “It is more praiseworthy to do something solely because God commands it than because our own logic or sense of morality leads us to the same conclusion” (*Sifra K’doshim*). The Tosafot compare this commandment to a lover’s kiss which cannot be explained but can only be experienced (BT Av. Zar. 35a).

Yet there have been persistent efforts to uncover the lessons taught to us by this ritual. Although the Torah describes the ritual as purifying a person of contamination from contact with a dead body and nothing else, the Midrash widens the scope to include moral contamination, especially idolatry, viewing this special cow as the antidote for the sin of the Golden Calf. “Let the mother come and repair the damage the offspring has caused” (Num. R. 19:8). Ramban, noting that the passage comes immediately after the completion of the tabernacle and the challenge to Aaron’s priesthood, understands it as a way of preventing ritually unfit people from violating the sanctity of the tabernacle. Israel of Ruzhin points out that this cow purifies the impure but renders the pure impure; God similarly purifies those who approach the sanctuary in a spirit of humility with knowledge of their own inadequacies, but condemns those who come in a spirit of arrogance and a claim to perfection. A modern commentator suggests that the ritual’s purpose is psychological. To heal a person burdened by a sense of wrongdoing, who feels the purity of his or her soul has been compromised, we take an animal completely without blemish and sacrifice it, as if to imply that perfection does not belong in this world. Perfect creatures belong in heaven; this world is given to the inevitably flawed and compromised.

Because this rite is inoperative today, so that there is no way to purify the ritually contaminated, some halakhic authorities consider all Jews ritually unfit to enter the Temple Mount lest they inadvertently tread on the site where the holiest precincts of the temple once stood in Jerusalem.

Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. ³You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. ⁵The cow shall be burned in his sight—its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included—and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow. ⁷The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall be impure until evening. ⁸He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be impure until evening. ⁹A man who is pure shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a pure place, to be kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is for purification. ¹⁰He who gathers up the ashes of

דָּבַר | אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֵיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין-בָּהּ מוּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל: ³ וַנִּתַּתָּם אֵתְּהָ אֶל-אֱלֶעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְהוֹצִיא אֹתָהּ אֶל-מַחֲוֵץ לְמַחֲנֶה וְשַׁחֵט אֹתָהּ לְפָנָיו: ⁴ וּלְקָח אֱלֶעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן מִדָּמָהּ בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ וְהִזָּה אֶל-נֶכַח פָּנָיו אֶהֱלִמוּעַד מִדָּמָהּ שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים: ⁵ וְשָׂרַף אֶת-הַפָּרָה לְעֵינָיו אֶת-עֹרָהּ וְאֶת-בְּשָׂרָהּ וְאֶת-דָּמָהּ עַל-פְּרִשָׁה יִשְׂרָף: ⁶ וּלְקָח הַכֹּהֵן עֵץ אַרְזוֹ וְאִזּוֹב וְשֵׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְהִשְׁלִיךְ אֶל-תּוֹךְ שַׂרְפַת הַפָּרָה: ⁷ וְכִבֵּס בְּגָדָיו הַכֹּהֵן וְרַחֵץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְאַחֵר יָבוֹא אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וְטָמֵא הַכֹּהֵן עַד-הָעֶרֶב: ⁸ וְהִשְׂרָף אֹתָהּ יְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו בַּמַּיִם וְרַחֵץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרֶב: ⁹ וְאִסַּף אִישׁ טָהוֹר אֶת אֲפֵר הַפָּרָה וְהִנִּיחַ מַחֲוֵץ לְמַחֲנֶה בְּמָקוֹם טָהוֹר וְהִיתָה לְעֵדוּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ לְמִי נִדָּה חֲטָאת הוּא: ¹⁰ וְכִבֵּס הָאִסָּף אֶת-

THE BROWN (“RED”) COW (vv. 1–13)

2. red Hebrew: *adom*, which here probably means “brown”—for which there is no word in the Bible. The idea is to increase, symbolically, the amount of blood in the ashes.

red . . . without blemish Better: “unblemished brown.” A cow completely uniform in color, without specks of white or black or without even two black or white hairs, is extremely rare.

no yoke has been laid It must not have been used for profane purposes.

3. in his presence The cow will also be burned in the presence of Eleazar, indicating that it is imperative for the officiating priest to supervise the entire ritual.

4. sprinkle it seven times This act consecrates the cow as a purification offering.

6. priest Any priest, not just Eleazar.

hyssop, and crimson stuff Hyssop, an aromatic plant, is widespread in the land of Israel. Crimson yarn refers to the dye extracted from a “crimson worm,” used in the weaving of the sa-

cred garments of the high priest and the inner curtains of the tabernacle.

7. wash his garments and bathe his body If he bathed first, his unwashed garments would recontaminate him.

until evening Whoever handles a burnt *hattat* offering may enter the camp as soon as he has laundered his clothing and bathed (see Lev. 16:26,28), provided he does not partake of sacred food until the evening.

8. He who performed the burning It is also presumed that he who gathers up the ashes remains outside the camp until after he has laundered and bathed, precisely as the contaminated priest has done.

9. A man Not necessarily a priest.

to be kept The ashes of the brown (“red”) cow must be guarded scrupulously lest they become contaminated.

It is for purification These ashes mixed with water will be sprinkled on corpse-contaminated individuals to remove the impurity.

10. wash his clothes It is understood that he will also bathe his body.

the cow shall also wash his clothes and be impure until evening.

This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you.

¹¹He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be impure for seven days. ¹²He shall purify himself with [the ashes] on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be pure; if he fails to purify himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be pure. ¹³Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the LORD's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains impure; his impurity is still upon him.

¹⁴This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be impure seven days; ¹⁵and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be impure. ¹⁶And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone, or a grave, shall be impure seven days. ¹⁷Some of the ashes from the fire of purification shall be taken for the im-

strangers All those who dwell in the Holy Land, Israelites and non-Israelites alike, must purify themselves of corpse contamination lest they defile the sanctuary by bearing their impurity within the community.

11. seven days Similarly, in ancient Babylonia, one who came into contact with dust from a place of mourning was required to offer sacrifices to the god Shamash, to bathe, change clothing, and remain inside the house for seven days.

13. defiles the LORD's Tabernacle Severe impurity is dynamic and can attack the sanctuary through the air. Corpse-contaminated individuals who prolong their impurity have defiled the sanctuary from afar, even without entering it.

shall be cut off If the neglect was deliberate

אָפֶר הַפָּרָה אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְטָמֵא עַד־הָעֶרֶב וְהִיִּתָּה לְבִנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגְר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם:

¹¹הַנִּגָּע בְּמַת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹²הוּא יִתְחַטֵּא־בּוּ בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְיִטְהַר וְאִם־לֹא יִתְחַטֵּא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי לֹא יִטְהַר: ¹³כָּל־הַנִּגָּע בְּמַת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת־מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה טָמֵא וְנִכְרַתָּה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי מִי נָדָה לֹא־זָרֵק עָלָיו טָמֵא יִהְיֶה עוֹד טָמְאָתוֹ בּוּ:

¹⁴זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי־יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל כָּל־הַבָּא אֶל־הָאֹהֶל וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶל יִטָּמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹⁵וְכָל־כְּלִי פְתוּחַ אֲשֶׁר אֵין־צִמִּיד פְּתִיל עָלָיו טָמֵא הוּא: ¹⁶וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־יִגַּע עַל־פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּחֻלְל־חֶרֶב אִוּ בְּמַת אִוּ־בַעֲצָם אָדָם אִוּ בְּקֶבֶר יִטָּמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ¹⁷וְלִקְחוּ לְטָמֵא

(see 15:30–31). (If the neglect was accidental, a purification offering is brought.)

PURIFICATION BY SPRINKLING (vv. 14–22)

14. enters the tent The impurity emitted by the body is trapped by the roof, so to speak, and cannot rise. Hence, every person and object under the roof is contaminated.

15. every open vessel A tightly closed vessel made entirely of earthenware, however, will not admit the “vapors” of impurity given off by the corpse; its contents remain pure.

fastened down The lid is attached by cords passing through holes in it and through the handles of the vessel. Such a lid would keep the vessel tightly closed and preserve it from defilement.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

19:14. When a person dies Once the Temple was destroyed, we could not purify ourselves from this type of ritual impurity. Now all but *kohanim* may attend funerals (see Lev. 21:2). We rinse our hands upon leaving the cemetery or upon entering a house of mourning after the funeral, in symbolic recollection of this law.

pure person, and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel. ¹⁸A person who is pure shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle on the tent and on all the vessels and people who were there, or on him who touched the bones or the person who was killed or died naturally or the grave. ¹⁹The pure person shall sprinkle it upon the impure person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus purifying him by the seventh day. He shall then wash his clothes and bathe in water, and at nightfall he shall be pure. ²⁰If anyone who has become impure fails to purify himself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for he has defiled the LORD's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on him: he is impure.

²¹That shall be for them a law for all time. Further, he who sprinkled the water of lustration shall wash his clothes; and whoever touches the water of lustration shall be impure until evening. ²²Whatever that impure person touches shall be impure; and the person who touches him shall be impure until evening.

20 The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and

מֵעֵפֶר שְׂרֵפֶת הַחַטָּאת וְנָתַן עָלָיו מִיִּם שְׁנֵי חַיִּים אֶל־כֶּלִי: ¹⁸ וְלָקַח אֲזוּב וְטָבַל בְּמִים אִישׁ טָהוֹר וְהִזָּה עַל־הָאֹהֶל וְעַל־כָּל־הַכֵּלִים וְעַל־הַנְּפֹשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ־שָׁם וְעַל־הַנֶּגַע בְּעַצֶּם אֹו בְּחֶלֶל אֹו בְּמַת אֹו בְּקָבֶר: ¹⁹ וְהִזָּה הַטָּהוֹר עַל־הַטָּמֵא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְחָטְאוּ בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְכִבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ בְּמִים וְטָהַר בְּעָרֵב: ²⁰ וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִטְמָא וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִתּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל כִּי אֶת־מִקְדָּשׁ יְהוָה טָמָא מִי נִדָּה לֹא־זֶרֶק עָלָיו טָמָא הוּא:

²¹ וְהִיתָה לָהֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם וַיִּמָּזֶה מִי־הַנִּדָּה יִכַּבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְהַנֶּגַע בְּמִי הַנִּדָּה יִטְמָא עַד־הָעָרֵב: ²² וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־יִגַּע־בּוֹ הַטָּמֵא יִטְמָא וְהַנֶּפֶשׁ הַנִּגְעָת הַטָּמֵא עַד־הָעָרֵב: פ

כ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־

shall be impure Open earthenware vessels are impure forever and must be broken.

18. A person who is pure This obvious condition is made explicit to bar those who had already handled the ashes and were thereby contaminated.

on all the vessels Afterward these must undergo washing, as people must.

19. Full purification comes only after laundering and bathing.

21. See Comment to 19:10.

22. Whatever That is, anything or anyone.

FROM KADESH TO THE STEPPES OF MOAB (20:1–22:1)

THE SIN OF MOSES AND AARON (20:1–13)

After Miriam's death, the people complain about the lack of water. Moses and Aaron are com-

manded to bring forth water from the rock. They produce the water but in so doing commit a sin akin to heresy and are condemned by God to die in the wilderness.

CHAPTER 20

1. The Talmud connects Miriam's death to the preceding passage. "Just as the ashes of the

brown cow atone for sin, the death of a righteous person does the same" (BT MK 28a). In the wake of a good person's death, we are moved to re-examine our own lives.

the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

²The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. ³The people quarreled with Moses, saying, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the LORD! ⁴Why have you brought the LORD’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? ⁵Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!”

⁶Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the LORD appeared to them, ⁷and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸“You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its

צֶן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקֶדֶשׁ
וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם:

וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לַעֲדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה
וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן: ³וַיָּרֹב הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה
וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר וְלוֹ גִּוְעָנוּ בַּגּוּעַ אַחֲיֵינוּ לַפְּנֵי
יְהוָה: ⁴וְלָמָּה הֵבֵאתֶם אֶת־קְהַל יְהוָה
אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לָמוּת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ
וּבְעֵירָנוּ: ⁵וְלָמָּה הֵעַלִיתֶנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם
לְהֵבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַרָע הַזֶּה לֹא
מָקוֹם זֶרַע וַתֵּאֲנָה וְגַפְּן וְרִמּוֹן וַיְמִים אֵין
לְשִׁתּוֹת:

וַיָּבֹאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מִפְּנֵי הַקְּהָל אֶל־פְּתַח
אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיִּרְא כְבוֹד־
יְהוָה אֲלֵיהֶם: ⁷וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־
מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ⁸קַח אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה וְהַקְּהַל
אֶת־הָעֵדָה אֹתָהּ וְאַהֲרֹן אֹחֵיךָ וְדַבְּרְתֶם

שלישי
[שני]

THE DEATH OF MIRIAM (v. 1)

1. The generation of the Exodus has died out and this is the 40th year. According to 13:26, however, the Israelites had already arrived at Kadesh at the start of their sojourn in the wilderness. Some commentators suggest that after having left Kadesh they returned to it in the 40th year. Most likely, these are two variant traditions.

Miriam died there On the 10th day of the first month, according to an ancient tradition.

3. when our brothers perished During the Korahite rebellion (16:35, 17:14). Although the

people identify with the Korahite rebels, God does not punish them because their complaint is legitimate: They are dying of thirst.

6. came away from That is, in flight.

fell on their faces Out of fear.

The Presence That is, the fire-encased cloud.

8. rod Of Moses, which had been employed in the performance of God’s miracles in the wilderness (see Exod. 14:16, 17:1–7,9).

to yield its water Because of the will of God, not the rod of Moses.

2. The community was without water A legend tells of a marvelous well that sprang up wherever the Israelites camped, as a tribute to Miriam’s piety. As she waited by the waters of the Nile to see the fate of her baby brother, as she celebrated God’s power at the Sea, so was she blessed with water, a substance more valuable in the desert than gold. When she died, the well vanished.

4. When Israel was leaving Egypt, triumphant and optimistic, they saw themselves as “the LORD’s congregation.” In the midst of the wilderness, thirsty and discouraged, they seem to be saying “We who used to think of ourselves as the LORD’s congregation can now only think in terms of being thirsty, along with

our cattle.” Similarly, in verse 8, God promises to send water for “the congregation and their beasts.” This has been understood to mean that the people, desperate with thirst, were responding at virtually an animal level, no different than their cattle (*Meshekh Hokhmah*).

6–12. When Moses strikes the rock to draw water instead of speaking to it as God commanded, he is condemned to die in the wilderness. In this puzzling incident, the punishment seems grossly disproportionate to the offense. Why should Moses, who has served God so loyally for so many years through so many trying times, be so harshly punished for what seems like a minor infraction? The classic commentators labor to find in the text some justifica-

water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”

⁹Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as He had commanded him. ¹⁰Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

¹²But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm

אֶל-הַסֵּלַע לְעִינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִיַּמּוֹ וְהוֹצֵאתָ
לָהֶם מַיִם מִן-הַסֵּלַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת-הָעֵדָה
וְאֶת-בְּעִירָם:

⁹וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמַּטֵּה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה
כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: ¹⁰וַיִּקְהֵלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן
אֶת-הַקְּהָל אֶל-פְּנֵי הַסֵּלַע וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם
שָׁמְעוּ-נָא הַמְּרִים הַמִּן-הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא
לָכֶם מַיִם: ¹¹וַיִּרָם מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ
אֶת-הַסֵּלַע בַּמַּטֵּהוּ פַּעַמַיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מַיִם
רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתֶּה הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם: ס
¹²וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַל-אַהֲרֹן יַעַן

9. from before the LORD That is, from the tabernacle.

as He had commanded him This statement would have been expected before or after the account of the fulfillment of the command, not in the middle. Its “misplacement” is deliberate, however. Up to this point Moses executes God’s command; thereafter, he deviates from it.

11. twice This indicates Moses’ anger, but it is not his sin. Nor is his sin in striking the rock.

Rather, his sin is in speaking so as to imply that what follows is his miracle—not God’s.

12. trust Me Just as Israel, who did not “trust Me” (14:11), must die in the wilderness (14:23), so must Moses and Aaron.

in the sight of the Israelite people Their sin was aggravated because it was witnessed by all of Israel.

this congregation The new generation, now eligible to enter the Land—an indication that this event takes place in the 40th year.

tion for God’s being so angry with Moses (and with Aaron, who seems to be a bystander at worst). Rashi points out that Moses’ striking the rock (rather than speaking to it) diminished the greatness of the miracle. Hananel and Ramban both fasten on verse 10: “Shall we get water for you out of this rock?” This seems to imply that Moses and Aaron present themselves rather than God as the source of the miracle. And why was Aaron punished? After the first strike, he could have stopped Moses from repeating his error, but did not.

Ibn Ezra and Albo criticize Moses for “needing to be told” to work a miracle instead of being confident that God would work one for the people (after all, Moses presumed to anticipate a miracle in the showdown with Korah). Several modern commentators fault Moses for using a tactic that had worked in an earlier generation (see Exod. 17:6) but was inappropriate for this generation.

Perhaps the most persuasive explanation is that offered by Maimonides in the 12th century and Hirsch in the 19th century. Moses was punished for losing his temper and losing pa-

tience with the people, calling them “rebels,” striking the rock (and then striking it a second time) in exasperation with the people. (One suspects he would as readily have struck the complainers with his staff.) “When a prophet loses his temper, his gift of prophecy abandons him” (BT Pes. 66b).

One might conclude that God’s decree of death in the wilderness for Moses and Aaron was not so much a punishment as a recognition that their time of leadership was over. They were emotionally worn out by having led the people for so long. In some cases, there was a two-generation gap between them and their followers. Moses and Aaron were not sinners; they were the right leaders for the Exodus, for Sinai, for establishing the tabernacle. They were not the right people to lead a younger generation into battle.

11. the community and their beasts drank The people drank like beasts, each person concerned solely with easing his or her own thirst. Only when we share with others what we ourselves also crave, do we rise above the animal level and become truly human.

My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”¹³ Those are the Waters of Meribah—meaning that the Israelites quarrelled with the LORD—through which He affirmed His sanctity.

¹⁴From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us; ¹⁵that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors. ¹⁶We cried to the LORD and He heard our plea, and He sent a messenger who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. ¹⁷Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king’s highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory.”

¹⁸But Edom answered him, “You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you

13. Israelites quarrelled with the LORD They had quarrelled only with Moses, but their real object was God.

affirmed His sanctity Although Moses and Aaron defied God, God continued to supply the Israelites with water, and thereby caused His name to be sanctified in Israel.

ENCOUNTER WITH EDMOM (vv. 14–21)

After the abortive attempt to enter Canaan from the south (14:40–45; see v. 25), Israel attempts to enter from the east, across the Jordan River. To reach the Jordan from their base at Kadesh, however, they must go north through Edomite territory.

14. The text closely resembles formal address

לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישְׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכֹן לֹא תְבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי לָהֶם: ¹³ הֲמָה מִי מְרִיבָה אֲשֶׁר־רְבוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־יְהוָה וַיִּקְדַּשׁ בָּם: ח

¹⁴ וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מַלְאָכִים מִקְדָּשׁ אֶל־מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם כֹּה אָמַר אַחִיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵלֶיךָ יָדַעְתָּ אֵת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מִצְּאֲתָנוּ: ¹⁵ וַיֵּרְדוּ אֲבֹתֵינוּ מִצְרַיִם וַנֵּשֶׁב בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים רַבִּים וַיִּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא־בָתִּינוּ: ¹⁶ וַנִּצְעַק אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ וַיִּצְאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ בְּקְדָשׁ עִיר קְצָה גְבוּלְךָ: ¹⁷ נִעְבְּרָה־נָא בְּאֶרְצְךָ לֹא נֵעְבֹר בְּשָׂדֵה וּבְכָרְם וְלֹא נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר דֶּרֶךְ הַמַּלְךְ נִלְךָ לֹא נִשָּׂה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאלוֹל עַד אֲשֶׁר־נִעְבֹר גְּבוּלְךָ: ¹⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדוֹם לֹא תֵעְבֹר בִּי פֶן־

in letters that was common throughout the ancient Near East: beginning with the addressee (“to the king of Edom”), followed by the addresser (“thus speaks your brother Israel”), and then the message (“You know . . .”).

your brother The personification of a people in the singular is frequently found in direct address (see Exod. 14:26). Here the personification is that of a brother or a kinsman.

hardships Israel’s misfortunes are emphasized solely to elicit sympathy.

16. He sent a messenger Literally: “angel,” which, although at variance with the standard view, is found elsewhere (see Exod. 33:2).

17. king’s highway The main route through the length of Transjordan.

15. dealt harshly with us Hebrew: *va-yarei-u lanu*; one rabbinic rendering is: “they made us seem harsh, bad.” To justify their cruel treatment of us, they proclaimed that we were evil and deserving of persecution.

and our ancestors The reference is not only to the parents and grandparents of the current generation. When Israel suffers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah in heaven feel their pain (Num. R. 19:15).

with the sword.”¹⁹ “We will keep to the beaten track,” the Israelites said to them, “and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot—it is but a small matter.”²⁰ But they replied, “You shall not pass through!” And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed.²¹ So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them.

²²Setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites arrived in a body at Mount Hor.²³ At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the LORD said to Moses and Aaron,²⁴ “Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have assigned to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the Waters of Meribah.”²⁵ Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up on Mount Hor.²⁶ Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead.”

²⁷Moses did as the LORD had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community.²⁸ Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain,²⁹ the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last.

turning off neither Literally, “we will not stray.”

21. To avoid the land of Edom, the Israelites must now journey south toward the Red Sea.

THE DEATH OF AARON (vv. 22–29)

22. arrived On the 1st of *Av* (see 33:38).

24. gathered to his kin This idiom is used only of Israel’s forefathers, never of women or of non-Israelites. It means “reunited with his ancestors” and refers to the afterlife in Sheol.

24. Let Aaron be gathered to his kin Literally, “. . . gathered to his people.” Let his good qualities now enter into the souls of those

בְּחָרֵב אֶצְא לְקִרְאָתְךָ: ¹⁹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַסְלָה נַעֲלֶה וְאִם־מִמִּימֶיךָ נִשְׁתָּה אֲנִי וּמִקְנִי וּנְתַתִּי מִכֶּרֶם רַק אִין־דָּבָר בְּרַגְלִי אֶעְבְּרָה: ²⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תַעֲבֹר וַיֵּצֵא אֱדוֹם לְקִרְאָתוֹ בְּעַם כְּבֹד וּבְיָד חֻזְקָה: ²¹ וַיִּמָּאֵן אֱדוֹם נֹתֵן אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹבֵר בְּגִבְלוֹ וַיִּטּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעֲלָיו: פ

²² וַיִּסְעוּ מִקַּדֵּשׁ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה הַר הָהָר: ²³ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן בְּהַר הָהָר עַל־גְּבוּל אֶרֶץ־אֱדוֹם לֵאמֹר: ²⁴ יֵאָסֶף אַהֲרֹן אֶל־עַמּוּיוֹ כִּי לֹא יָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲשֶׁר־מְרִיתֶם אֶת־פִּי לְמִי מְרִיבָה: ²⁵ קַח אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וְהַעֵל אִתְּם הַר הָהָר: ²⁶ וְהַפְּשֹׁט אֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְהַלְבַּשְׁתָּם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וְאַהֲרֹן יֵאָסֶף וַיָּמָת שָׁם:

²⁷ וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיַּעֲלֶה אֶל־הָהָר הָהָר לְעֵינָי כָּל־הָעֵדָה: ²⁸ וַיִּפְּשֹׁט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ אִתָּם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וַיָּמָת אַהֲרֹן שָׁם בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּרַד מֹשֶׁה וְאֶלְעָזָר מִן־הָהָר: ²⁹ וַיִּרְאוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה כִּי גֹעַ אַהֲרֹן וַיִּכְבְּוּ

חמישי
[שלישי]

disobeyed My command To sanctify God’s name, which Moses and Aaron failed to do when they attributed the miracle to their own powers.

26. Strip Aaron of his vestments Eleazar had already been anointed as his father’s successor so that he could take his place whenever his father became incapacitated or ritually impure (see Lev. 6:15).

29. the whole community knew Because Eleazar was wearing Aaron’s garments.

living Israelites who knew him, that those qualities not be lost even after his death.

All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.

אֶת־אֶהְרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל: 8

21 When the Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelt in the Negeb, learned that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he engaged Israel in battle and took some of them captive. ²Then Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, “If You deliver this people into our hand, we will proscribe their towns.” ³The LORD heeded Israel’s plea and delivered up the Canaanites; and they and their cities were proscribed. So that place was named Hormah.

כא וַיִּשְׁמָע הַכְּנַעֲנִי מֶלֶךְ־עָרֹד יֹשֵׁב הַנֶּגֶב כִּי בָא יִשְׂרָאֵל דֶּרֶךְ הָאֲתָרִים וַיִּלָּחֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשָּׁב אֶמְנֹנוּ שָׁבִי: ² וַיִּדָּר יִשְׂרָאֵל נָדַר לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־נָתַן תַּתֵּן אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה בְּיָדֵי וְהִחַרְמֹתִי אֶת־עָרֵיהֶם: ³ וַיִּשְׁמָע יְהוָה בְּקוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי וַיִּחַרֶם אֶתְהֶם וְאֶת־עָרֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם חֶרְמָה: 9

⁴They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But

וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהַר הָהָר דֶּרֶךְ יַם־סוּף לְסַבֵּב אֶת־אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם וַתִּקְצַר נַפְש־הָעָם בְּדֶרֶךְ: ⁴

thirty days This is an indication of Aaron’s importance, because mourning ordinarily lasts for only 7 days (see Gen. 50:10). To be sure, Jacob was mourned for 70 days (Gen. 50:3), but that was in accordance with Egyptian practice.

under ban” (*heirem*). This was an extreme form of self-denial. Troops were not salaried in ancient times and were recompensed only by receiving a share of the booty. To dedicate all booty to God is an act of selflessness intended to win the support of the deity.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE CANAANITES (21:1–3)

THE BRONZE SNAKE (vv. 4–9)

Israel “turns away” from the Edomites (20:21) and encounters the Canaanites of the Negeb.

While rounding the land of Edom near the Red Sea, the Israelites fall to complaining once again about the lack of food and water. This, the last of Israel’s wilderness complaints, is the most grievous, because this time it is in open defiance of the Lord Himself.

1. dwelt Hebrew: *yoshev*; also be understood as “ruled.”

2. Israel For the vow to be effective it had to be taken by every soldier.

proscribe Hebrew: *v’haḥaramti*; literally, “put

4. Sea of Reeds Hebrew: *yam suf*. Here it refers to the Red Sea. (The Israelites had crossed the

29. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron In contrast, later (Deut. 34:8) we will read that “Israelites [but not all Israel] bewailed Moses.” Moses, the voice of judgment, was respected—but Aaron the peacemaker was universally loved.

CHAPTER 21

1. learned Literally, “heard.” What did the king of Arad hear? That Aaron and Miriam had died. At that point he attacked Israel, suspecting that without those two righteous leaders,

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH
20:29. thirty days This verse and Deut. 34:8 are the biblical precedents for the 30-day mourning period of *sh'loshim*. For 30 days after burial (*sh'loshim*), the bereaved (the spouse, siblings, children, and parents of the deceased) do not attend dances or parties, although they may attend a wedding ceremony (BT MK 22b). Shaving is also prohibited except if necessary to earn a living, and then only after *shiv-ah*, the first 7 days of mourning. Informational radio and television programing is permitted to the mourner during *sh'loshim*. For children mourning parents, the mourning practices extend for 12 months, except that reciting the mourner’s *Kaddish* ends after 11 months.

the people grew restive on the journey,⁵ and the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.”⁶ The LORD sent *seraph* serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!” And Moses interceded for the people.⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a *seraph* figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover.”⁹ Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover.

וַיִּדְבֹר הָעָם בְּאֱלֹהִים וּבַמֶּשֶׁה לָמָּה⁵
הָעֵלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי אֵין
לֶחֶם וְאֵין מַיִם וְנִפְשָׁנוּ קָצָה בַלֶּחֶם
הַקָּלָקָל׃⁶ וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה בָּעָם אֶת־הָעֵם
הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשֶּׂרָפִים וַיִּנְשָׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם
וַיָּמָת עִם־רַב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל׃⁷ וַיָּבֹא הָעָם
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חָטָאנוּ כִּי־דִבַּרְנוּ
בְּיְהוָה וּבְךָ הַתְּפַלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּסֶּר
מֵעַלֵינוּ אֶת־הַנְּחָשׁ וַיִּתְּפַלֵּל מֹשֶׁה בְּעַד
הָעָם׃⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לְךָ
שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל־גֹּסֶס וְהָיָה כָּל־הַנִּשְׁוֹף
וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָי׃⁹ וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נְחָשׁ נְחָשֶׁת
וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל־הַגֹּסֶס וְהָיָה אִם־נִשְׁוֹף הַנְּחָשׁ
אֶת־אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל־נְחָשׁ הַנְּחָשֶׁת וְחָי׃

וַיִּסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאֶבֶת׃¹⁰ שׁי

¹⁰The Israelites marched on and encamped

Sea of Reeds upon leaving Egypt; see Exod. 13:18, 15:4,22.)

5. the people spoke against God and against Moses The opposite of Israel’s attitude when they crossed the Sea of Reeds: “they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses” (Exod. 14:31).

6. *seraph* The verb *saraf* means “burn.” Here it refers to the serpent’s poisonous bite.

8. *seraph figure* A winged snake similar to the Egyptian winged cobra. Its image, engraved on a bronze bowl inscribed with a Hebrew name,

was found in the excavation of the royal palace of Nineveh, dating to the end of the 8th century B.C.E. It was believed that looking at it would generate healing. Note, too, that winged snakes are found on many Judahite seals of the pre-exilic period. Contrast this with the winged angelic beings in Isa. 6.

9. *copper* Hebrew: *n’hoshet*; better: “bronze” (see Comment to Exod. 25:3). Note the wordplay between it and *nahash* (serpent). Abравал explains that the color of the poisonous snakes could be imitated only by *n’hoshet*.

Israel’s morale and sense of unity would falter (Israel of Ruzhin).

6. Why are the Israelites punished with serpents for the sin of complaining? Tradition has it that because the serpent caused Adam and Eve to transgress by means of clever words, the serpent would always be the instrument of punishing people who sin with words (Num. R. 19:22). Why did Moses’ bronze serpent heal them? According to the Mishnah, it directed the people’s thoughts heavenward as they looked up at it (RH 3:8), just as Moses’ raised arms directed people’s attention heavenward in their battle with Amalek (Exod. 17:11). The *Zohar* explains that looking at the bronze ser-

pent reminded the people of why they deserved to be punished, and that is the first step toward repentance and forgiveness (*Sh’lah* 175). Finally, Hirsch suggests that the image of the serpent reminded people of how dangerous the journey through the wilderness was, and how much they depended on God to guide them through it.

In anti-idolatry reforms, King Hezekiah destroyed Moses’ bronze serpent, because it had become an object of veneration (2 Kings 18:4). Religion often runs the risk of having people ascribe excessive holiness to one of God’s instruments, losing sight of God to whom it points.

at Oboth. ¹¹They set out from Oboth and encamped at Iye-abarim, in the wilderness bordering on Moab to the east. ¹²From there they set out and encamped at the wadi Zered. ¹³From there they set out and encamped beyond the Arnon, that is, in the wilderness that extends from the territory of the Amorites. For the Arnon is the boundary of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites. ¹⁴Therefore the Book of the Wars of the LORD speaks of "...Waheb in Suphah, and the wadis: the Arnon ¹⁵with its tributary wadis, stretched along the settled country of Ar, hugging the territory of Moab..."

¹⁶And from there to Beer, which is the well where the LORD said to Moses, "Assemble the people that I may give them water." ¹⁷Then Israel sang this song:

Spring up, O well—sing to it—

¹⁸The well which the chieftains dug,
Which the nobles of the people started
With maces, with their own staffs.

And from Midbar to Mattanah, ¹⁹and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, ²⁰and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland.

THE ROUTE THROUGH TRANSJORDAN (vv. 10–20)

This section offers a summary of the stations of Israel's march through Transjordan, given in fuller form in 33:41–49.

12. wadi Zered A "wadi" is a ravine through which a stream flows. (The word is from Arabic; in Hebrew it is *nahal*.) In present-day Israel most wadis are dry except during the rainy season. The wadi Zered (present-day Wadi el-Hesa), however, contains a perennial stream; it is 35 miles (56 km) long and flows into the southeastern end of the Dead Sea.

13. Arnon A perennial stream flowing mid-way into the eastern end of the Dead Sea through

¹¹ וַיִּסְעוּ מֵאֹבֹת וַיֵּחָנוּ בְּעֵי הַעֲבָרִים
בְּמִדְבַּר אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי מוֹאָב מִמְזֻרַח
הַשָּׁמַשׁ: ¹² מִשָּׁם נָסְעוּ וַיֵּחָנוּ בְּנַחַל זֶרֶד:
¹³ מִשָּׁם נָסְעוּ וַיֵּחָנוּ מֵעֵבֶר אֲרֹנוֹן אֲשֶׁר
בְּמִדְבַּר הַיַּצָּא מִגְּבוּל הָאֱמֹרִי כִּי אֲרֹנוֹן
גְּבוּל מוֹאָב בֵּין מוֹאָב וּבֵין הָאֱמֹרִי:
¹⁴ עַל-כֵּן יֵאמָר בְּסֵפֶר מִלְחָמֹת יְהוָה
אֶת-וְהָב בְּסוּפָהּ וְאֶת-הַנְּחָלִים אֲרֹנוֹן:
¹⁵ וְאֲשֶׁר הַנְּחָלִים אֲשֶׁר נָטָה לְשֵׁבֶת עַר
וַנִּשְׁעַן לְגְבוּל מוֹאָב:

¹⁶ וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֵרָה הוּא הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר
יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה אֲסֹף אֶת-הָעָם וְאֶתְנַה לָּהֶם
מַיִם: ¹⁷ אַז יִשְׁרַח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-
הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת

עָלֵי בְּאֵר עֲנוּ-לָהּ:

¹⁸ בְּאֵר חֲפְרוּהָ שָׂרִים

כְּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעָם

בְּמַחֲקֵק בְּמִשְׁעָנֹתָם

וּמִמִּדְבַּר מִתְּנָה: ¹⁹ וּמִמִּתְּנָה נַחְלִיאל
וּמִנַּחְלִיאל בְּמוֹת: ²⁰ וּמִבְּמוֹת הַגִּיאָ אֲשֶׁר
בְּשֻׁדָּה מוֹאָב רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וַנִּשְׁקָפָה עַל-

פְּנֵי הַיַּם יָמֵן: פ

שביעי
[רביעי]

the Wadi el-Mujib, a tremendous ravine that at one point is 2.5 miles (4 km) wide and 1650 feet (500 m) below the tops of the adjoining cliffs. The Arnon unites the waters of a complex of wadis.

territory The Israelites marched in the wilderness that lies to the east of the territories of the Moabites and Amorites.

14. Book of the Wars of the LORD According to Ibn Ezra, this was a separate book which, like the Book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18), was an anthology of early songs describing the saga of Israel's battles at the beginning of its national existence.

17. Then Israel sang Similar words introduce the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1).

¹⁷ Encouraged by early military victories, sustained by having found oases in the wilder-

ness, Israel is now a singing community, grateful and reinvigorated.

²¹Israel now sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, ²²“Let me pass through your country. We will not turn off into fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king’s highway until we have crossed your territory.” ²³But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. Sihon gathered all his people and went out against Israel in the wilderness. He came to Jahaz and engaged Israel in battle. ²⁴But Israel put them to the sword, and took possession of their land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as [Az] of the Ammonites, for Az marked the boundary of the Ammonites. ²⁵Israel took all those towns. And Israel settled in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon and all its dependencies.

²⁶Now Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against a former king of Moab and taken all his land from him as far as the Arnon. ²⁷Therefore the bards would recite:

“Come to Heshbon; firmly built
And well founded is Sihon’s city.

²⁸For fire went forth from Heshbon,
Flame from Sihon’s city,
Consuming Ar of Moab,
The lords of Bamoth by the Arnon.

²⁹Woe to you, O Moab!

VICTORY OVER SIHON (vv. 21–32)

Moving northward along the eastern (wilderness) edge of Moab, Israel now seeks peaceful passage through the Amorite kingdom of Sihon as it did with Edom. Sihon confronts Israel with an armed force.

21. Israel now sent messengers Either at Moab’s boundary from Iye-abarim (v. 11) or from the ford of the Arnon, which separates the Moabites and the Amorites (v. 13).

24. put them to the sword That is, Sihon’s army. **Jabbok** One of the main eastern tributaries of the Jordan River.

25. its dependencies Literally, “its daughters.” In this and in similar contexts, the distinc-

²¹ וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל מַלְאָכִים אֶל-סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ-הָאֱמֹרִי לֵאמֹר: ²² אֶעֱבְרָה בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא נֹטֶה בְּשָׂדֵה וּבְכָרֶם לֹא נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר בְּדַרְךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ נִלְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר-נִעְבֵּר גְּבֻלְךָ: ²³ וְלֹא-נִתַּן סִיחֹן אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹבֵר בְּגְבֻלוֹ וַיֵּאסֹף סִיחֹן אֶת-כָּל-עַמּוֹ וַיֵּצֵא לְקִרְאֵת יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיָּבֵא יְהֻצָּה וַיִּלָּחֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: ²⁴ וַיַּכֵּהוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפִי-חֶרֶב וַיִּירֹשׁ אֶת-אַרְצוֹ מֵאֲרֹנָן עַד-יַבֹּק עַד-בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן: ²⁵ וַיִּקַּח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל-הָעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל-עָרֵי הָאֱמֹרִי בְּחֶשְׁבּוֹן וּבְכָל-בְּנֵי-חֵיה: ²⁶ כִּי חֶשְׁבּוֹן עִיר סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי הוּא וְהוּא נִלְחָם בְּמֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיִּקַּח אֶת-כָּל-אַרְצוֹ מִיַּדוֹ עַד-אֲרֹנָן: ²⁷ עַל-כֵּן יֹאמְרוּ הַמְּשָׁלִים:

בָּאוּ חֶשְׁבּוֹן תַּבְּנָה

וְתִכְוֹנֵן עִיר סִיחֹן:

²⁸ כִּי-אֵשׁ יִצְאָה מִחֶשְׁבּוֹן

לְהִבָּה מִקִּרְיַת סִיחֹן

אֶכְלָה עַר מוֹאָב

בְּעַלְי בָּמוֹת אֲרֹנָן:

²⁹ אוֹי-לְךָ מוֹאָב

tion between “mother” and “daughter” is that between walled city and open village.

27. bards Hebrew: *ha-moshlim*, those who recite *m’shalim* (sing. *mashal*)—from the stem *משל* (to be like). *M’shalim* included proverb, parable, riddle, and allegory. They could vary from pithy folk maxims to longer artistic compositions, such as Job’s discourses and the contents of the Book of Proverbs. They also included taunt songs mocking a foe, such as the following poem, which first recalls the gloating of the newly defeated Amorites over the previously defeated Moabites.

28. fire went forth This image is frequently used for a ravaging army.

Ar A city or district near the Arnon River.

29. Woe Hebrew: *oi*, which also occurs as

You are undone, O people of Chemosh!
His sons are rendered fugitive
And his daughters captive
By an Amorite king, Sihon.”

³⁰Yet we have cast them down utterly,
Heshbon along with Dibon;
We have wrought desolation at Nophah,
Which is hard by Medeba.

³¹So Israel occupied the land of the Amorites.

³²Then Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its dependencies and dispossessed the Amorites who were there.

³³They marched on and went up the road to Bashan, and King Og of Bashan, with all his people, came out to Edrei to engage them in battle.
³⁴But the LORD said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I give him and all his people and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites who dwelt in Heshbon.” ³⁵They defeated him and his sons and all his people, until no remnant was left him; and they took possession of his country.

אָבְדָתָ עַם־כְּמוֹשׁ
נָתַן בָּנָיו פְּלִיטִים
וּבְנֹתָיו בְּשִׁבִית
לְמֶלֶךְ אַמְרֵי סִיחֹן:
וַנִּירָם אָבֶד
חֶשְׁבֹן עַד־דִּיבּוֹן
וּנְשִׁים עַד־נֹפַח
אֲשֶׁר * עַד־מִידְבָּא:

³¹ וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הָאֲמֹרִי: ³² וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְרַגֵּל אֶת־יַעֲזֹר וַיִּלְכְּדוּ בְּנֵי־יִירָשׁ וַיִּירָשׁ אֶת־הָאֲמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם:

³³ וַיִּפְּנוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ דֶרֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן וַיֵּצֵא עוֹג מֶלֶךְ־הַבָּשָׁן לִקְרֹאתָם הוּא וְכָל־עַמּוֹ לְמַלְחָמָה אֲדָרְעִי: ³⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־תִּירָא אֹתוֹ כִּי בְיָדִי נָתַתִּי אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ וְאֶת־אֶרְצוֹ וְעָשִׂיתָ לוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב בְּחֶשְׁבֹן: ³⁵ וַיִּכּוּ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ עַד־בְּלַתִּי הַשְּׂאִיר־לוֹ שְׂרִיד

v. 30. נקוד על ר

hoi. Exclaimed when facing death (1 Kings 13:30; Jer. 22:18) or predicting catastrophe (Isa. 3:9,11).
people of Chemosh Chemosh was the national deity of Moab. The phrase refers to the Moabites, just as the Israelites are called “the people of YHVH.”

are rendered Literally, “he rendered.” The god Chemosh willingly surrenders his subjects. In the ancient Near East, a nationwide disaster was often considered the result of a decision made by the national deity.

VICTORY OVER OG (vv. 33–35)

The campaign against Og differs from that against Sihon. No messengers are sent requesting passage, because the way across the Jordan has already been secured with the victory over Sihon. Also, whereas the battle against Sihon is undertaken at Israel’s initiative (the name of God does not appear in vv. 21–32), here the campaign against Og is expressly commis-

sioned by the Lord (v. 34). The land of Og, in contrast to Sihon’s land, is part of the Promised Land, which includes the Bashan (34:10–11). Thus the Lord commands the conquest of the Bashan as part of the conquest of Canaan.

33. Bashan This includes the area bounded by Mount Hermon to the north, Jebel Druze to the east, the hills east of the Sea of Galilee to the west, extending to about six miles (10 km) south of the Yarmuk River.

Og An Amorite. The prophet Amos described the Amorites as a people “Whose stature was like the cedar’s / And who was stout as the oak” (Amos 2:9). Og himself was remembered as the last of the giant Rephaim (Deut. 3:11; see also 2 Sam. 21:16–22).

Edrei Identified with modern Der’a, it was located near the Yarmuk River and the desert, probably at the southeast border of Og’s kingdom.

22 ¹The Israelites then marched on and encamped in the steppes of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho.

וַיִּירָשׁוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ מוֹאָב: וַיִּסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּעַרְבֹת מוֹאָב מֵעֵבֶר לְיַרְדֵּן יְרִיחוֹ: * ס

22:1. This verse is a transition to the last third of the Book of Numbers, which deals with events that occurred and laws that were given at the banks of the Jordan before entry into the Promised Land. The point of origin of this last stage of the march is not given.

steppes of Moab The eastern portion of the lower Jordan plain before it empties into the Dead Sea.

opposite Jericho At the point of the Jordan River located at Jericho.

* For the haftarah for this portion, see p. 909.

BALAK

²Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

³Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites,⁴ and Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.”

Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time,⁵ sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, “There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me.⁶ Come then, put a curse upon this people

בלק

וַיִּרְא בַלָּק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמְרֵי:

וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעַם מְאֹד כִּי רַב־הוּא וַיִּקְץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל־זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן עֲתֵה יִלְחֲכוּ הַקְהָל אֶת־כָּל־סִבִּיבֵיתֵינוּ כַּלְחֶף הַשּׁוֹר אֶת יֵרֶק הַשָּׂדֶה

וּבַלָּק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר מָלֵךְ לְמוֹאָב בִּעַת הַהוּא: ⁵ וַיִּשְׁלַח מִלְאָכִים אֶל־בַּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר פְּתוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַנְּהַר אַרְצָה בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹ לְקַרְאֵל לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה עִם יִצְאָ מִמִּצְרַיִם הִנֵּה כֹסֵה אֶת־עֵינָי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יִשָּׁב מִמִּלִּי: ⁶ וְעֲתֵה לְכֹה־נָא אָרְה־לִּי אֶת־

BALAAM THE DIVINER (22:2–24:25)

THE HIRING OF BALAAM (22:2–21)

2. Amorites The kingdom of Sihon, mentioned in 21:21,25–26,31–32.

4. elders of Midian Midian was a confederation of peoples, some of whom may have been ruled by the Moabite king.

5. Pethor Identified with Pitru on the Sajur River, a tributary of the Euphrates, some 12 miles (20 km) south of Carchemish. It was at least a

20-day journey from Pethor to Moab, a distance of about 400 miles (640 km). Because the text records four such journeys, the traveling would have taken about three months.

it hides the earth from view Israel is compared with a locust plague, a common simile for an invading army.

6. Balaam’s curse is expected to weaken the Israelites so that Moab can defeat them in battle and expel them from its land.

This *parashah* contains what may be the only comic passage in the Torah. It tells how Balaam, reputedly the world’s most powerful wizard, cannot find his way out of his own neighborhood, and how his attempts to curse Israel are turned into blessings in his mouth. The overall message, however, is a serious one: God continues to watch over Israel and extend divine protection to them, despite their recalcitrant behavior and lack of appreciation. Human efforts to harm the people Israel will not prevail.

This story’s most memorable feature is the talking donkey. Here, as in so many tales in folklore when animals behave like humans, it raises questions: “What does it mean to be human? What makes us different from other animals?” Seeing the angel blocking the path, the

donkey can recognize, better than Balaam does, that what they are setting out to do is wrong. Human beings should have the capacity to know right from wrong. When temptation and weakness blind us to the wrongness of what we are doing, we are no better than dumb animals.

Some rabbinical sources see Balaam as an authentic prophet, sent to the gentiles as Moses was sent to the Israelites. For that reason, his incantations were to be feared and God had to change his curses into blessings. Others see Balaam as a pathetic, arrogant fraud whose only successful trick was to fool himself into believing that God approved of his intentions. “When the gift of prophecy was given to the gentile nations, many of them misused it, seeking to destroy rather than to bless” (Tanḥ. 1).

for me, since they are too numerous for me; perhaps I can thus defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

⁷The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, versed in divination, set out. They came to Balaam and gave him Balak’s message. ⁸He said to them, “Spend the night here, and I shall reply to you as the LORD may instruct me.” So the Moabite dignitaries stayed with Balaam.

⁹God came to Balaam and said, “What do these people want of you?” ¹⁰Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ¹¹Here is a people that came out from Egypt and hides the earth from view. Come now and curse them for me; perhaps I can engage them in battle and drive them off.” ¹²But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not curse that people, for they are blessed.”

¹³Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak’s dignitaries, “Go back to your own country,

הָעַם הַזֶּה כִּי־עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוּלַי אוּכַל נִפְהֶבּוּ וְאֶגְרֹשְׁנוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־תְּבָרֵךְ מְבָרֵךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תִּאָּר יוֹאָר:

⁷וַיֵּלְכוּ זְקֵנֵי מוֹאָב וְזְקֵנֵי מִדְיָן וְקִסְמִים בְּיָדָם וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־בַּלְעָם וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלָיו דְּבָרֵי בַלָּק: ⁸וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם לִינּוּ פֹה הַלְלִילָה וְהִשְׁבֹּתִי אֶתְכֶם דְּבַר כַּאֲשֶׁר יִדְבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלַי וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שְׂרֵי־מוֹאָב עִם־בַּלְעָם:

⁹וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בַּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה עִמָּךְ: ¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים בַּלָּק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב שָׁלַח אֵלָי: ¹¹הִנֵּה הָעַם הַיֵּצֵא מִמִּצְרָיִם וַיִּכַּס אֶת־עֵין הָאָרֶץ עֵתָה לְכָה קָבָה־לִּי אֹתוֹ אוּלַי אוּכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ וְגִרְשָׁתִיו: ¹²וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בַּלְעָם לֹא תִלְךָ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תֹאֵר אֶת־הָעַם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא:

¹³וַיָּקָם בַּלְעָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־שְׂרֵי בַלָּק לְכוּ אֶל־אַרְצְכֶם כִּי מֵאֵן יְהוָה

שני
[חמישי]

7. versed in divination The Hebrew idiom may mean that they took divinatory materials with them. The text emphasizes that Balaam is a diviner (one who predicts the future), not a sorcerer (one who alters the future through cursing and blessing), as Balak makes him out to be.

8. Spend the night Thus Balaam might receive a divine message in a dream.

9. What do these people want God, of course knows, but uses this rhetorical question to open a conversation (as in Gen. 3:9, 4:9).

12. they are blessed They are already blessed

from the time of the patriarchs, and the blessing cannot be reversed by a curse.

13. Balaam arose in the morning Evidently, God appeared to him in the night.

the LORD will not let me go Balaam omits the full reason—that cursing Israel is futile—not because he hoped later to change God’s mind but because it would have brought the episode to an end had the emissaries reported this reason to Balak.

the LORD It was not unusual for a non-Israelite to invoke the name of Israel’s God. Abimelech the Philistine did that in Gen. 26:28.

“The opposition between God and the sorcerer is the opposition between the true Deity and human wisdom. Sorcery is one of the heathen arts, grounded in people’s believing in their own power to force God to reveal the divine secrets” (Y. Kaufmann).

CHAPTER 22

2–20. The first mention of Balak (v. 2) does not describe him as a king. One account has

him beginning as a courtier who seized the throne by manipulating people’s fear of Israel (H. Soloveichik).

Why didn’t Balak hire Balaam to bless his own people rather than to curse Israel (since “whom you bless is blessed indeed,” v. 6)? He was so consumed by hatred that he forgot about his people’s needs and could think only about hurting his enemy (*Beit Ramah*).

In verse 12, God tells Balaam not to go, so

for the LORD will not let me go with you.”¹⁴The Moabite dignitaries left, and they came to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”

¹⁵Then Balak sent other dignitaries, more numerous and distinguished than the first. ¹⁶They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: Please do not refuse to come to me. ¹⁷I will reward you richly and I will do anything you ask of me. Only come and damn this people for me.” ¹⁸Balaam replied to Balak’s officials, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. ¹⁹So you, too, stay here overnight, and let me find out what else the LORD may say to me.” ²⁰That night God came to Balaam and said to him, “If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do.”

²¹When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass and departed with the Moabite dig-

לְתַתִּי לְהִלָּךְ עִמָּכֶם : ¹⁴ וַיִּקְוּמוּ שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-בָּלָק וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֵן בְּלַעַם הִלָּךְ עִמָּנוּ :

¹⁵ וַיִּסַּף עוֹד בָּלָק שְׁלַח שָׂרִים רַבִּים וַנִּכְבְּדִים מֵאֵלֶּה : ¹⁶ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ כֹּה אָמַר בָּלָק בֶּן-צִפּוֹר אֶל-נָא תִמְנַע מִהִלָּךְ אֵלַי : ¹⁷ כִּי-כַבֵּד אֶכְבְּדְךָ מֵאִדּ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמַר אֵלַי אֶעֱשֶׂה וְלִכְהֵ-נָא קְבֹה-לִי אֵת הָעַם הַזֶּה : ¹⁸ וַיַּעַן בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמַר אֶל-עַבְדֵי בָלָק אִם-יִתֶּן-לִי בָלָק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוֹכֵל לַעֲבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת קִטְנָה אוֹ גְדוּלָה : ¹⁹ וְעַתָּה שָׁבוּ נָא בְּזַה גַּם-אַתֶּם הַלַּיְלָה וְאִדְעָה מִה-יִסַּף יְהוָה דְבַר עִמִּי : ²⁰ וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בְּלַעַם לִילָה וַיֹּאמַר לוֹ אִם-לִקְרֹא לְךָ בָּאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים קוּם לְךָ אַתֶּם וְאִךְ אֶת-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ אַתּוֹ תַעֲשֶׂה :

²¹ וַיָּקָם בְּלַעַם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת-אַתָּנוֹ שְׁלִישִׁי

14. The emissaries do not mention that the Lord is the author of Balaam’s refusal. The narrator may be indicating that the Moabites were so convinced of Balaam’s inherent power to curse Israel that they regarded Balaam’s reliance on the Lord as an excuse to back out.

17. I will reward you richly Literally, “I will honor you greatly.” This is a euphemism for monetary rewards, as the next verse makes explicit.

18. The LORD my God This affirmation might explain why Moab sought the help of Balaam even though the seer lived so far away. Perhaps Moab believed that Balaam’s allegiance to

and intimacy with Israel’s God would stand him in good stead as he attempted to persuade God to curse His people Israel.

19. what else Perhaps the Lord will change His mind. Such indeed is the unspoken premise behind all forms of divination. The same ritual procedures are repeated until a favorable omen is received. Even in dream interpretation, a single dream is not decisive. Thus Balaam can sincerely hope that in his second dream he will learn that the Lord has changed His mind.

20. That night God came to Balaam That is, in a dream.

he spurns the Moabite invitation. Balak sends a second delegation, adding an element not mentioned by the first: “I will reward you richly” (v. 17). Can we see Balaam’s dream in verse 20 as arising from a repressed wish to accept the assignment? Did the wizard, blinded by the prospect of riches, fool himself into believing that Balak’s request was legitimate? In the view of Maimonides, based on a comment in the Midrash, God did not simply give Balaam permission to go, but gave

him permission to exercise his free will. As the Midrash puts it, “I desire not the destruction of the wicked, but since you are bent on following this path that will lead to your destruction, I will not prevent you from doing so” (Num. R. 20:12).

21. Balaam saddled his ass The Sages take this as implying his great eagerness to set forth. **departed with the Moabite dignitaries** Suggests that he was fully with them in intent (BT Sanh. 105b).

nitaries. ²²But God was incensed at his going; so an angel of the LORD placed himself in his way as an adversary.

He was riding on his she-ass, with his two servants alongside, ²³when the ass caught sight of the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. The ass swerved from the road and went into the fields; and Balaam beat the ass to turn her back onto the road. ²⁴The angel of the LORD then stationed himself in a lane between the vineyards, with a fence on either side. ²⁵The ass, seeing the angel of the LORD, pressed herself against the wall and squeezed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he beat her again. ²⁶Once more the angel of the LORD moved forward and stationed himself on a spot so narrow that there was no room to swerve right or left. ²⁷When the ass now saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam was furious and beat the ass with his stick.

²⁸Then the LORD opened the ass's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" ²⁹Balaam said to the ass, "You have made a mockery of me! If I had a sword with me, I'd

וַיִּלְךָ עִם־שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב׃ ²² וַיַּחַר־אַף אֱלֹהִים כִּי־הוֹלֵךְ הוּא וַיִּתְנַצֵּב מִלְּאָף יְהוָה בְּדַרְךָ לְשָׁטוֹן לוֹ וְהוּא רָכַב עַל־אַתְנֹו וּשְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו עִמּוֹ׃ ²³ וַתֵּרָא הָאֱתוֹן אֶת־מִלְּאָף יְהוָה נֹצֵב בְּדַרְךָ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלוּפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַתִּט הָאֱתוֹן מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ וַתֵּלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּךְ בְּלֶעָם אֶת־הָאֱתוֹן לְהִטְתָּהּ הַדֶּרֶךְ׃ ²⁴ וַיַּעֲמֹד מִלְּאָף יְהוָה בְּמִשְׁעוֹל הַכְּרָמִים גְּדֵר מְזֵה וְגֵדֵר מְזֵה׃ ²⁵ וַתֵּרָא הָאֱתוֹן אֶת־מִלְּאָף יְהוָה וַתִּלְחָץ אֶל־הַקִּיר וַתִּלְחָץ אֶת־רִגְלָהּ בְּלֶעָם אֶל־הַקִּיר וַיִּסֹּף לְהַפְתָּהּ׃ ²⁶ וַיּוֹסֶף מִלְּאָף־יְהוָה עֲבוֹר וַיַּעֲמֹד בְּמָקוֹם צָר אֲשֶׁר אֵין־דֶּרֶךְ לַנְּטוֹת יָמִין וּשְׂמָאוֹל׃ ²⁷ וַתֵּרָא הָאֱתוֹן אֶת־מִלְּאָף יְהוָה וַתִּרְבֹּץ תַּחַת בְּלֶעָם וַיַּחַר־אַף בְּלֶעָם וַיִּךְ אֶת־הָאֱתוֹן בַּמֶּקֶל׃

²⁸ וַיִּפְתַּח יְהוָה אֶת־פִּי הָאֱתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבִלְעָם מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִכִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים׃ ²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלֶעָם לְאֱתוֹן כִּי הִתְעַלְלִית בִּי לֹו יִשְׁחָרֵב בְּיָדֵי כִּי עַתָּה

BALAAAM AND THE ASS (vv. 22–35)

22. But God was incensed Balaam's compliance indicates his eagerness to curse Israel, arousing the anger of God.

two servants Balak's officials have disappeared.

23. into the fields Implies that the fields had no fences along the road.

24. a lane Perhaps a hollowed-out furrow that served as a path.

fence Literally, "a wall of stones."

25. wall That is, the surface of the stony fence.

beat her again The first time was for a purpose—to get the ass back on the road. Here,

the lack of purpose serves to indicate that Balaam struck the ass in sheer anger. The story about the ass lampoons Balaam, making him out to be a fool.

27. When the ass now saw For the third time, in contrast to Balaam's persistent blindness.

with his stick An index of his mounting anger; perhaps previously he struck with his hand or a strap.

28. The LORD opened the ass's mouth That is, God gave the ass the power of speech. Note that the use of fables—stories of talking animals or plants—is rare in the Bible (see Gen. 3:1–5; for Jotham's see Judg. 9:7–15).

29. If I had a sword The irony rests in the

²⁵. A rabbinical tradition identifies this wall with the pile of stones erected by Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:51), each promising never to cross that point with hostile intent toward

the other. Balaam, identified as a descendant of Laban the Aramean (see Num. 23:7), is about to violate that accord.

29. If I had a sword This sorcerer, who is

kill you.”³⁰The ass said to Balaam, “Look, I am the ass that you have been riding all along until this day! Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?” And he answered, “No.”

³¹Then the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed right down to the ground. ³²The angel of the LORD said to him, “Why have you beaten your ass these three times? It is I who came out as an adversary, for the errand is obnoxious to me. ³³And when the ass saw me, she shied away because of me those three times. If she had not shied away from me, you are the one I should have killed, while sparing her.” ³⁴Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I erred because I did not know that you were standing in my way. If you still disapprove, I will turn back.” ³⁵But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you.” So Balaam went on with Balak’s dignitaries.

הַרְגִּיתִּי: ³⁰וַתֹּאמֶר הָאֲתוֹן אֶל-בְּלָעַם הַלּוֹא אֲנֹכִי אֲתֹנְךָ אֲשֶׁר-רִכַּבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדךָ עַד-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הֲהִסְפֵּן הַסִּפְנָתִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לְךָ כֹּה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא:

³¹וַיִּגַּל יְהוָה אֶת-עֵינָיו בְּלָעַם וַיֵּרֶא אֶת-מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה נֹצֵב בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְחֶרֶב בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לְאִפְיוֹ: ³²וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה עַל-מָה הִכִּיתָ אֶת-אֲתֹנְךָ זֶה שְׁלוֹשׁ רְגָלִים הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי יֹצֵאתִי לְשִׁטְן כִּי-יִרַט הַדֶּרֶךְ לְנֹגְדִי: ³³וַתִּרְאַנִי הָאֲתוֹן וַתִּטּ לִפְנֵי זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ רְגָלִים אוּלַי נִטַּתָּה מִפְּנֵי כִּי עֲתָה גַם-אֲתִכֶּה* הָרְגִיתִי וְאוֹתָהּ הַחַיִּיתִי: ³⁴וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלָעַם אֶל-מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה חָטָאתִי כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה נֹצֵב לְקִרְאתִי בַדֶּרֶךְ וְעֲתָה אִם-רַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲשׁוּבָה לִּי: ³⁵וַיֹּאמֶר מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֶל-בְּלָעַם לֵךְ עִם-הָאֲנָשִׁים וְאַפֵּס אֶת-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אָדַבְרָ אֵלֶיךָ אֲתוֹ תִדְבַּר וַיִּלֶךְ בְּלָעַם עִם-שָׂרֵי בְלָק:

v. 33. יתיר ה'

fact that the sword Balaam seeks is close at hand with the angel, whom he, the seer, cannot see.

30. Have I been in the habit Balaam’s impetuous rage is answered by the considered and justifiable argument of the ass.

31. the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes The wording is deliberate, a sardonic contradiction of Balaam’s claim that his “eyes are opened” to God’s revelation (24:4,16).

32–33. these three times . . . those three times This expression is repeated by the angel to mock

Balaam: The dumb animal shied away from me three times; but you, the all-wise seer, did not shy away from me even once.

34. I did not know In contradiction to Balaam’s claim that he “obtains knowledge from the Most High” (24:16).

35. Balaam’s two servants, who disappeared, have been replaced by Balak’s dignitaries.

what I tell you The angel, here identified with the “I” of the Lord, thus speaks or acts as the Lord’s surrogate.

setting out to destroy an entire people with words, needs a sword to harm a donkey (Tanḥ. 9). The passage calls to mind the comment of the Sages that one who gives a sword to an angry person violates the commandment “You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind” (Lev. 19:14). Rationalist commentators interpret the incident of the talking ass in a nonliteral manner. Maimonides sees it occur-

ring in a dream. Luzzatto suggests that the donkey brayed plaintively and Balaam intuited what it was trying to convey. The Midrash lists Balaam’s ass as one of several miracles created by God in the last hours of Creation. This would mean that its speaking did not violate natural law. God created a world in which donkeys would not speak, except for this donkey at this moment.

³⁶When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, which is on the Arnon border, at its farthest point. ³⁷Balak said to Balaam, “When I first sent to invite you, why didn’t you come to me? Am I really unable to reward you?” ³⁸But Balaam said to Balak, “And now that I have come to you, have I the power to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth.”

³⁹Balaam went with Balak and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

⁴⁰Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and had them served to Balaam and the dignitaries with him. ⁴¹In the morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth-baal. From there he could see a portion of the people.

23 Balaam said to Balak, “Build me seven altars here and have seven bulls and seven rams ready here for me.” ²Balak did as Balaam di-

THE MEETING OF BALAK AND BALAAM
(22:36–23:6)

36. Ir-moab Probably identical with Ar of Moab (21:15,28) on the southern shore of the upper Arnon River.

Arnon border That is, the northern border of Moab, which presumes that Balaam came from the north.

at its farthest point Balak paid Balaam the utmost respect due him by meeting him at the point at which Balaam crossed into Moabite territory.

³⁶וַיִּשְׁמַע בַּלַּק כִּי בָא בַלְעָם וַיֵּצֵא לְקִרְיַתוֹ אֶל-עִיר מוֹאָב אֲשֶׁר עַל-גְּבוּל אַרְנוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּקִצֵּה הַגְּבוּל: ³⁷וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלַּק אֶל-בַּלְעָם הֲלֹא שְׁלַח שְׁלַחְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ לְקַרְאֲךָ לָמָּה לֹא-הִלַּכְתָּ אֵלַי הָאֲמַנִּים לֹא אוּכַל פְּבֹדְךָ: ³⁸וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל-בַּלַּק הֲנִיחָבְאֲתִי אֵלֶיךָ עֲתָה הֵיכַל אוּכַל דַּבֵּר מֵאוּמָה הַדְּבַר אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמִים אֱלֹהִים בְּפִי אֲתוּ אֲדַבֵּר:

³⁹וַיֵּלֶךְ בַּלְעָם עִם-בַּלַּק וַיָּבֹאוּ קִרְיַת חִצּוֹת: ⁴⁰וַיַּזְבַּח בַּלַּק בָּקָר וְצֹאן וַיִּשְׁלַח לְבַלְעָם וּלְשָׂרִים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ: ⁴¹וַיְהִי בַבֶּקֶר וַיִּקַּח בַּלַּק אֶת-בַּלְעָם וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ בְּמֹת בַּעַל וַיִּרְא מִשָּׁם קִצֵּה הָעָם:

רביעי
[ששי]

כג וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל-בַּלַּק בְּנֵה-לִי בַזָּה שְׁבַעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בַזָּה שְׁבַעָה פָּרִים וּשְׁבַעָה אֵילִים: ²וַיַּעַשׂ בַּלַּק כַּאֲשֶׁר

40. sacrificed Balak sacrificed a well-being offering (*zevah sh'lamim*), the meat of which is eaten by the worshiper and his guests.

41. In the morning Sacrificial ritual implies entering into a state of sanctification, a preliminary requirement for a divine encounter.

he could see a portion of the people The object must be within sight for a curse against it to be effective. Balak, however, fears that the sight of too many Israelites may nullify and even reverse the curse. Hence, he allows Balaam to see only a portion of the Israelites.

CHAPTER 23

Presumably Balaam’s curses would have no effect. Why does God go to the trouble of directing his speech? The Midrash comments on verse 5 (“the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth”): “As a rider puts a bit in the mouth of his horse, to control him” (Num. R. 20:20). Astruc suggests that God did this lest others interpret any disaster that might befall Israel as resulting from Balaam’s curse, strengthening their belief in wizardry. Abravanel says

that it is to avoid Israel’s enemies’ gaining confidence from Balaam’s words. Kaspi notes, “A true friend will spare his friend mental anguish and concern, even if he knows there is no basis for it.” The Israelites, having grown up in Egypt, a land of superstition and sorcery, might tend to take Balaam’s curses seriously and thus be demoralized. By the same token, they might be strengthened by his blessings. Praise from a prominent gentile might heighten their devotion to achieving their goals.

rected; and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ³Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings while I am gone. Perhaps the LORD will grant me a manifestation, and whatever He reveals to me I will tell you.” And he went off alone.

⁴God manifested Himself to Balaam, who said to Him, “I have set up the seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.” ⁵And the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Return to Balak and speak thus.”

⁶So he returned to him and found him standing beside his offerings, and all the Moabite dignitaries with him. ⁷He took up his theme, and said:

From Aram has Balak brought me,
Moab’s king from the hills of the East:
Come, curse me Jacob,
Come, tell Israel’s doom!

⁸How can I damn whom God has not
damned,

How doom when the LORD has not doomed?

⁹As I see them from the mountain tops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
There is a people that dwells apart,
Not reckoned among the nations,

23:2. a bull and a ram The most expensive—and, therefore, the most desirable—animals in the sacrificial system.

3. Stay They worked in tandem. Balak stood at his sacrifice while the diviner sought omens.

your offerings Literally, “your burnt offering,” which the specific sacrifice required.

reveals to me Via omens.

I will tell you I will interpret for you.

4. offered up The subject is Balak, not Balaam.

5. the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth The Lord told him the exact words.

THE FIRST ORACLE (vv. 7–10)

All of the oracles are in verse form, probably attesting to their antiquity.

דִּבֶּר בַּלְעָם וַיַּעַל בָּלַק וּבַלְעָם פָּר וְאַיִל
בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם לְבָלַק הַתִּיַצֵּב
עַל-עֲלֹתֶיךָ וְאַלֶּכָּה אוֹלֵי יְקָרָה יְהוָה
לְקַרְאֲתִי וּדְבַר מִה־יִרְאֲנִי וְהִגִּדְתִּי לָךְ
וַיֵּלֶךְ שָׁפִי:

⁴ וַיִּקָּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בַּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אֶת-שְׁבַעַת הַמִּזְבְּחוֹת עָרַכְתִּי וְאַעַל פָּר
וְאַיִל בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ: ⁵ וַיִּשֶׁם יְהוָה דְּבַר בְּפִי
בַלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶל-בָּלַק וְכֹה תִדְבֹּר:
⁶ וַיָּשׁוּב אֵלָיו וְהִנֵּה נֹצֵב עַל-עֲלֹתוֹ הוּא
וְכָל-שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב: ⁷ וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

מִן-אַרָם יִנְהַנִּי בָלַק
מִלֶּךְ-מוֹאָב מִהַרְרֵי-קְדָם
לְכֹה אֶרְהֶ-לִי יַעֲקֹב
וּלְכֹה זַעֲמָה יִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁸ מָה אֶקְבֵּ לֹא קִבָּה אֶל
וּמָה אֶזְעַם לֹא זַעַם יְהוָה:
⁹ כִּי-מִרְאֵשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ
וּמִגִּבְעוֹת אֲשׁוּרָנוּ
הֲזַעַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֵּן
וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב:

7. theme Hebrew: *mashal*, which has no precise rendering and is never used for the discourses of Israel’s prophets. This indicates that Balaam’s oracle is not to be reckoned as prophecy.

hills of the East Hebrew: *har rei kedem*; literally, “hills of Kedem [east].” It seems to designate a specific territory in the Syrian desert, east of the Phoenician coast.

9. apart In terms of strength and security.

reckoned The people Israel will not share the fate of other nations.

people . . . nations Hebrew: *am . . . goyim*; here the first term refers to Israelites, and the second to non-Israelites. Usually “*am*” is a more intimate, ethnic designation than the political designation “*goyim*.”

9. a people that dwells apart, / Not reckoned among the nations One prominent thinker suggested that the Jewish people survived in the Diaspora, not despite the enmity

¹⁰Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Number the dust-cloud of Israel?
May I die the death of the upright,
May my fate be like theirs!

¹⁰מִי מִנְהָ עֵפֶר יַעֲקֹב
וּמִסְפָּר אֶת־רֵבַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
תָּמֹת נַפְשֵׁי מוֹת יִשְׁרָיִם
וַתְּהִי אַחֲרֵיתִי כְּמֵהוּ:

¹¹Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? Here I brought you to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them!”

¹²He replied, “I can only repeat faithfully what the LORD puts in my mouth.” ¹³Then Balak said to him, “Come with me to another place from which you can see them—you will see only a portion of them; you will not see all of them—and damn them for me from there.”

¹⁴With that, he took him to Sedehzophim, on the summit of Pisgah. He built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. ¹⁵And [Balaam] said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offerings, while I seek a manifestation yonder.”

¹⁶The LORD manifested Himself to Balaam and put a word in his mouth, saying, “Return to Balak and speak thus.” ¹⁷He went to him and

¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר בָּלַק אֶל־בְּלָעָם מַה עָשִׂיתָ לִּי
לְקַב אֵיבֵי לְקַח־תִּיךָ וְהִנֵּה בִּרְכַתְּ בְּרָךְ:
¹²וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶת אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה
בְּפִי אֲתוֹ אֲשַׁמֵּר לְדַבֵּר: ¹³וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
בָּלַק לֶךְ נָא לְכֹה־נָא אִתִּי אֶל־מְקוֹם אַחֵר
אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶנּוּ מִשָּׁם אֶפֶס קָצְהוּ תִרְאֶה
וְכֹלוּ לֹא תִרְאֶה וְקִבְּנוּ־לִי מִשָּׁם:
¹⁴וַיִּקְחֵהוּ שָׂדֵה צַפִּים אֶל־רֹאשׁ הַפְּסִגָּה
וַיִּבֶן שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאַיִל
בְּמִזְבֵּחַ: ¹⁵וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־בָּלַק הֲתִיַּצֵּב כֹּה
עַל־עַלְתֶּךָ וְאַנְכִי אֶקְרָה כֹּה:

¹⁶וַיִּקֶר יְהוָה אֶל־בְּלָעָם וַיִּשֶׂם דְּבַר בְּפִיו
וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶל־בָּלַק וְכֹה תִדְבֹר: ¹⁷וַיָּבֹא

10. dust-cloud The image here is of the dust raised by Israel’s marching hosts. (The translation is based on emending the text’s *et rova* to *turba*—*at turba*, meaning “dust cloud.”)

my fate Balaam’s wish illustrates the blessing that every nation and person will desire to receive from God—to share the fate of Israel.

BALAK’S REACTION AND SECOND ATTEMPT (vv. 11–17)

13. another place Balaam will continue to

try the same oracular procedure to effect a favorable omen, this time at another location, perhaps believing that a change of place might lead to a change of luck.

only a portion Balak was showing Balaam an even smaller segment of the Israelite camp than before, fearing that the sight of too many Israelites would once again produce a blessing.

14. Sedehzophim Literally, “mountain of the watchmen.” A lookout post for astronomical observation or for observing the flight of birds.

of their neighbors but precisely because of it. If we ever became objects of their friendship, it would be harder to avoid assimilating (Baal Shem Tov). Several anti-Zionist Orthodox rabbis of the early 20th century based their opposition to Zionism on this verse’s praise of the Jewish people for not being a nation like other nations. Even the liberal thinker Rosenzweig feared that the Jewish people would lose its distinctive greatness if it “re-entered history” as a political state.

10. May I die the death of the upright The

Sages, suspicious of Balaam, take him to be saying “May I live as a greedy, degenerate sinner all my days and become righteous just before my death.”

13. you will see only a portion of them Individual Israelites may not be that impressive, but it has always been the genius of the Jewish people that the whole added up to more than the sum of its parts. Ordinary people combine to create extraordinary communities, sites of holiness, and charity (Menahem Mendel of Kotzk).

found him standing beside his offerings, and the Moabite dignitaries with him. Balak asked him, “What did the LORD say?”¹⁸ And he took up his theme, and said:

Up, Balak, attend,
Give ear unto me, son of Zippor!
¹⁹God is not man to be capricious,
Or mortal to change His mind.
Would He speak and not act,
Promise and not fulfill?
²⁰My message was to bless:
When He blesses, I cannot reverse it.
²¹No harm is in sight for Jacob,
No woe in view for Israel.
The LORD their God is with them,
And their King’s acclaim in their midst.
²²God who freed them from Egypt
Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
²³Lo, there is no augury in Jacob,
No divining in Israel:
Jacob is told at once,
Yea Israel, what God has planned.

אָלָיו וְהָנוּ נִצֵּב עַל-עֹלֹתָיו וְשָׂרֵי מוֹאָב
אָתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בְּלֶק מֵהַדְּבָר יְהוָה:
וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר¹⁸

קוֹם בְּלֶק וּשְׁמָע
הֲאֵינִי עָדֵי בְנוֹ צִפּוֹר:
¹⁹לֹא אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּכְזֹב
וּבֶן-אָדָם וַיִּתְנַחֵם
הֲהוּא אָמַר וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה
וַדְּבָר וְלֹא יִקְיַמְנָה:
²⁰הִנֵּה בָרַךְ לְקַחְתִּי
וּבִרְךָ וְלֹא אֲשִׁיבֶנָּה:
²¹לֹא-הָבִיט אֶן בְּיַעֲקֹב
וְלֹא-רָאָה עֵמֶל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיו עִמּוֹ
וַתְרוֹעַת מְלֶךְ בּוֹ:
²²אֵל מוֹצִיָאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם
כְּתוּעַפֹת רְאִים לוֹ:
²³כִּי לֹא-נִחַשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב
וְלֹא-קָסַם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
כְּעַת יֹאמֶר לְיַעֲקֹב
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵהַפֶּעַל אֵל:

17. What did the LORD say? For the first time, Balak recognizes that Israel’s God alone determines Israel’s fate.

THE SECOND ORACLE (vv. 18–24)

21. acclaim Hebrew: *t’ru-ah*, the military alarm sounded by trumpet or *shofar*. It can also mean a shout of joy.

22. freed them Balaam subtly corrects Balak’s assertion that Israel was “a people come out of Egypt” (22:5), as if it had successfully escaped from slavery without divine help.

wild ox The metaphor refers to God. In the ancient Near East, gods often were depicted with horns or wearing horned crowns.

23. augury Hebrew: *nahash*, which refers to observing omens such as the flight of birds, or reading the entrails of a domesticated animal.

divining A tacit admission that magic works but that Israel has no need for it.

planned Because God has provided Israel with prophets, it has no need to resort to magical arts to determine His will.

18. Up, Balak Balaam had referred to Balak as “king” (22:10); having encountered the true sovereign, he no longer does so (N. Leibowitz).

21. No harm is in sight Literally, “[God] sees no evil in Israel.” The *Tanḥuma* understands this to teach that God, out of love, overlooks Israel’s faults. Ibn Ezra, by contrast, reads

the verse: “Only when God sees no evil in Israel is the LORD with them.” Israel is not vulnerable to curses when they do God’s will. Entice them to sin grievously, as the Moabites do in chapter 25, and God will no longer be a protective presence in their midst. “A Jew is never alone; God is always with every Jew” (Baal Shem Tov).

²⁴Lo, a people that rises like a lion,
Leaps up like the king of beasts,
Rests not till it has feasted on prey
And drunk the blood of the slain.

²⁵Thereupon Balak said to Balaam, “Don’t curse them and don’t bless them!” ²⁶In reply, Balaam said to Balak, “But I told you: Whatever the LORD says, that I must do.” ²⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them for me there.” ²⁸Balak took Balaam to the peak of Peor, which overlooks the wasteland. ²⁹Balaam said to Balak, “Build me here seven altars, and have seven bulls and seven rams ready for me here.” ³⁰Balak did as Balaam said: he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.

24 Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. ²As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the

THE THIRD ORACLE (23:25–24:9)

This is the climactic oracle. In the first oracle, only God determines blessing and curse (23:8); in the second, God’s blessing cannot be revoked (23:20); in this, the third, those who bless or curse Israel will themselves be blessed or cursed.

27. Perhaps God will deem it right that you damn them A submissive, almost plaintive utterance, acknowledging the power of God. Balak’s previous order, in verse 13, had been: “Damn them.” The transformation in Balak is now clear. He must reckon with the power of Israel’s God. **will deem it right** Literally, “be straight in the eyes of.” That is, be to his liking.

24:1. in search of omens The reason he separated himself from Balak on the previous two oc-

הַיְעָם בְּלִבָּיָא יְקוּם ²⁴
וּכְאֲרִי יִתְנַשָּׂא
לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד-יֵאכַל טֶרֶף
וְדָם-חַלְלִים יִשְׁתָּה:

²⁵וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלַּק אֶל-בַּלְעָם גַּם-קִב לֹא
תִקְבְּנוּ גַם-פָּרוּךְ לֹא תִבְרַכְנוּ: ²⁶וַיַּעַן
בַּלְעָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-בַּלַּק הֲלֹא דִבַּרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ
לֵאמֹר כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-יִדְבֹר יְהוָה אִתּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה:
²⁷וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלַּק אֶל-בַּלְעָם לְכֵה-נָא אֶקְחֶךָ
אֶל-מְקוֹם אַחֵר אוּלַי יִישַׁר בְּעֵינַי
הַאֱלֹהִים וְקִבְּתוּ לִי מִשָּׁם: ²⁸וַיִּקַּח בַּלַּק
אֶת-בַּלְעָם רֹאשׁ הַפְּעוּר הַנִּשְׁקָף עַל-פְּנֵי
הַיְשִׁימֹן: ²⁹וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל-בַּלַּק בְּנֵה-
לִי בְזֵה שְׁבַעָה מִזְבְּחוֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בְזֵה
שְׁבַעָה פָּרִים וְשְׁבַעָה אֵילִים: ³⁰וַיַּעַשׂ
בַּלַּק כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר בַּלְעָם וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאֵיל
בְּמִזְבֵּחַ:

ששי
[שבועי]

כד וַיֵּרָא בַלְעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינָיו יְהוָה
לְבַרְךָ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא-הָלַךְ כְּפַעֲם-
בְּפַעֲם לְקִרְאֵת נְחֻשִׁים וַיִּשֶׁת אֶל-הַמְדַבֵּר
פָּנָיו: ²וַיִּשָּׂא בַלְעָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-

casions is now clarified. While Balak attended to the sacrifices, Balaam went off by himself to search for portents of the future.

toward the wilderness Balaam, convinced that God intends only blessing for Israel (23:20), no longer needs to follow Balak’s precaution that he see only a portion of Israel lest the curse be ineffectual. He can now view the entire Israelite encampment with impunity. Rather than timidly catching a glimpse of the edge of the Israelite camp, Balaam now boldly steps forward so that he can see all of the people Israel.

2. the spirit of God came upon him Instead of seeking God in a dream or having God’s words “put into his mouth,” Balaam is now invested with the divine spirit and falls into an ecstatic state, the mark of a prophet.

spirit of God came upon him. ³Taking up his theme, he said:

Word of Balaam son of Beor,
 Word of the man whose eye is true,
⁴Word of him who hears God's speech,
 Who beholds visions from the Almighty,
 Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:
⁵How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
 Your dwellings, O Israel!
⁶Like palm-groves that stretch out,
 Like gardens beside a river,
 Like aloes planted by the LORD,
 Like cedars beside the water;
⁷Their boughs drip with moisture,
 Their roots have abundant water.
 Their king shall rise above Agag,
 Their kingdom shall be exalted.
⁸God who freed them from Egypt
 Is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
 They shall devour enemy nations,
 Crush their bones,
 And smash their arrows.

3-4. Balaam introduces himself as one who is privy to God's direct revelation.

4. Almighty Hebrew: *Shaddai*, an ancient name for Israel's God (Gen. 17:1, 28:3).

Prostrate An act that acknowledges and pays homage to the Presence of God.

but with eyes unveiled Either his eyes were literally "opened" or, more likely, he was figuratively "enlightened"; i.e., he saw with his inner eye.

5. fair That is, pleasing.

dwellings Parallel to "tents." The Hebrew word (*mishk'notekha*) includes the plural of *mishkan* (tabernacle; temporary structure).

6. aloes A sweet-smelling tree whose sap is used as a perfume.

יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁכֵן לְשִׁבְטֵי וְתִהְיֶה עָלָיו רוּחַ
 אֱלֹהִים: ³ וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

נֹאֵם בְּלַעַם בְּנוֹ בְּעֹר
 וְנֹאֵם הַגֹּבֵר שְׂתֵם הָעֵינַן:
⁴ נֹאֵם שָׁמַע אִמְרֵי-אֵל
 אֲשֶׁר מִחֹזֵה שְׂדֵי יַחֲזֶה
 נִפְל וְגִלְוֵי עֵינָיִם:
⁵ מֵה־טָבוֹ אֹהֲלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב
 מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁶ כַּנְּחָלִים נְטִיּוֹ
 כַּגִּנֹּת עָלֵי נְהַר
 כַּאֲהָלִים נֹטַע יִהְיֶה
 כַּאֲרָזִים עָלֵי-מַיִם:
⁷ יוֹל־מַיִם מִדְּלִיּוֹ
 וְזָרְעוּ בְּמַיִם רַבִּים
 וַיִּרֶם מֵאֲגַג מְלָכּוֹ
 וְתִנְשָׂא מְלֻכָתּוֹ:
⁸ אֵל מוֹצִיאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם
 כְּתוֹעַפֹת רֵאֵם לוֹ
 יֹאכְל גּוֹיִם צָרִיו
 וְעִצְמֹתֵיהֶם יִגְרֶם
 וְחִצָּיו יִמְחָץ:

7. Their boughs drip The image is one of trees (v. 6) so drenched that their boughs drip water. The vegetation will be watered from above and below. Water is a common metaphor for affluence.

Their roots Literally, "and its seed." This is a reference to posterity.

Their king Thrice promised by God to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:6,16, 35:11).

Agag King of Amalek during the reign of Israel's King Saul (1 Sam. 15:8). The Amalekites were Israel's most dreaded enemy in the time of Moses (e.g., Exod. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-18).

8. Is for them That is, for Israel.

devour An image of military conquest.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

24:5. This verse is the source for the prayer *Mah Tovu*, recited daily upon entering a synagogue. And the Talmud bases its requirements for respecting privacy on this verse, explaining that Balaam was moved to praise the tents of Jacob because the arrangement of their entrances made it impossible for a family to see inside the tents of others, showing respect for privacy (BT BB 60a).

⁹They crouch, they lie down like a lion,
Like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them?
Blessed are they who bless you,
Accursed they who curse you!

⁹ פָּרַע שָׁכַב בְּאֶרֶץ
וּבְלָבִיא מִי יְקִימוּנוּ
מְבֹרָכֶיךָ בָרוּךְ
וְאֲרֻרֶיךָ אָרוּר:

¹⁰Enraged at Balaam, Balak struck his hands together. “I called you,” Balak said to Balaam, “to damn my enemies, and instead you have blessed them these three times! ¹¹Back with you at once to your own place! I was going to reward you richly, but the LORD has denied you the reward.” ¹²Balaam replied to Balak, “But I even told the messengers you sent to me, ¹³Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the LORD’s command. What the LORD says, that I must say.” ¹⁴And now, as I go back to my people, let me inform you of what this people will do to your people in days to come.” ¹⁵He took up his theme, and said:

Word of Balaam son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
¹⁶Word of him who hears God’s speech,
Who obtains knowledge from the Most High,
And beholds visions from the Almighty,

¹⁰ וַיִּחַר-אַף בְּלֶךְ אֶל-בַּלְעָם וַיִּסְפֹּק אֶת-
כַּפָּיו וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלֶךְ אֶל-בַּלְעָם לִקְבֹּב אֵיבֵי
קְרָאתֶיךָ וְהִנֵּה בִרְכַת בָּרוּךְ זֶה שְׁלֹשׁ
פְּעָמִים: ¹¹ וְעַתָּה בְּרַח-לְךָ אֶל-מְקוֹמְךָ
אֲמַרְתִּי כִּבְד אֲכַבְדְּךָ וְהִנֵּה מִנְעַךְ יְהוָה
מִכְבוֹד: ¹² וַיֹּאמֶר בַּלְעָם אֶל-בְּלָק הֲלֹא
גַם אֶל-מְלֹאכֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַחְתָּ אֵלַי דִּבַּרְתִּי
לֵאמֹר: ¹³ אִם-יִתֶּן-לִי בְלָק מְלֵא בֵיתוֹ
כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא אוֹכַל לְעִבֹר אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה
לְעִשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה מִלְּבַי אֲשֶׁר-יִדְבֹּר
יְהוָה אֵתְּךָ אֲדַבֵּר: ¹⁴ וְעַתָּה הִנְנִי הוֹלֵךְ
לְעִמִּי לְכֹה אֵי עֲצָף אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָעָם
הַזֶּה לְעַמֶּךָ בְּאַחֲרִית הַיָּמִים: ¹⁵ וַיִּשָּׂא
מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר

נָאִם בַּלְעָם בְּנוֹ בְעֹר
וְנָאִם הַגֹּבֵר שְׁתֵּם הָעֵינַן:
נָאִם שָׁמַע אֲמַר־יֵאל
וַיִּדַע דַּעַת עֲלִיוֹן
מִחֻזָּה שְׂדֵי יַחֲזֶה

9. crouch That is, they rest. In the second oracle, the lion rises and does not rest until it eats its prey. Here, the sated lion lies down to rest. Even when it is in a state of repose, who would dare rouse it?

Blessed . . . Accursed Everyone will bless you in order to be blessed and will desist from cursing you for fear of being cursed (cf. Gen. 12:3).

THE FOURTH ORACLE (vv. 10–19)

Still imbued with prophetic inspiration, Balaam turns his attention to the future of Balak’s country, Moab. Most of the words and references in these verses remain obscure.

10. struck his hands together A derisive gesture.

13. could not of my own accord Balaam, like Moses, acts only on God’s instructions.

14. inform you That is, of God’s plan. *what this people will do to your people* Implies that the oracle will deal only with Moab. *in days to come* Not “the end of days” but the near future from the speaker’s point of view.

15–16. These verses are almost identical with verses 3–4. The repetition of Balaam’s self-introduction signifies that he continues to prophesy under the influence of the divine spirit without resort to divination.

Most High Hebrew: *Elyon*, a name for God (Gen. 14:18–22, Deut. 32:8). (The Canaanite creator god, El, who also bears this name, may be meant in Gen. 14.)

Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled:
 17What I see for them is not yet,
 What I behold will not be soon:
 A star rises from Jacob,
 A scepter comes forth from Israel;
 It smashes the brow of Moab,
 The foundation of all children of Seth.
 18Edom becomes a possession,
 Yea, Seir a possession of its enemies;
 But Israel is triumphant.
 19A victor issues from Jacob
 To wipe out what is left of Ir.
 20He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme, he said:
 A leading nation is Amalek;
 But its fate is to perish forever.

21He saw the Kenites and, taking up his theme,
 he said:
 Though your abode be secure,
 And your nest be set among cliffs,
 22Yet shall Kain be consumed,
 When Asshur takes you captive.

17. Balaam's visionary powers soar from the present to behold the distant future.

star Hebrew: *kokhav*, which has been interpreted as an image of a king, as the messianic king, and as a "host" in the sense of "multitude of an army."

smashes . . . Moab A fitting and ironic conclusion to the Balaam story. Balak of Moab wished to curse Israel; instead, his hired seer, Balaam, curses Moab.

children of Seth A general term for all the nomadic groups descended from Abraham (see Gen. 25) and considered to be his kinsmen. The Sethites were a nomadic people located somewhere in Canaan. Israel was promised dominance

נִפְלַ וְגִלּוֹי עֵינָיִם :
 17 אֲרָאֲנֹו וְלֹא עֲתָה
 אֲשׁוּרֲנֹו וְלֹא קָרוֹב
 דְּרֹךְ כּוֹכָב מִיַּעֲקֹב
 וְקֶם שֵׁבֶט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל
 וּמַחֲץ פְּאֲתַי מוֹאָב
 וְקַרְקַר כָּל־בְּנֵי־שֵׁת :
 18 וְהָיָה אֱדוֹם יְרֻשָּׁה
 וְהָיָה יְרֻשָּׁה שְׂעִיר אִי־בֵי
 וְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲשָׂה חֵיל :
 19 וְיִרְדֵּי מִיַּעֲקֹב
 וְהֶאֱבִיד שָׂרִיד מְעִיר :
 20 וַיִּרְא אֶת־עַמְלֵק וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר
 רֵאשִׁית גּוֹיִם עַמְלֵק
 וְאַחֲרֵיתוֹ עַד־י אֲבָד :
 21 וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַקֵּינִי וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֵיתָן מוֹשְׁבָךְ
 וְשִׁים בְּסַלְעַ קַנָּה :
 22 כִּי אִם־יְהִיָּה לְבַעַר קֵיִן
 עַד־מָה אֲשׁוּר תִּשְׁבְּךָ :

over them in the patriarchal blessings (as in Gen. 27:29). They have been identified with the Sutu nomads mentioned frequently in Egyptian texts as wandering through the desert regions of the area.

ORACLES AGAINST NATIONS (vv. 20–25)

Balaam is still on the heights as a series of nations come into view. From the Moabite plateau one can see into the Negeb—home of the Amalekites, Asshurim, and Kenites.

21. **Kenites** A nomadic group that attached itself to Midian, Amalek, and Israel. It ranged from the Sinai Peninsula to the Galilee as far as Kadesh.

CHAPTER 24

17. Some 14 centuries after this event, when Simeon bar Kosiba led a revolt against Ro-

man occupation, Akiva called him Bar Kokhba, "son of a star," and applied this verse to him as the triumphant ruler predicted by the Torah. His revolt, alas, ended in defeat and destruction.

²³He took up his theme and said:
 Alas, who can survive except God has willed it!
²⁴Ships come from the quarter of Kittim;
 They subject Asshur, subject Eber.
 They, too, shall perish forever.

²⁵Then Balaam set out on his journey back home; and Balak also went his way.

וַיִּשָׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר ²³
 אֹי מִי יִחְיֶה מִשְׁמוֹ אֵל:
 וְצִיִּים מִיַּד כִּתִּים ²⁴
 וְעַנּוּ אַשּׁוּר וְעַנּוּ-עֵבֶר
 וְגַם-הוּא עֲדֵי אֲבָד:

וַיֵּקֶם בַּלַּעַם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב לְמִקְמוֹ וְגַם- ²⁵
 בַּלַּק הָלַךְ לְדַרְכוֹ: פ

25 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, ²who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. ³Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the LORD was incensed with Israel. ⁴The LORD said to Moses, “Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the LORD, so that the

כה וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֹׁטִים וַיִּחַל ¹
 הָעָם לְזָנוֹת אֵל-בְּנוֹת מוֹאָב: ² וַתִּקְרָאנָן
 לָעָם לְזִבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכְלֵם הָעָם
 וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶן: ³ וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל
 לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיַּחֲרִיף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:
⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה קַח אֶת-כָּל-
 רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם וְהוֹקֵעַ אוֹתָם לִיהוָה נִגְדַּי

24. Kittim Cyprus. This verse may refer to the invasions of the sea peoples in the 13th and 12th centuries B.C.E.

IDOLATRY AND EXPIATION AT BAAL-PEOR (25:1–18)

Balaam’s prediction of Israel’s glorious promise is dashed by the events at Baal-peor. The nation that dwells alone with its God abruptly pollutes itself with idolatry.

THE APOSTASY (vv. 1–9)

1. at Shittim Literally, “in the acacias.” Its full name was Abel-shittim. It was from there that Joshua sent out spies and led Israel across the Jordan.

Moabite women Apparently, Moabites continued to dwell in the territory after Sihon and the Israelites conquered it.

2. Sexual attraction led to Israelite participation in the sacrificial feasts at the shrine of Baal-peor.

3. attached itself to Israel transferred its allegiance from YHVH to Baal or engaged in acts

of the ritual sexual intercourse required in Baal worship.

Baal-peor “Baal”: the name of the god; “peor”: the name of the site.

the LORD was incensed God’s anger frequently takes the form of a devastating plague (see 17:11).

4. ringleaders Hebrew: *rashei ha-am*, literally, “heads of the people,” simply means “leaders” (see 10:4, 13:3). It suggests that innocent and guilty leaders alike were to be executed.

impaled The punishment for idolatry was death by stoning, with the body then hanged for public display. Impaling is a rare punishment (see Deut. 21:22–23), carried out also on the sons of Saul by the Gibeonites for breach of covenant (2 Sam. 21).

before the LORD That impaled corpses would

^{25.} Each went back to his previous way of thinking, unaffected by having encountered God’s protecting love for Israel. God’s word can only affect people who are willing to change.

LORD's wrath may turn away from Israel.”⁵ So Moses said to Israel's officials, “Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor.”

⁶Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. ⁷When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, ⁸he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. ⁹Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

have brought ritual defilement to the sanctuary is not a consideration, because an emergency situation prevailed.

the LORD's wrath Here, this means the plague. In the Bible it is not unusual for the Lord to refer to Himself in the third person (e.g., Exod. 12:11,14).

5. Israel's officials Hebrew: *shof'tei Yisra-el*; the root שפט (often understood as “to judge”) frequently means “to rule” or “to administer.” The judge (*shofet*) is also an officer (*sar*). Moses appointed military officers as commanders and judges, on Jethro's advice. The two functions overlap, with the commander frequently acting in a judicial capacity. This was the practice throughout Mesopotamia.

his men That is, those under his command. Some assume that the execution was carried out. It is more likely, however, that God's wrath was assuaged by Phinehas's act before Moses' order could be fulfilled.

6. This act, committed before the sanctuary in the sight of Moses and the people while they

הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּשֶׁב חֲרוֹן אַף־יְהוָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל :
 5 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־שַׁפְּטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַרְגוּ
 אִישׁ אֶנְשָׁיו הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעֹר :
 6 וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב
 אֶל־אֶחָיו אֶת־הַמִּדְיָנִית לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה
 וְלְעֵינֵי כָל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָמָּה בָכִים
 מִפְּטִיר פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד : 7 וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן־
 אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקֶּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה
 וַיִּקַּח רֶמַח בְּיָדוֹ : 8 וַיָּבֵא אַחֵר אִישׁ־
 יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־הַקְּבֹה וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת־שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת־
 אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־קִבְתָּהּ
 וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמַּגָּפָה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל : 9 וַיְהִי
 הַמָּתִים בַּמַּגָּפָה אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים
 אָלֶף : פ

were bewailing the plague in supplication to God, was a flagrant escalation of Israel's sin.

who were weeping While Moses and the community were weeping, the couple passed them by.

7. Phinehas An Egyptian name meaning “the Nubian.” Phinehas was at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting in his capacity as chief of the sanctuary guards (1 Chron. 9:20), an office held by his father before him (Num. 3:32). Eleazar the high priest did not act in this instance because he was forbidden to come into contact with the dead under any circumstances (Lev. 21:10–12).

spear A short-shafted pike that could be held in both hands and, like the modern bayonet, thrust downward on a recumbent body. Phinehas would have been armed if he was on duty.

9. twenty-four thousand This count probably included the rest of the older generation who were doomed to die in the wilderness, because it is expressly certified in the census that follows this incident.

CHAPTER 25

9. Hirsch contrasts the 24,000 who die here with the 3,000 who died after worshipping the Golden Calf and concludes that sexual immorality is a greater temptation than idolatry. Israel, at this point an ado-

lescent nation, is vulnerable to the sexually charged orgiastic worship and fertility cult of the Moabites. In all likelihood, this is why the Torah later calls for the destruction of all Canaanite altars and holy places in such stark terms when Israel occupies the Promised Land.

הַפְּטָרָה בַּלַּק

HAFTARAH FOR BALAK

MICAH 5:6–6:8

(When Hukkat and Balak are combined, recite this haftarah.)

The exact time of Micah's prophecy is unspecified. According to the first verse of his book, he lived and labored during the mid-8th century B.C.E., the period of the kings mentioned there. It was a time of expanding Assyrian power; the prophet's words of doom (1:2–3:12) may either anticipate or reflect the Assyrian invasions that led to the destruction and dispersion of the northern kingdom in 722–721 B.C.E.

The *haftarah* opens with two prophecies addressed to the remnant of Jacob after the destruction and dispersion. The first prophecy turns on the image of dew, or droplets of water, in a message that gives hope to the people that their renewal will come directly from God (Micah 5:6). As dew comes from heaven without any mortal involvement, so may Israel hope in a resurrection among the nations through divine grace. The second prophecy introduces the simile of a "fierce lion . . . / Which tramples wherever it goes / And rends, with none to deliver" (v. 7). This figure of power and violence gives a sense of empowerment to the nation in exile. Its tone of brute physicality stands in marked contrast to the opening prophecy. The two prophecies presumably were delivered on separate occasions, reflecting two moods or sensibilities.

The prophet climaxes his first two prophecies with a further vision of divine action. "In that day" of regeneration and victory, God will destroy the Israelites' military arsenal and its idolatrous practices (vv. 9–13). The verb "destroy" (*v'hikhrati*) is repeated four times in these verses, like a persistent hammer beat, and is complemented by four other verbs of wreck and ruin. Divine intervention will be total, eradicating the people's reliance on physical force and false worship.

Speaking on God's behalf, Micah then con-

fronts the nation by recalling deeds of divine redemption in the past (6:3–5). The prophet summons the natural world to testify, along with Israel itself, whether God has ever failed them or brought them into danger. The prophet is certain that memory will yield only recollections of the "gracious acts of the LORD" on their behalf.

Hearing all this, the people ponder how best to "approach the LORD" and "Do homage to God on high." The poignancy and the pathos of their proposals (vv. 6–7) leave no reason to doubt their earnestness. The prophet, rejecting the human desire to offer one's earthly goods as an act of entreaty, speaks the word of God through tradition (v. 8).

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

Micah recalls to the people "what Balak king of Moab / Plotted against you [i.e., your ancestors], / And how Balaam . . . Responded to him" (6:5). This episode, one of God's "gracious acts" for His people, provides a direct link to the *parashah* (Num. 22:2–25:9).

The echo of Balaam's words in the *haftarah* provocatively juxtaposes that seer's contemplative sight with the prophet's moral demands. Evocation of the wondrous gaze in Numbers (24:5), "How fair are your tents, O Jacob" (*mah tovu ohalekha ya-akov*), is now balanced by Micah's statement of "what is good [*mah tov*]" behavior in God's sight. Aesthetics and similes of nature (palm groves, gardens, aloes, and cedars beside the water in Num. 24:6) thus stand on one side, and the tasks of covenantal responsibility on the other. It need not be so, however. Visions of the natural world need not result in moral blindness any more than moral clarity must contradict the insights of nature. The mature mind may sustain the teachings of both the *parashah* and the *haftarah*. It is the challenge of higher religious consciousness.

5 ⁶The remnant of Jacob shall be,
 In the midst of the many peoples,
 Like dew from the LORD,
 Like droplets on grass—
 Which do not look to any man
 Nor place their hope in mortals.
⁷The remnant of Jacob
 Shall be among the nations,
 In the midst of the many peoples,
 Like a lion among beasts of the wild,
 Like a fierce lion among flocks of sheep,
 Which tramples wherever it goes
 And rends, with none to deliver.
⁸Your hand shall prevail over your foes,
 And all your enemies shall be cut down!
⁹In that day

—declares the LORD—

I will destroy the horses in your midst
 And wreck your chariots.
¹⁰I will destroy the cities of your land
 And demolish all your fortresses.
¹¹I will destroy the sorcery you practice,
 And you shall have no more soothsayers.
¹²I will destroy your idols
 And the sacred pillars in your midst;
 And no more shall you bow down
 To the work of your hands.
¹³I will tear down the sacred posts in your
 midst

ה ⁶וְהָיָה | שְׁאֵרֵית יַעֲקֹב
 בְּקֶרֶב עַמִּים רַבִּים
 כְּטֵל מֵאֵת יְהוָה
 כְּרִבְבִים עָלֵי-עֵשֶׂב
 אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִקְוֶה לְאִישׁ
 וְלֹא יִחַל לְבַנֵּי אָדָם:
⁷וְהָיָה שְׁאֵרֵית יַעֲקֹב
 בְּגוֹיִם
 בְּקֶרֶב עַמִּים רַבִּים
 כְּאַרְיֵה בְּבַהֲמוֹת יַעַר
 כְּכַפִּיר בְּעֵדְרֵי-צֹאן
 אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָבַר וְרָמַס
 וְטָרַף וְאִין מִצִּיל:
⁸תָּרַם יָדָךְ עַל-צָרֶיךָ
 וְכָל-אֹיְבֶיךָ יִכְרְתוּ: פ
⁹וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם-הַהוּא
 נֶאֱמַר יְהוָה
 וְהִכֵּיתִי סוּסֶיךָ מִקְרָבָךְ
 וְהִאֲבִדְתִּי מְרַבְתֶּיךָ:
¹⁰וְהִכֵּיתִי עָרֶיךָ * אֶרְצֶךָ
 וְהִרְסֵתִי כָל-מִבְצָרֶיךָ:
¹¹וְהִכֵּיתִי כְּשֵׁפִים מִיָּדָךְ
 וּמַעֲוֹנָנִים לֹא יִהְיוּ-לָךְ:
¹²וְהִכֵּיתִי פְסִילֶיךָ
 וּמִצְבוֹתֶיךָ מִקְרָבָךְ
 וְלֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עוֹד
 לַמַּעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ:
¹³וְנִתְּשֵׁתִי אֲשִׁירֶיךָ מִקְרָבָךְ

v. 10. לשון שנהא

Micah 5:6. remnant of Jacob In its original context, these references to the remnant refer to the contemporary exile of Israelites in Assyria and elsewhere. Later generations would read them as a messianic hope for their own time.

Like dew from the LORD Israel's remnant will be graced with divine sustenance and renewal, which asks nothing in return.

8. Your hand shall prevail over your foes Most commentators regard this as God's promise to Israel, but it can also be interpreted as Israel's prayer to God.

13. sacred posts Hebrew: *asherim*; prohibited by the Torah (Deut. 16:21–22). Destruction of Canaanite *asherim* is commanded in Exod. 34:13.

And destroy your cities.
 14In anger and wrath
 Will I wreak retribution
 On the nations that have not obeyed.

וְהַשְׁמַדְתִּי עָרֶיךָ*:
 וְעָשִׂיתִי בְּאַף
 וּבַחֲמָה נִקְמָה
 אֶת־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁמְעוּ: ס

6 Hear what the LORD is saying:
 Come, present [My] case before the moun-
 tains,
 And let the hills hear you pleading.

שְׁמַעוּ־נָא אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אָמַר
 קוּמוּ רִיב אֶת־הַהָרִים
 וְתִשְׁמַעְנָה הַגְּבְעוֹת קוֹלְךָ:

²Hear, you mountains, the case of the LORD—
 You firm foundations of the earth!
 For the LORD has a case against His people,
 He has a suit against Israel.

שְׁמַעוּ הָרִים אֶת־רִיב יְהוָה
 וְהָאֲתָנִים מְסָדֵי אֶרֶץ
 כִּי רִיב לִיהוָה עַם־עַמּוֹ
 וְעַם־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתּוֹכַח:

³“My people!
 What wrong have I done you?
 What hardship have I caused you?
 Testify against Me.

עַמִּי ³

⁴In fact,
 I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
 I redeemed you from the house of bondage,
 And I sent before you
 Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ
 וּמָה הִלְאַתִּיךָ
 עֲנֵה בִי:

⁵“My people,
 Remember what Balak king of Moab
 Plotted against you,
 And how Balaam son of Beor
 Responded to him.
 [Recall your passage]
 From Shittim to Gilgal—

כִּי ⁴
 הֵעֲלֵתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
 וּמִבֵּית עַבְדִּים פְּדִיתִיךָ
 וְאֶשְׁלַח לְפָנֶיךָ
 אֶת־מֹשֶׁה אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם:

14. nations that have not obeyed The mention here of other nations—and their disobedience—is puzzling. Some commentators propose emending the word at the heart of this difficulty (*goyim*, “nations”) to read *ge'im*, “arrogant ones.” Then the prophet would be referring to the “arrogant ones” of Israel.

Micah 6:5. From Shittim to Gilgal A syn-

opsis of places of divine beneficence, from the wilderness wanderings to settlement of the Promised Land. Shittim was the place of Israelite encampment where God transformed Balaam’s prophecy for the good of the Israelites (Num. 22:1, 25:1, 33:48–49). Gilgal was the cult site where Saul’s kingship was renewed after his victory against the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:14).

לשון שנאה v. 13.

And you will recognize
The gracious acts of the LORD.”

עֲדָה־הַגְּלָל
לְמַעַן דַּעַת
צְדָקוֹת יְהוָה:

⁶With what shall I approach the LORD,
Do homage to God on high?
Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?
⁷Would the LORD be pleased with thousands
of rams,
With myriads of streams of oil?
Shall I give my first-born for my transgres-
sion,
The fruit of my body for my sins?

בְּמַה אֶקְדֶּם יְהוָה ⁶
אֶפֶף לֵאלֹהֵי מְרוֹם
הָאֶקְדַּמְנוּ בְּעוֹלוֹת
בַּעֲגֻלִים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה:
⁷הֲיִרְצֶה יְהוָה בְּאַלְפֵי אֵילִים
בְּרִבְבוֹת נְחֹלֵי־שֶׁמֶן
הָאֶתֵּן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי
פְּרִי בִטְנִי חֲטָאת נַפְשִׁי:

⁸“He has told you, O man, what is good,
And what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice
And to love goodness,
And to walk modestly with your God.”

הֲגִיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה־טוֹב ⁸
וּמַה־יְהוָה דוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ
כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט
וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד
וְהִצַּנְע לְכַת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ: פ

6–8. A classic expression of the primacy of morality over sacrifice. Other prophets (Amos 5:21–25; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:10–20) also articulate divine contempt for the performance of rituals in the absence of moral behavior.

He has told you . . . what the LORD requires This usually is understood as two parts of one injunction, referring both to what is good and to what the Lord requires as a doubled expression. However, because of the accent marks in the Hebrew text, the second phrase may be interpreted as specifying the injunction (“And what does the LORD require of you: / Only to do justice”).

justice . . . goodness . . . walk modestly

Abravanel astutely interprets this triad as a graded series of obligations: (1) the demands of justice—the formalities and externals of civil and criminal law; (2) the requirement of loving-kindness—actions performed in the spirit of the law, going beyond its formal, minimal demands; and (3) the inwardness of true piety hidden from the world at large.

For Rosenzweig, justice and goodness are goals yet to be accomplished. Humility before God, by contrast, is the unconditional starting point of all true living. It is a standing before the world in a “wholly present trust,” daring to “say ‘Truly!’ to the truth” at every moment.