SUMMARY OF CHUKAT-BALAK

CHUKAT

Ashes that purify

The most severe of all ritual impurities is tum'at met, the impurity contracted through contact with a corpse. Here the Torah lays out its purification process: a reddish cow is offered, its body is burned, its ashes are mixed with spring water, and the mixture is sprinkled on the impure person or object, which is thereby purified. An impure person may not enter the Tabernacle or the Temple until this process is complete.

The death of Miriam and the complaints over water

In the fortieth year in the desert, Miriam, Moshe's sister, dies. With her death, the waters that had flowed providentially dry up, and the people complain bitterly.

Moshe strikes the rock

God commands Moshe to "speak" to a rock so that it will give its water, as a demonstration of Divine power. But Moshe "strikes" it instead, giving the impression that the water gushed out from the blow of the staff rather than from Divine intervention. For this, Moshe and Aharon will no longer lead the people much longer.

Edom, the death of Aharon, and the first hostages

Edom denies Israel passage through its land, and the people must go around it. At Mount Hor, Aharon dies –Eleazar succeeds him as High Priest– and the nation mourns him for thirty days. The Canaanites of Arad attack and take prisoners; rather than negotiate with the terrorists, the Jews launch a rescue operation that, thank God, ends in success.

The serpents and the conquest east of the Jordan

The people complain again, this time about the manna. God sends serpents; many die, and the cure comes when the Jews look toward the bronze serpent that Moshe sets atop a pole. Finally, Sichon, king of the Emorites, and Og, king of Bashan, attack Israel; the Jews prevail and take their lands, on the eastern bank of the Jordan, across from Jericho.

BALAK

Balak’s fear

Forty years after leaving Egypt, and shortly before entering the land of Israel, the Jews have just defeated the Emori and the people of Bashan, in what is today the north of the Jordan. Balak, king of Moab, watches these victories with deep concern: he fears his nation will be next. But he knows that Israel’s true strength lies not in its army but in its Covenant with God. So he looks for an unconventional way to weaken it, and sends for Bilam, a sorcerer famous for the power of his curses, to curse the Jewish people.

Bilam and his donkey

God appears to Bilam and forbids him to go to Moab: “You shall not curse this people, for it is blessed.” Bilam declines the invitation, but Balak insists and promises him a generous reward. This time God allows him to go, on one condition: he will say only the words God places in his mouth. On the way, God sends an angel that Bilam cannot see, but his donkey perceives it and refuses to go on. Bilam strikes her, and then the miracle happens: the donkey speaks and rebukes him for the beating. With this, God shows Bilam two things: that his animal’s prophetic vision surpasses his own, and that it is God who places the words in the mouths of all His creatures.

The curses that turn into blessings

Bilam arrives in Moab, where Balak is waiting. They build seven altars and offer sacrifices, but every time Bilam opens his mouth to curse, blessings come out instead: “How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?” Balak, furious, takes him from one place to another, as if a change of view could change the result. But each attempt brings the same thing: more altars, more offerings, and more blessings for Israel. Among them are the words we say today as we enter the synagogue: “How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel!”

The star of Jacob

Before leaving empty-handed, Bilam delivers one last prophecy about the end of days: “I see it, but not now; I behold it, but not soon. A star shall come forth from Jacob…” He foretells the defeat of Israel’s enemies and, later on, the fall of Esav, Amalek, and Asiria. Balak’s plan failed completely: he never got God to curse His people.

The sin of Baal-Peor

With the plan of curses frustrated, a far subtler one is set in motion. The women of Moab and Midian enter the camp of Israel to seduce the men and drag them, through immorality, into the idolatry of Baal-Peor. Many fall, and a plague breaks out that kills twenty-four thousand people. When Zimri, a Jewish leader, sins publicly with a Midianite princess, Pinechas—grandson of Aharon haCohen—executes them both, and the plague stops.