

Introduction to Parsha #39¹: Chukat

READINGS: ***Torah Chukat:*** **Numbers 19:1–22:1**
 Haftarah: **Judges 11:1-33**
 B’rit Chadasha: **John 3:10-21**



The whole community of B’nei Yisrael set out ...

[Numbers 20:22(a)]

This Week’s Amidah Prayer Focus is Petition # 11, *Y’rushalayim* [Jerusalem]

Vayedaber Adonai el-Moshe v’el-Aharon l’emor – *And the Holy One spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying ...* ***Zot chukat ha-torah asher-tzivah Adonai*** – *these are the trustworthy ordinances of Torah that the Holy One enjoins* **Numbers 19:1-2a.**

Behold – out in the desert! Who is this coming forth from the wilderness? A hungry, resilient remnant, with Kalev and Yehoshua as their mentors, has caught the Holy One’s vision for what freedom and relevance are supposed to look like. A new normal, with a new baseline, is being established. A new generation is arising from the ashes – a generation that will go places heir forebearers, who listened to could not or would not tune out complainers and naysayers, refused to go.

Redeeming the Time

Parsha *Chukat* finds *B’nei Yisrael* in a prophetic ‘time warp’. Huge chunks of time fly. Thirty-eight whopping years of desert wandering pass by leaving not a trace. A new *season of supernatural favor and blessing* bursts forth.

In this new season of favor and blessing may we be empowered to face and overcome every one of the challenges from which the generation that preceded us shied away. As Shaul of Tarsus exhorts us:

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*Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.
Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt,
that you may know how you ought to answer each one.*

*Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love,
in honor giving preference to one another;
not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Holy One;
rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;
distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.
Be of the same mind toward one another.
Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble.
Do not be wise in your own opinion.
Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men.
If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*

*Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.
[Colossians 4:5-6; Ephesians 5:15-16; and Romans 12:9-18]*

Setting Apart Every Place the Sole of Our Foot Shall Tread Unto and For the Purposes Of The Bridegroom-King

Strap on your best pair of sandals, Dear Ones - we have *a lot of dusty miles* to travel. We have places to go that the sons and daughters of Avraham have not been in generations. We have something to bring to – and leave behind in – every piece of land upon which the sole of our foot shall tread. And we have Divinely-arranged encounters with people – indeed with whole people groups - who have never seen a true, Covenant-faithful, son or daughter of Avraham in their lifetimes. We have a precious treasure to offer to the world. Whether they want what we offer – and how they respond to us – is their business, not ours.

The Pillar of Fire and Cloud is going to keep us on the march most of the week. He is going to bring us face-to-face with the most self-obsessed and therefore unhappy cultures in the world. The first place the Pillar will take us will be the arid watershed called *Tzin*. Then it will be on to *Merivah* – and on to *Mount Hor*. Then as we continue our journey toward *Hormah* we will run into some difficulty with a raiding party sent out by the king of *Arad*. That will detour us for quite a while, and give the generation raised in the desert its first taste of hand-to-hand combat. When that is done, the Holy One will lead us on a long, difficult route around the belligerent people of *Edom*. Breaking camp from *Obot*, we will proceed northward, along the ridges of the Eastern side of the Jordan Rift Valley, up to *Abarim*. Our Great Shepherd will then lead us through the Valley of *Zered*, across the River Arnon. We will make short stops in places like *Be'er*, *Mattanah*, *Nahaliel*, and *Bamot*. We will then have our first confrontations with the Emori [*i.e.* Amorites] in a

generation, as angry hordes burst forth upon us from the strongholds of *Cheshbon* and *Bashon* like angry warrior ants pouring out of a disturbed fire-ant mound.

By week's end the traveling will stop – at least for the remainder of Torah. We will set up camp at our forty-second and final way station this side of our destination. The high plain nestled beneath the twin peaks of *Pisgah* and *Nebo*, overlooking the Jordan River Valley from the East, will be our base of operations until we receive the order to launch the Great Invasion.

***It Is About So Much More Than Changes in Longitude and Latitude –
It Is About the Covenant People Awakening To Their Destiny***

The experiences that the Holy One has choreographed for us this week will, of course, involve a lot more than geography. They will bring with them a stunning revelation about our purpose on earth. We will discover that our presence is actually intended to be a polarizing force wherever we go. The Holy One has arranged it so that we send off vibrations that disrupt the atmosphere everywhere we travel. The hills and valleys and passes we enter breathe a sigh of relief that the sons and daughters of the Creator have finally manifested and come their way; but the peoples living in those lands? Not so much! Our very existence makes people question all their cultural, social, and religious assumptions. Our proximity creates an earthquake in the *status quo*. Such is the lot of the *chosen people* of the Holy One. Without even trying to – indeed even when we try very hard not to – we *push the anti-Semitic envelope*. We make people who are immersed in uncleanness nervous, you see. Our delight in that which is *holy [i.e. kadosh]* – the Holy One, Mashiach, the Ruach, Torah, Sabbath, the Mo'edim, Tefillah, Tehillah, Tzedakah, Kashrut, Kippur, the Mish'kan – does not sit well with those whose life revolves around that which is common/profane [*i.e. chol*] things. Our mere presence on earth causes other nations' deeply seated paranoias to flare. Our proximity? Well, our proximity causes all the worst kinds of hatred mankind can experience to rear to rear their ugly head. So it will be for our ancestors this week. And so it will be for most of us – and for our children and our children's children - in the generations to come. It doesn't matter how we try to assure people we are not out to either run their lives or take over the world. It doesn't matter how hard we try to fit in.

In other words, with all due respect, the weak of heart and queasy of stomach simply need not apply for this job. All too often the folks we encounter along the Covenant way are going to react to our presence by *stiffening their necks, sharpening their rhetoric, beating their pruning hooks into swords and spears*, and attacking us. When that happens, rest assured that there is *simply no talking to – much less living with - them*. Gird up your loins. Be bold. Be strong. Stay focused. Keep *sh'ma*-ing the Voice of the Creator and faithfully *sh'mar*-ing and *asah*-ing

the wise counsel of the provisions of His Covenant. And remember, the Holy One our God is with us.

How will the prophetic destiny of the chosen people unfold? First of all, they will *narrowly escape a dramatic diplomatic disaster* with the descendants of Esau. Then they will have some of their best and brightest kidnapped by special stealth forces acting on behalf of the King of Arad. Then they will be attacked by hostile Emori warlords with hearts bent on Holocaust.

As we go, we will say good-bye to a staggering number of friends and family members. The old guard of the Sea of Reeds and Sinai is going to pass way. Aharon and Miryam will leave us. We will find out that Moshe's days among us are numbered as well. But the focus of Torah's message this week will not be upon what and who we are losing. It will be upon what and who we are becoming. A new generation of leadership is going to arise in our midst. This new generation of leadership is going to take up the Bridegroom-King's mantle with a powerful, unshakable, *present-future focus*. None of the attacks against us will succeed - and by the empowering grace of the Holy One, *what does not kill us will make us much, much stronger*.

Moreover, before the week is over we will actually *catch our first breathless collective glimpse of the Jordan River ...* and the beautiful land that awaits us. From the heights of Moav *we will stare out in awe at the Promised Land that our Bridegroom-King is preparing for us*. In fact, if we stare through the haze, across the great Valley² we will actually see the Sycamore groves of Yericho. By week's end we will be walking in a totally new layer of relationship with our Divine Bridegroom. It is time to *embrace the mystery* – and turn our hearts away from the momentary light afflictions of whatever wilderness we are in to the joy set before us, calling us home.

A truly challenging time is coming to the earth ... but the Creator of the Universe is bringing forth from the Wilderness a people empowered to overcome and transcend. The people He is bringing forth for such a time as this is a people who know the Bridegroom-King intimately. Because they know Him, and love Him with all their hearts, all their souls, and all their strength, they will passionately embrace all His Ways. They will trust Him to know best – even when they do not understand what He is doing or why He is doing it. They will *sh'ma* His Voice. They will cherish and treasure and carefully guard His Words. They will remain

² The Jordan Rift Valley is the deep rift in the Earth that separates modern-day Jordan on the East and modern-day Israel on the West. The Valley includes the Dead Sea, which at 377 meters (1,237 feet) below Sea Level is the lowest land elevation on Earth. Several tectonic plates interconnect in the Dead Sea area.

steadfast in *shalom* – whatever the challenge placed before them. They will be continually brimming with joy – joy so rich that they it cannot be corrupted by offense or outrage. They will be hard to offend. They will be quick to forgive. They will be short on incendiary rhetoric and long on real-time acts of love. They will not inhabit ivory towers. They will not sit in the seat of the scornful. They will not sit in coffee shops and community centers arguing philosophies, politics, ideologies, economic theories, or theologies. They will not be known for throwing out clichés, labels, and judgment; they will instead radiate light and life, hope and healing. They will exude – and model – humility. And they will absolutely delight in self-denial and real-time service of both their Creator and their fellow man.

Through it all, under the Watchful Eye and Steady Hand of our Good Shepherd and Glorious Bridegroom-King, the people that the Holy One is bringing forth from the wilderness will persevere. They will stay the course. They will not become slaves to a victim mentality. They will not become statistics. Goodness and Mercy will follow them all the days of our lives. They will not merely survive - they will *overcome* and *transcend*. This is the mystery!

Understanding the Essential Covenant Behavior-Pattern the Torah Calls “Chukat”³

‘Zot chukat ha-torah’ [*i.e.* These are the *chukat* of Torah ...]. With these words from the Mouth of the Holy One Torah exits the realm of narrative and re-enters the realm of mystery. What follows is sort of like the *Mish’kan Discourse* [Exodus 25-32], Part II. Some things, the Holy One wants us to know, are – and are intended to be – beyond our natural understanding. We are called to do more than get comfortable with that reality; we are called to rejoice and revel in it. The mystery of our King is the hidden treasure.

Chukat, the name given by the sages to this parsha, is usually translated into English as “*statute*” or “*ordinance*”. It can also be translated as *custom*. But perhaps it would be more appropriately rendered simply as “*unexplained directive*”⁴. It is something we are told to just do because we trust the One Who told us to do it – without having to being told either the specific reason why we are

³ *Chukah* is Strong’s Hebrew word #2708, *chet, kuf, hey*, pronounced *khook-kaw’*.

⁴ The use of legal terminology to describe the Holy One’s instructions to us is a convention derived from European society that equated the king with God, and the king’s decrees with Scripture. The “King James” Bible translation occurred at a time when England had a real, functioning monarchy and everything the king said [he was also pope of the Anglican church, the only legal religious organization in England] was looked upon as a Divine pronouncement. King James was an iron-fisted ruler, whose word was “law” – and that is the view the translation he sponsored gives us of God. This perspective entered the consciousness of the English language, and, hence, subsequent English translations of the Bible have, intentionally or unintentionally, *perpetuated* this error.

to do it or what in the Great scheme of Redemption our doing it is supposed to accomplish.

Let us contrast a *chukah* with the other, more familiar, forms of Divine Instruction we have heretofore studied. We are familiar with *mitzvot* – *i.e.* those instructions that our English Bibles call ‘commandments’. We are also familiar with *mishpatim* – those directives that our English Bibles call the ‘Judgments’ or ‘Decrees’ of the Holy One. But we are much less familiar with *chukat*. A *chukah* is a distinct type of directive from the Holy One – equal in transforming power to the *mitzvot* [instructions for living] and the *mishpatim* [judgments as to what the Holy One Himself would do in the course of walking out interpersonal relationships]. A *chukah* is *purely relational* – a matter of *love* and *trust*. A *chukah* is not aimed at the mind of man but the heart of man. A *chukah* is a distinct type of directive from the Holy One – equal in transforming power to the *mitzvot* [instructions for living] and the *mishpatim* [judgments as to what the Holy One Himself would do in the course of walking out interpersonal relationships]. A *chukah* is *purely relational*. A *chukah* is not aimed at the mind, will, or emotions of man but at the *neshama* – *i.e. eternal spirit breathed by the Holy One* – deep within man.

Unlike a *mitzvah* or a *mishpat*, a *chukah* is not designed to fix something broken in the world or restore divine balance to the Ecosystem. A *chukah* is deeply personal - *a relational affirmation*. A *chukah* calls for a response of *unquestioning, childlike faith*. It is something a best friend, a respectful, dedicated servant, or a passionate, all-in lover does when prompted - without needing or even desiring an explanation as to why. Picture a bride who is deeply in love with and completely trusts her bridegroom doing something *simply because her bridegroom asks her to*. A *chukah* is something we do simply because we trust our Bridegroom and believe that if we do exactly what He says, even if we do not understand it, the Covenant bond between us will be stronger and the Kingdom’s Agenda will be advanced. Each time we see a *chukah* in Scripture, what we should see beyond the words on the page is our Bridegroom-King holding His Hand out to us, smiling at us with tender affection, and saying ‘*Do you trust me?*’ Each *chukah*, you see, provides a *unique test of trust* and of *love*. Each offers a passageway or portal from the naturally seen and understood, temporal realm of this world, into the hidden but eternal realm of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now let’s put some substance to all this. Examples of instructions in Torah that the Holy One or Moshe specifically refers to as *chukat* include the following:

1. **Exodus 12:17** – we are to *observe the feast of matzah* for 7 days each year as a remembrance of when the Holy One brought us out of the land of Mitzrayim;

2. **Leviticus 23:14** – we are not to eat of the new crop of grain until *the day of firstfruits, when we present the firstfruits portion to the Holy One*;
3. **Leviticus 23:21,31** – *no customary work* is to be done on *Shavuot* or on the *Day of Atonement*;
4. **Leviticus 23:41** – *the feast of Sukkot [Tabernacles]* is to be observed as directed every year.
5. **Exodus 27:20-21** – *each of us is to be responsible for providing pure oil for use in the lamps of the menorah day after day*;
6. **Leviticus 24:3** - *the oil in the lamps of the menorah is to be refreshed every morning and evening, forever*;
7. **Exodus 28:43; 29:9** – *Aharon's family's wearing of the priestly garments is an 'ordinance' forever*';
8. **Leviticus 3:17** - *neither the blood of an animal nor the fat from around the kidneys and the liver of an animal is to be eaten*;
9. **Leviticus 16:29, 31, and 34** – *the Day of Atonement is to be a day of complete rest and receiving and basking in the forgiveness of our sins*
10. **Leviticus 17:7** - *no sacrifices are to be made to demons or foreign gods*;
11. **Numbers 10:8** – *we are to listen for and respond to the message of the silver trumpets of the Holy One*;
12. **Numbers 19:10** – *we are always to mark and solemnly celebrate the transition from a tamei or unclean state to a tahor or 'clean' state by immersion in water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer.*

Tracing the Covenantal Roots of the Chukat

The first instance of a human participating in *chukat* protocol dates back to our Avraham Avinu. **Gnesis 26:5**. In Genesis 26:5 the Holy One told Yitzchak: ***“in your seed will all the nations of the earth be blessed; because Avraham sh'ma-ed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes [Hebrew, chukat] and My laws.***

Trusting in the blood of the Passover lamb is specifically described by Torah as a ***chukah***. **Exodus 12:14, 17**; see also **Exodus 13:10**. The wearing of the priestly garments is described as a *chukah*. **Exodus 28:43**. It is by the *chukat* of Torah that we are taught to *lean not on our own understanding*, but to *trust in the Holy One with all our hearts* - and to *let Him direct our paths*.

The first *chukah* our Divine Bridegroom is going to give us this particular week will pertain to *the preparation and usage of special waters of cleansing*. As the Holy One has designed a special formula for the oil to be used to anoint the furnishings and priests of the *Mish'kan*, and as He has apothecated a special recipe

for the incense to be burned in the holy place, so He has ordained a special recipe for the cleansing waters with which people and things passing from a *tamei* state to a *tahor* state are to be sprinkled. The recipe is simple: *Start with ordinary water*. Then *add the ashes produced by burning the flesh of a red-colored heifer* – a heifer that has been burned on a pyre along with three other components: 1. *chips of cedar wood*, 2. *sprigs of hyssop*, and 3. *pieces of cloth stained with scarlet dye*. Got it? But why? Why water? Why a red heifer? Why cedar wood? Why hyssop? Why scarlet dye? What is the reason? What does it accomplish? Welcome to the world of *chukat*, Dear One! Try as you might you will not be able to come up with any practical reason why water mixed with such ashes provides spiritual cleansing. The sages say Moshe couldn't understand it either. Logic and reason have nothing to do with the *chukat* of our Covenant Partner in Heaven. They require pure trust.

The power of cleansing is not in the water or the ashes, or the wood or the hyssop or the dye. It is not even in the obedience. The power of cleansing is not of the earth or anything in it. The power to cleanse belongs to ONE and ONE alone. All we can do is *cooperate, co-labor according to His instructions*, and gratefully receive. Are you okay with that? Or do you feel like you have to know – and/or tell other people - 'why'?

Judging the Thoughts and Attitudes of the Heart

Does the 'water of purification' directive sound like *hocus-pocus* to you? Does the concept *bother* you? Does it make you a little *uncomfortable*? Do you wish that the Torah of the Holy One consisted only of the *mitzvot* and the *mishpatim*, which we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we understand as rules of dedication and of social justice? Do you wish we could somehow *do without* — *you know, edit out*, so to speak – *all the chukat*? Never forget that it is the Holy One's way to *offend the mind in order to reveal the heart*. Remember Na'aman the Syrian? Na'aman did not want to go through what looked to him like the *meaningless process* of bathing in the Jordan. It insulted his intelligence and his cultural sensitivities. But he was afflicted with *tza'arat* - and he was desperate. When one is DESPERATE one does things out of pure faith and trust, not requiring them to make 'sense'. Down to the Jordan in desperation goes Na'aman. And that is what the Holy One's *chukat* are all about.

Proud people, people worried about what others may think, do not like *chukat*. They may accept that loving one's neighbor as one's self, and not killing or committing adultery are a good 'code to live by' – but they scoff at such things as the ashes of the red heifer, and the "water of separation". Desperate people however *run to the priest to be first in line to get sprinkled*. Which do you think receive the fullness of the blessing of the Holy One? I do not know about you, but I

am *unashamedly* desperate. So ... *I'll race you to the water barrel!*

The Parah Adamah – or ‘Red Heifer’

The first *chukah* our Divine Bridegroom is going to give us this week will pertain to the preparation of special waters of cleansing with which the Holy One wants people and things passing from a *tamei* state to a *tahor* state⁵ to be sprinkled before they draw near Him at the *Mish’kan*. As the Holy One did with Creation we are to *start with ordinary water*⁶. To ordinary water we are to *add the ashes produced by burning the flesh of a special kind of animal – a parah adamah*, or red-colored heifer – the carcass of which has been burned on a pyre along with three prescribed ingredients: 1. *chips of cedar wood*, 2. *sprigs of hyssop*, and 3. *pieces of cloth stained with scarlet dye*. Try as you might you will not be able to come up with any practical reason why water mixed with such ashes provides spiritual cleansing. The sages of the Talmud say Moshe couldn’t understand it either. Logic and reason have nothing to do with the *chukat* protocols of our Covenant Partner in Heaven. They require pure trust. The power of cleansing is not in the water or the ashes. It is not even in what Western readers might think of as ‘obedience’. The power of cleansing is not of the earth or anything in it. The power to cleanse belongs to ONE and ONE alone. All we can do is *cooperate, co-labor according to His instructions*, and gratefully receive. All we can do is embrace the mystery. Are you okay with that? Or do you feel like you have to know ‘why’?

A Chukat Travelogue

As aforesaid in the course of this parsha the Divine narrator will without warning ‘fast-forward’ us ahead 38 years or so. The parsha begins in the 2nd year after the Exodus and ends in the final year of wilderness wandering. After detailed *chukat* concerning the water of cleansing are given [Numbers 19], Torah’s narrative of the great journey toward our destiny resumes. At long last we get to see Hagar and Yish’mael’s world disappearing in our rear view mirror.

The Redeemed Community Bids Farewell to Miryam

The first place the Holy One takes us after we leave the wilderness of Paran will be *midbar-Tzin* – i.e. the *desert of Tzin*. There, Miryam, sister of Moshe and Aharon, our resident prophetess and worshipper, will breathe her last breath. We will bury her.

Water Crisis, Revisited - Meribah

After Miryam’s death we will, for the first since the Holy One opened up a fountain for us at Refidim [Exodus 17:1 ff], suffer from a shortage of water. Streams of living water from the rock at Refidim have followed us – and provided the

⁵ For an explanation of the significance of the Hebrew concepts of *tamei* and *tahor* see Monday’s *Shiur* of parsha *Tazria* [the Rabbi’s son’s commentary on Leviticus 12:1-8]

⁶ See Genesis 1:2.

substance of life for us – everywhere we have gone. Until now, that is. With Miryam's death the streams seem to dry up. And that results in the first outbreak of negativity on this leg of the journey.

Amidst renewed complaints of thirst the Holy One will appear to Moshe again. He will give Moshe some very specific directives about how to make the living waters from the Rock flow freely for the Redeemed Community again. This is a test not only for the people – but for Moshe and Aharon. The Bridegroom-King will instruct Moshe to gather the people together before another seemingly lifeless desert rock. Moshe's *chukah* from the Holy One at that point will be to simply *speak to* the rock in question. The Holy One has promised to cause fresh waves of living water to issue forth in response to the positive decree that the Holy One has authorized Moshe to make. Alas, Moshe and Aharon will take a wild, self-serving detour from the Holy One's *chukah*. Once the assembly is in place Moshe's suppressed anger will burst forth. He will not speak to the rock – he will instead go off on the people. He will use the opportunity afforded by the thirst of the people go off on them – ranting and raving and showering them in verbal slime. After drawing everyone's attention to himself and expressing his - not the Holy One's - anger at them, he will deliberately and dramatically *strike the rock* with his rod. He will never *speak a solitary word to the rock* - as the Holy One clearly told him he was to do. Then, to top it all off, he will take for himself and Aharon all the glory for bringing forth water from the rock.

Moshe was given a joyful task to perform, and really, really good news to share; he chose to spread a bad attitude instead. What Moshe was instructed to do was to release a river of sweet, living water from water; what he did instead was let a reservoir of pent-up anger and an attitude of self-righteousness take control of him. He *mixed the release of living water the Holy One had in mind for His People with the venom of the Serpent* with which Moshe had allowed himself to become infected.

What would you have done in the face of this deliberate and flagrant rebellion by Moshe? Probably not what the Holy One did! Despite Moshe's rebellion, He still caused the rock to give forth water – as if Moshe had done exactly what He had told him to do. He was not about to deny His Beloved People the water they need to drink just because their leader has an anger management and narcissism problem. They will, and drink deeply, of the living water He provides. But though the water will pour forth for the thirsty people, there will yet be consequences for Moshe and Aharon. In a private communication, far from the ears of the masses, Moshe will be told that his presumptive act of striking the rock and claiming the glory for himself and Aharon will result in neither he nor Aharon being allowed to lead the Redeemed Community to their destiny in the Promised Land. Moshe will

not be publicly reprimanded; but He will be called to accountability.

***The Curtain Lifts on Our Season of Interaction With
the Five Prophetic Kingdoms of this Earth***

Eventually the Cloud will then lift, and we will renew our travels toward the land of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. The first place the Cloud will lead us will be to the border of the land of *Edom*, *i.e.* the high country to the East of the Jordan Rift Valley. This land was occupied by the descendants of our famous kinsman Esau. Edom – and controlled by his sensual, materialistic spirit. Edom will only be the first of *five prophetic kingdoms* with which we will have to deal before we get to the Land of our Inheritance.

Our prophetic interactions with Edom will begin with Moshe sending messengers on a diplomatic mission to Edom's king to ask permission just to pass through Edom's land. The request will be presented politely and honorably. Pledges will be made that we will not to harm the land in any way. We will even offer to purchase food and drink from the Edomi despite the fact that manna continued to fall from Heaven every day. But Edom will have none of it. The king of Edom deny this request. His people will *rattle their sabers, amass their armies, ratchet up their rhetoric, and threaten genocide* if one Israeli so much as sets foot on Edomi land.

In order to avoid war with our kinsmen of Edom the Holy One will then quickly turn us in another direction. The trip will take longer. But we will learn that *initiating a war over what seems right and fair in our eyes is not ever the Holy One's first or best option.*

The Community Bids Farewell to Its First High Priest, Aharon

The Redeemed Community then travel to *Mount Hor*. It is at this mountain that Aharon will die and be buried. And it is there that Aharon's son Elazar will be called forth to don the garments, receive the anointing, and assume the duties of High Priest for the generation of the Appropriation of the Land. The people will mourn for Aharon at Mount Hor a full 30 days.

***The Great Prophetic Journey Up the Eastern Bank of the Jordan Rift Valley
To the Plain of Moab, Opposite Yericho***

Torah then provides a travelogue, listing the important places we passed and/or camped during the course of our journey from Mount Hor to the Plain of Moab. This travelogue is interrupted briefly by the description of a prophetic war we had with the King and people of Arad, a story about the Holy One dealing with another bout of complaining by sending a plague of fiery serpents into our camp, and the words of the Song of the Well that we learned to sing to cause the earth to yield it's water wherever we happen to be.

Two Prophetic Wars With the Emori

The Redeemed Community will then find itself attacked on two separate occasions by the *Emori* [Amorites]. Avoiding war through diplomacy will not be possible. We have to take up arms and make a stand or be destroyed. The Holy One will therefore deliver the Emori armies into the hands of the Redeemed nation - along with their kings. We will suddenly find ourselves in possession of *sixty cities* filled with all the wealth/booty the Emori have accumulated through raiding the surrounding nations.

In View of the Promised Land At Last

Finally, by week's end, we will arrive at and set upon camp on the plains of Moav. Now an army majestic with banners with stunning victories under its belt, the Holy One's new warrior generation will finally begin to strike terror in the hearts of the surrounding nations. We will have to wait until next week, and the parsha called *Balak*, to discover the interesting ways in which those nations choose to respond to our presence.

Haftarah Chukat

Judges 11:1-33

This week's Haftarah reading⁷ will come from the 11th chapter of the book of Judges. In this particular Haftarah we will meet a man named *Yiftach* [transliterated in most Bibles as *Jephthah*], who lived in the period of the Judges in the area known as Gilad (Gilead). Gilad is East of the Jordan River, in the precise area where Torah records us defeating the Emori kings.

Yiftach's Humble Beginnings

Yiftach's saga is the sordid history of a very unlikely hero. The writer of the book of Judges begins the Yiftach chronicle by informing us of Yiftach's ignoble beginnings. He was an illegitimate son born to his father by a prostitute and brought into the home. His younger half-brothers despised him, and as soon as they were able they threw him out of his father's home and denied him - "*the son of another woman*" – both the place at the table his father had made for him and his share of their father's inheritance.

Cast adrift on his own devices Yiftach took up with a group of men described as "*worthless fellows*" and developed a reputation as a tough guy, not quite good enough for polite society. Enter the armies of the Ammoni (Ammonites), seeking conquest, stage right.

⁷ In the synagogue there is a tradition to follow the reading of the weekly Torah portion with the reading of a short selection from one of the books of the prophets. Typically, this section, called the 'haftarah' or 'leave-taking' (the idea being that it is a kind of epilogue or coda to the Torah reading) is connected in some thematic way to the Torah portion.

Yiftach's Strange 'Calling' To Be Israel's Deliverer

Confronted by a threat from the outside against which they had no means of defense Yiftach's old tormentors, the men of Gilad (Gilead), become desperate. They approach Yiftach and ask him to lead them in battle, acting for them something like an old-West 'hired-gun'.

Surprisingly enough Yiftach agreed. And that is how he became the unlikely leader of the Hebrew people.

Yiftach's First Act as 'Deliverer'

Yiftach's first act as 'Deliverer-Elect' of Avraham's descendants was not however to go out and wage war. For a person placed in a leadership role solely as a 'hired gun' he did something totally out of character. Instead of forming an army and attacking the Ammoni he instead *sent a diplomatic mission* to the Ammoni king seeking to negotiate a *peace treaty*.

In the diplomatic discussions that followed Yiftach actually *presented some pretty good legal arguments* on behalf of his kinsmen. He reminded the King of Ammon that the land of *Gilad* (Gilead) had been *legitimately occupied by Israel* after being *taken over in connection with a defensive war*. In fact, Yiftach basically taught – or tried to teach – the King of Ammon the last part of parsha **Chukat**, which, as we will find out later this week, chronicles the story of how 300 years previously Israel had been savagely attacked by the Emori (Amorites), had fought back against this attack to avoid genocide, and had been divinely-enabled not only to repel the attackers but also to conquer and possess the attackers' land. Yiftach also persuasively argued that the Ammoni, who declined to participate in that war back then, could have no legitimate claim of right to the hard-won land now.

Yiftach's efforts at diplomacy – just like the modern nation of Israel's efforts today to argue a similar position – proved to be to no avail. The enemies of the Holy One's people do not, you see, just want the land we occupy. They want us *dead*. They will settle for nothing less.

The Ammoni therefore break off discussions and attack us with full force. They leave Yiftach no choice but to do what he was 'hired' to do – i.e. engage them in battle. Before he enters the fray however, Yiftach, like most people, has a little heart-to-heart conversation with the Holy One. Yiftach's conversation with the Holy One is not exactly on a par with the eloquent intercession of *Moshe* [Moses] or the humble submission of *Y'hoshua* [Joshua]. The 'son of another woman', he who was denied any inheritance in the land or among the people he is now required to defend, prepares for battle by making a rash vow to the Holy One. He declares that if he is victorious upon his return from the battle:

"whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Holy One's, and I will offer it up for an olah [wholly-consumed burnt offering]." Shoftim (Judges) 11:30-31.

What on earth was Yiftach thinking? He was probably assuming that the first thing he would see upon his return – if he returned at all from this fight - would be a goat, or sheep, or cow.

Through the delivering power of the Holy One, Yiftach is victorious in battle against the Ammoni. When he returns home to fulfill his vow he finds to his horror that instead of a goat, a sheep, or a cow, the first one he sees coming to greet him is his daughter, his only child. The end of the story is therefore horribly tragic:

When he saw her, he rent his clothes, and said, 'alas, my daughter, you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of trouble to me, for I have opened my mouth to the Holy One, and I can not go back'.

And she said to him, 'my father, if you have opened your mouth to the Holy One, do to me that which has come out of your mouth' ".

Musings on the Connection Between Yiftach and Moshe

Moshe and Yiftach, though they lived 300 years apart, both led the people of Israel in a fight over the same piece of real estate – the land of *Gilad* (Gilead), just East of the Jordan River. The similarity of their struggles provides an obvious connection between the parsha and the haftarah. Less obvious however is the connection between the Yiftach story and the story of Moshe smiting the rock. Let's think about that for a moment.

Moshe began his career as a man of action. He was like Yiftach estranged from his family at a young age. The first act Torah tells us Moshe engaged in was to smite and kill someone – the Egyptian taskmaster. Later at the burning bush, when the Holy One called on Moshe to go to speak to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Holy One's people go, Moshe demurred, claiming not to be a man of words. The Holy One therefore had Moshe rely upon his brother Aharon to act as a spokesman while Moshe used his staff to inaugurate plagues and signal the beginning of miracles. This all underscored Moshe's persona as a man of action, rather than words.

As the 40 years in the desert came to an end and the second-generation of those the Holy One redeemed from Egypt prepared to enter the land of Israel, the Holy One's instruction to Moshe to take the staff in hand but merely SPEAK to - as opposed to STRIKE - the rock can be viewed a kind of final test for Moshe. Moshe was thereby challenged to transcend his persona as a man of action and accept, at long

last, the role of a speaker - one who achieves not by hitting, but by being a *man of the voice*. Moshe failed this test miserably, and as a consequence denied the right to enter the land.

It is worth noting that the same word *vayach* - "and he smote" - is used back at the beginning of his career to describe Moshe's action *when Moshe killed the Egyptian* as well as in our parsha *when Moshe does to the rock the same thing as he did to the Egyptian*. Moshe was called to be a man of words; but he rejected that calling and chose instead to be a man of action. And it cost him dearly.

Yiftach's story contains a similar – but reversed - tension between speech and action. Yiftach refused to be typecast as a simple strongman, and sought after diplomacy first, and only resorted to military engagement as a last resort. When the Ammonite refused to listen to his diplomacy Yiftach was forced to be what everyone wants him to be; a man of action and violence. In a fascinating twist on the Moshe chronicle, Yiftach's personal tragedy came about not through anything he did [as a man of action], but through something he *said* - his vow to offer the first thing to come out of his door to the Holy One.

To everything there is a season. There is a time for words, and there is a time of forceful action. The key to success – then and now - is to distinguish *which is which*.

The Apostle's Teaching for the Week

John 3:10-21

The true test of fidelity to the Holy One and His Word is not, we will discover this week, whether one can memorize and quote John 3:16. The true test is whether one can understand and interpret John 3:16 *in light of the context of the entire Bible, and in light of all the covenants and interactions the Holy One has established*.

The apostolic message I have selected to go with parsha *Chukat* is the *pasuk* [i.e. passage, verses] that surrounds John 3:16. In this *pasuk* Yeshua our Messiah speaks with a member of the ruling council - the Sanhedrin⁸ – who had come to inquire of Him secretly by night⁹. This same very influential man would later speak to the Sanhedrin in Yeshua's behalf [John 7:50-51] and would along with Yosef of Arimathea participate in Yeshua's burial [John 19:38-40]. The man will be

⁸ During the time of Yeshua the Great Sanhedrin met daily in Jerusalem to consider and rule on important controversies involving the proper application of Torah to the affairs of life. The council was made up of 71 men, all of whom were the fathers of families, whether they were priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees, or Sadducees. To belong to the Great Sanhedrin, they all must have served in lower Jewish courts before their terms of office in the Great Sanhedrin.

⁹ Nicodemus is identified by Yochanan as a "leader of the Jews" (3:1) and "a teacher of Israel" (3:10). He was of the Pharisaic sect.

introduced to us as: *a man of the P'rushim [Pharisees], named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.*

Yeshua will however refer to him as '*a teacher of Yisra'el*'. We will discover that in the Holy One's kingdom *teachers* must be *learners* – and *doers* - as well. And to be learners and doers they must – absolutely must – as must we all, be *begotten from above*. We will, you see, learn this week about the controversial subject of the 'new birth' – not from the stilted perspective of 21st Century Christian evangelists, but in Hebraic simplicity, from the Master Himself. We will read and come to understand John 3:16 *in its Scriptural and Hebraic context* rather than as a Christian memory verse and evangelistic slogan. And we will thereby - the Holy One willing - learn the basic spiritual principles underlying the physical phenomena we know as 'light' and 'darkness', 'death' and 'life'.

If we will receive it, the passage we will study from Yochanan's book will teach us the difference between being merely a man [or woman] who *talks a talk* and one who actually *walks a walk consistent with one's talk*. There is you see very little if any room in the Holy One's Divine plan for *academicians* – people who think and study and talk about abstract principles. The Holy One's divine plan is for one's Torah to *come out*, and *be manifest* to the world, 'where the rubber hits the road' – in the daily affairs and struggles of life – not in high-sounding sermons or political discourse.

When he came to Yeshua by night Nicodemus came as a *theologian*, an *academician*, and as a *political figure*. He was a very influential person - a member of the Great Sanhedrin that met daily in Jerusalem to consider allegations of violations of Torah that took place in all the Jewish communities in the known world at that time. If you were to analogize Nicodemus to someone today in the government of the United States, he would probably be a Justice of the United States Supreme Court. He had, in order to attain to this position, studied Torah as a code of law, and could undoubtedly speak eloquently about it – and the Holy One – *from a standpoint of abstract principle*. He knew very well how to use Torah in political discourse to advance the interests of his party [the *P'rushim* (Pharisees).]

But Yeshua quickly taught Nicodemus that such a level of knowledge of the Torah and such a usage of Torah was neither what Torah is all about nor what the kingdom of the Holy One consists of.

*May you know the Holy One, and sh'ma His voice,
and not be distracted by the flattery of men, by the allure of public ministry,
nor by the excitement of religious activity. May you love His People, and quietly fulfill His Will.*

The Rabbi's son

Amidah Prayer Focus for The Week
Petition #11 – Y'rushalayim

V'lirushalayim irecha b'rachamim t'shuv
And unto Jerusalem, your City, return in compassion

v'tishkon b'tokah ka-asher d'varto
and take your rest within it, as you have declared

ub'nei asah b'karav b'yomeinu bin'yan olam
May you rebuild it soon in our day, an eternal structure

V'chisai Dovid m'herah l'tokah tachin
And speedily re-establish the kingdom of David

B'ruch atah Adonai Bonei Y'rushalayim
Blessed are You, O Holy One - builder of Jerusalem