

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

### Chukat-Balak 20 – “Where Are We Going?”

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's sermon is sponsored by Ellen Geller, in honor of her retirement from her positions at Temple University Medical School. Mazal tov!

I often comment that Parshat Chukat, the first of our Parshiot this week, is suffused with the topic of death. It begins by presenting the laws about purification when someone dies in a tent, which is the section we read on Shabbat Parah. The Torah goes on to tell us that Miriam dies, and then Moshe and Aaron are sentenced to death because of their incident with the water and the rock. Soon thereafter, Aaron dies. When the Jewish people resume their complaints about food and water, God sends a plague of poisonous snakes, which according to the Zohar, are also a symbol of death, and the only way anyone can survive is to look upward at a snake made of copper that Moshe has placed atop a pole.

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Parsha, Balak, continues with this morbid theme. Bilaam attempts to curse the Jewish people, but God stymies him by transforming one curse into a blessing that states, *tamut nafshi mot yesharim* he wishes to die the death of the upright.

The Sages tell us that *yesharim* in this blessing refers to our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who died in a peaceful manner. Based on this verse, the Talmud in Mesechet Avoda Zara 25a teaches that the book of Bereishit is called *sefer hayashar*, *the straight book*, and the Yerushalmi in Mesechet Sotah 8a says that the book of Bamidbar is called *Sefer Hayashar*. I always explain that the book of Bereisheet is about great individuals -- our founding fathers, and while Bamidbar is about the Leviim, the book has a deeper message, about how each person must develop an **individual identity** within the context of the nation. It is in keeping with that message that our two Parshiot focus on the topic of death. I think the Torah's message here is that to achieve greatness, an individual must accept that death is inevitable.

That's why Rabbi Eliezer teaches in the Mesechet Shabbat 153a that we should each do teshuva, return to God, *one day before we die*. What he means is that we should approach teshuva by treating every day as if it were our last. In the same vein, the Mishna in Pirkei Avot 3:1 tells us that there are 3 stages to life: Knowing where you come from, understanding where you are going, and who you have to answer to.

In his insightful book, *Biblical Challenges that Guide and Ground Our Lives*, the author Niles Goldstein points out the commonality shared by the Rabbi Eliezer story, the passage from Pirkei Avot, and the theme expressed by the artist Gauguin in his painting entitled, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* In each work, we are reminded that by the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of life, we must confront our mortality and accept that all human beings come to the same fate in one way or another – a life that is difficult and limited. This recognition may sound mournful, but it is also the catalyst for humility, which is ultimately the foundation for greatness. So, the nearness of death should not be a cause for despair but a call to action, to fulfill our individual potential for greatness.

This message is distinctly resonant on this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, when we celebrate the Declaration of Independence, a document which expresses the value of nationhood while recognizing individual rights. We cannot deny the political turmoil affecting our country in recent months. But we must never forget that the United States has proven to be the one place on earth, outside the state of Israel, where Jewish values can be practiced most freely, and more than that, the richest environment for people to flourish. Shabbat shalom.