

At the end of our *Parashah*, Bil'am prophesies about the End of Days, and he says (24:17): "A *Kochav* / star has issued from Yaakov . . ." *Midrash Eichah Rabati* sees in this verse an allusion to Bar Kochva, who Rabbi Akiva said was *Mashiach*. *Rambam z"l* writes (*Hil. Melachim* 11:2): "Rabbi Akiva and all the Sages of his generation thought that Bar Kochva was *Mashiach*. Once he was killed, however, they realized he was not *Mashiach*."

R' Yitzchak Arieli *z"l* (1896-1974; *Mashgiach* of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav; author of *Enayim La'mishpat*) writes: Rabbi Akiva saw in Bar Kochva many of the traits that *Mashiach* is supposed to have, and he tried in to instill in Bar Kochva *Yir'at Shamayim* / fear of Heaven, as well. Bar Kochva and his followers were inspired by physical prowess, and Rabbi Akiva and his students tried to teach them to be inspired by Torah and fear of G-d. They were successful, thus saving the youth of the generation.

For his part, Rabbi Akiva was inspired by his immense love for the Jewish People and for the Land of Israel. Though only decades had passed since the destruction of the *Bet Hamikdash*, Rabbi Akiva refused to believe that it was too soon for the redemption to occur.

As in the story of Bar Kochva and Rabbi Akiva, writes R' Arieli, the eventual redemption will begin as a "physical" movement, a desire to build a country in a homeland. But, that will not be the complete redemption, for, at that stage, there will not yet be a longing for spiritual redemption. That longing will come only later, as we read (*Hoshea* 3:5), "Afterward, *Bnei Yisrael* will return and seek out *Hashem*." (*Haggadah Shel Pesach Shirat Ha'geulah* p.13-14)

## The Fast of Erev Shabbat Parashat Chukat

R' Avraham Abele Gombiner *z"l* (the "*Magen Avraham*," one of the most important commentators on the *Shulchan Aruch*; Poland; died 1682) writes: On Friday of the week in which *Parashat Chukat* is read, some individuals have the custom to fast because, on that day in 5004 [1244], twenty wagon-loads of *Sefarim* / Torah works were burned in France. This fast day was not established on the day of the month on which that tragedy occurred, as most commemorations are, because it was revealed to the sages of that time in a dream that the decree was connected with the *Parashah*, as we read (19:2), "This is the decree [regarding] the Torah."

Also, in 5408 [1648, during the Chmielnicki Massacres], two great Jewish communities were destroyed on that day.

(*Magen Avraham*, end of ch.580)

R' Tzidkiyah ben Avraham Ha'rofeh *z"l* (Italy; died 1275) lived at the time of the first event above. He provides some additional (and some different) details:

We have written this as a remembrance of what occurred in our own days due to our many sins -- the Torah of our *Elokim*, approximately 24 wagon-loads of books of *Talmud*, *Halachah* and *Aggedeta*, was burned in France on Friday of *Parashat Chukat* in the year 5002 [1242]. We heard from some of the rabbis who were present that they asked through a dream whether this was a Divine decree, and they were answered: "This is the decree [regarding] the Torah." They decreed that, from that day onward, individuals who are able to should fast on Friday of the week of *Parashat Chukat*. May its ashes atone for us like a burnt-offering on the altar's pyre!

(*Shibbolei Ha'lekket* 263)

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**“Elokim came to Bil’am.” (22:9)**

*Midrash Rabbah* teaches: We read (*Devarim* 34:10), “Never again has there arisen in *Yisrael* a prophet like Moshe.” However, among the gentiles a prophet like Moshe has arisen, so that the nations cannot argue that they would have served *Hashem* if they had had a prophet like Moshe. Who was that prophet? Bil’am. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R’ Mordechai Neugroschl *shlita* asks: How does having a prophet like Bil’am, a thoroughly evil man and a very poor role model, prevent the nations from claiming that they would have served *Hashem* if they had been given a prophet?!

He explains: When *Hashem* offered the Torah to the gentile nations, they refused to accept it because it went against their natures. They were not willing to work on themselves. And, they did not believe that *Bnei Yisrael* were any more interested in self-improvement. Rather, they claimed that *Bnei Yisrael* served *Hashem* because they had a seer who could tell them the future. The nations were not looking for a prophet who would inspire them. Also, Bil’am’s prophesy had no impact on his personality, as we see from the Torah. Even so, such a seer was adequate to prove false the nations’ claim that they would have served *Hashem*.

(*Mi’darchei Ha’lev Ha’yehudi Al Kuzari* p.43)

**“The people will arise like a lion cub and raise itself like a lion.” (23:24)**

The *Zohar* states: “Who is a strong nation like *Yisrael*! When the dawn appears, the get up like a lion to serve their Master with songs and praises, and they study Torah every day.” [Until here from the *Zohar*]

R’ Avraham Abish Zeinwirth *shlita* (Yerushalayim) writes: This relates to the *Gemara* (*Beitzah* 25b) which states: “Why was the Torah given to the Jewish People? Because they are brazen.” R’ Shmuel Eliezer Eidels *z”l* (*Maharsha*; Poland; 1555-1631) explains that one who is overly shy cannot learn, because he won’t ask questions. Therefore, the Torah was given to the brazen, to the nation that is strong like a lion.

(*Even Yekarah Al Shulchan Aruch Ha’Zohar* p.62 #4-5)

**“He has told you, man, what is good, and what *Hashem* seeks from you -- only to do justice, love of kindness, and walking discreetly with your *Elokim*.” (*Michah* 6:4 - from the *Haftarah*)**

R’ Chaim of Valozhyn *z”l* (Belarus; 1749-1821) writes that this verse describes a progression: “To do justice” means doing what is right -- for example, learning Torah -- just because one is obligated to, even though it is not “*L’shma*” / with the proper intention. “Love of kindness” refers to learning Torah *L’shma*. Likewise, the *Gemara* (*Sukkah* 49b) defines “*Torat Chessed*” / “Torah of kindness” (*Mishlei* 31:26) as Torah studied *L’shma*. “Walking discreetly” also refers to serving *Hashem L’shma*, not in order to be recognized by others.

We are taught (*Avot* 2:1), “What is the straight path that a person should choose? That which will bring him glory from man.” When a person is still “choosing” a path, not yet committed, explains R’ Chaim, he may choose a path that will bring him glory from man. Afterward, however, he should serve *Hashem L’shma*.

(*Ruach Chaim*)

**“This is the *Chukah* / decree of the Torah, which *Hashem* has commanded . . .” (19:2)**

*Rashi z”l* writes: Because the *Yetzer Ha’ra* and the nations of the world taunt the Jewish People, saying, “What is this commandment and what reason is there for it,” the Torah describes it as a “*Chukah*,” implying: “It is an decree from before Me; you have no right to question it.”

R’ David Kimchi *z”l* (*Radak*; 1160-1235; Narbonne, France) writes: Even the *Chukim*, about which is it said, “They have no reason,” it is true that they do not have a reason that can be understood by the majority of people. However, a wise person who studies the commandment carefully will find a clear and understandable reason.

(*Hakdamat Ha’Radak L’Sefer Yehoshua*)



**“*Hashem* said to Moshe and to Aharon, ‘Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of *Bnei Yisrael*, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them.’” (20:12)**

R’ Levi ben Gershon *z”l* (“*Ralbag*”; 1288-1344) writes that this verse should not be understood as punishing Moshe, and Moshe’s hitting the rock is not the immediate reason why Moshe did not enter *Eretz Yisrael*. Rather, Moshe did not enter *Eretz Yisrael* because *Bnei Yisrael* were not worthy at that time of conquering *Eretz Yisrael* quickly. Yet, if Moshe had entered the Land, he surely would have completed the *Mitzvah* of conquering *Eretz Yisrael* in short order (unlike his successor, Yehoshua, who did not complete the conquest even after 14 years). How, then, are we to understand *Hashem*’s criticism of Moshe in our verse? *Hashem* is saying: “Maybe, if you had spoken to the rock instead of hitting it, you would have raised *Bnei Yisrael* to a higher level of faith, such that they would then have deserved to conquer the Land quickly. Then, you could have entered the Land with them!”

*Ralbag* continues: This understanding is proven by a number of verses. We read that *Hashem* said to Yehoshua (*Yehoshua* 1:2): “Moshe, My servant, has died. Now, arise, cross this Jordan [River], you and this entire people . . .” *Hashem* calls Moshe “My servant,” a term reserved for exceptionally righteous people, indicating that Moshe had not sinned. Also, Moshe himself told *Bnei Yisrael* (*Devarim* 1:37), “With me, as well, *Hashem* became angry because of you, saying, ‘You, too, shall not come there.’” Moshe would not have blamed *Bnei Yisrael* for his inability to enter the Land if it had been his own fault.

(*Commentary to Yehoshua*, ch.1, “*Ha’to’elet Ha’shelishi*”)