

This week's double Parashah transports us to the end of the Israelites' forty years in the desert.

In **Chukat**, God instructs Moses and Aaron regarding the red heifer. Miriam, sister to Moses and Aaron, dies. Moses displays uncharacteristic impatience and Aaron dies. Moses usually shows endless patience for the Israelites, despite their ongoing litany of complaints. On this occasion, they complain of thirst for lack of water in the desert. God tells Moses specifically to *speak* to a rock to draw water from it but instead he hits the rock in anger.

It is only human to occasionally lose control of our emotions—to get angry or behave impulsively—and the triggers for such behaviour vary. Sometimes, we sense that something is missing in our lives. Or we may need to deal with an issue that is personally difficult. Suddenly, when we least expect it that dark cloud hanging over us manifests in uncharacteristic behaviour.

Moses' lack of patience and loss of control over his emotions is only human. His beloved sister Miriam has just died and this loss backdrops Moses' erratic behaviour. In his grief, Moses is unable to show the unending patience he normally shows towards the Israelites.

In **Balak**, the King of Moab, asks a non-Israelite prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites after he sees them defeat various nations in battle. Balaam's donkey sees an angel of God and refuses to move any further. Balaam hits the donkey; God speaks through the mouth of the donkey to tell him not to curse the Israelites. And instead of cursing the Israelites, Balaam blesses them.

The King of Moab puts immense pressure on Balaam to curse the Israelites. God tells the prophet that he cannot curse them. But Balaam is tempted by the riches and approval that he will receive from the King of Moab if he does curse the Israelites. Ultimately, however, Balaam discovers that he doesn't have the power to curse the Israelites, only the power to bless them, according to God's will.

Balaam shows us that to stand up against the pressure of those steering us in the wrong direction, we must have great internal strength and courage. Although making difficult choices might draw the disapproval of others, it is more important to be an upstander than to seek the constant approval of those around us.

Chukat-Balak encourages us to deal with and address our deeper emotional issues rather than lose control. And it shows us the importance of standing up and making the right choices in life even when that choice might not be popular. And yet, we need to remember that we are only human after all.