How Habit Shapes Spiritual Perception



Your 18Forty Parsha Guide is a weekly newsletter exploring five major takeaways from the weekly parsha. Receive this newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

He stands in the hallway of his shul at the end of a long workday, saying Mincha, and realizes his eyes have raced ahead of his voice by half a paragraph. He has davened three times a day since his bar mitzvah, and somewhere in the past few months the words have begun to feel like something he is saying rather than something he is doing. The suspicion he has not voiced is that his davening has become performance rather than practice, and this week's double parsha, Chukat paired with Balak, speaks to that suspicion more directly than most readers expect.

In Bamidbar 20, near the close of Parshat Chukat, Moshe is told to speak to a rock so water will come out, and instead he strikes it twice, and for that choice God tells him he will not enter the Land of Israel. Two chapters later, in Bamidbar 22, which opens Parshat Balak, the gentile prophet Bilam rides toward Moab on a mission to curse Israel, and his donkey sees an angel blocking the path while Bilam, the professional seer, sees nothing at all. Both portions turn on a single axis, the instant a specific instruction is given and a trained person reaches for force in place of obedience.

Moshe had just buried his sister Miriam, and the staff in his hand was the same staff he had raised at Horeb 40 years earlier when God drew water from a rock, so reaching for it felt like faithful action. Bilam had been hired by Balak for a heavy fee, and beating the donkey when she veered off the path felt like ordinary discipline. In both stories, force was the wrong answer to the moment. God commanded speech, and Moshe answered with a strike. The donkey refused the path, and Bilam answered with a beating. The davener who feels his practice has gone mechanical reaches for the same reflex, more concentration and more effort, when what the two parshiot commend is the opposite, a quieter discipline of obeying the ordinary command at the exact moment when striking or staring past would feel more honest.

1. The Command Moshe Missed

The instruction in Bamidbar 20:8 is unusually specific. God tells Moshe to take the staff, gather the community, and speak to the rock in front of them so it will give its water. The three verbs the text commands are take, gather, and speak, and there is no fourth verb permitting Moshe to use the staff he is carrying. What happens in Bamibdar 20:11 is that Moshe lifts his hand and strikes the rock twice, the water comes out as if nothing were wrong, and the common English gloss that Moshe lost his temper obscures the sin itself, which on a plain reading is a swapped verb inside a set of otherwise obeyed instructions.

Rashi locates the failure in the verb swap itself. A rock that merely hears a command and releases water, Rashi argues, would teach the generation entering the land what no amount of force could teach them, that the God who brought them out of Egypt now asks for obedience through speech rather than through power. Rabbi David Fohrman, founder of Aleph Beta and a former *18Forty Podcast* guest, argues in his Aleph Beta series on Chukat that the gap between “speak to the rock” and “struck the rock twice” is the sin’s exact location rather than a stand-in for some larger psychological failure. Ramban moves the failure one verse earlier, to Moshe’s “shall we bring forth water for you from this rock,” reading the plural we as the moment a self crowded into a frame reserved for God’s name to be sanctified publicly.

Charles Duhigg, in *The Power of Habit*, describes how a tool that has produced results for years becomes the default response under pressure. Moshe's staff is the paradigm case, the instrument he was holding when God split the sea and when God drew water from a rock at Horeb 40 years earlier. The davener whose practice has gone mechanical faces a parallel temptation, because the concentration the *Amidah* asks of him is not itself the trap. The trap is the quiet expectation that the right intensity of *kavanah* will compel the felt connection to return on demand. On Rashi's reading, Moshe's error has exactly that shape, and the decree leaves the question of why a single misstep after 40 years of faithful leadership could bar Moshe from entering the land.

2. A Punishment That Fits the Job

Immediately after Moshe strikes the rock, God tells Moshe and Aharon that they will not bring the assembly into the land, because they did not trust God to sanctify God in the eyes of the Children of Israel. Aharon dies later in the same chapter at Hor HaHar, and the question that commands the tradition's attention is the one about Moshe. A single misstep ending 40 years of faithful leadership strikes many readers as disproportionate, and the verse's language answers by placing the failure in the public sphere where a lesson owed to a watching community was not delivered.

The classical commentators disagree about which verse carries the sin. Rashi puts the sin in the strike itself, arguing that a rock yielding water in response to speech would have demonstrated God's power more fully than a rock producing water from a blow. Ramban pulls the sin one verse earlier, to the plural *we* of "shall we bring forth water for you from this rock," reading the plural as the moment Moshe allowed himself into a frame the verse had reserved for God alone. Rambam, in the fourth chapter of his *Shemoneh Perakim*, pulls the sin one verse earlier still, where Moshe calls the people rebels, arguing that a prophet displaying visible anger caused the community to read God's disposition as angry when God's actual disposition was compassionate. Each reading places the failure in public view, treating it as a misrepresentation of God to a people whose understanding depended on what they saw Moshe do.

If the failure was a public misrepresentation of God, the decree begins to make sense as a succession decision rather than retribution for a single infraction. A leader whose public behavior has just caused the community to misread God cannot be the leader who trains that same community to read God correctly in the next stage of the covenantal story. Rabbi Yosef Bronstein, on the *18Forty Podcast*, brings that reading forward, arguing that different eras of Jewish history call for different kinds of leadership, and the leader fitted to one era is often not the leader the next era needs. Moshe was the leader the wilderness generation required, when the people received their food from heaven and their water from a rock, but the land will ask for something different, and their next leader will have to help them take responsibility under covenant. Edgar Schein, an organizational psychologist at MIT, named the same pattern in secular vocabulary, arguing that the founder who builds an institution from nothing is rarely the manager who can carry it forward, and the commentators had named the same pattern in covenantal terms three millennia earlier. A leader whose first instinct in a crisis is still to raise the staff has been trained for the generation behind him, not for the generation about to cross the river. Parshat Balak, which shares a Shabbat reading with Chukat but belongs to a separate narrative arc, turns to a hired non-Jewish prophet whose journey shows what happens when a trained professional is convinced he already sees what the road contains.

3. What Bilam's Donkey Saw

King Balak of Moab watched the Israelites camp across the Jordan and sent messengers to hire Bilam son of Beor, a seer whose blessings and curses were known in the region to work. God first told Bilam not to go, then permitted him on the condition that he speak only what God told him to speak. On the road, an angel of God stood in the way with a drawn sword, visible to the donkey and hidden from Bilam, and three times the donkey moved aside, and three times Bilam, unable to see the angel, beat the animal back toward the path.

Then the Torah says God opened the donkey's mouth, and she asked Bilam what she had done to deserve three beatings. Bilam answered that if he had a sword in his hand he would kill the animal on the spot. Only after this exchange does the verse say God uncovered Bilam's eyes and he saw the angel standing with a drawn sword in the road. The verse's language matters here, because it names God, not Bilam's arrogance, as the cause of the blindness up to this point, and any reading that blames Bilam's character for the blindness is commentary on top of the verse, not what the verse itself asserts.

Rashi, reading the donkey's speech at verse 30, treats the episode as a deliberate humiliation of a seer whose reputation rested on seeing what ordinary people cannot. Sifrei Devarim 357 records a tradition that Bilam's prophetic capacity was real and comparable in some respects to Moshe's, which sharpens the commentators' reading because a man with genuine prophetic ability is missing what a donkey catches on the first try. Bilam's sight was functioning throughout the scene, and the blindness came from the orientation he carried onto the road.

Philip Goff, a British philosopher of mind at Durham University, argues on the *18Forty Podcast* that perception of something larger than the self is better understood as an orientation a person holds toward the world than as a processing capacity. Bilam's eyes worked and his prophetic capacity worked, and the commentators say he lacked the orientation that would have let those working eyes see an angel whose presence contradicted his contract. The psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris asked observers to count basketball passes between players in white shirts, and about half failed to notice a person in a gorilla suit walking through the scene, because firm task-focus hides anomalies. Bilam's task-focus was firmer still, because he had been paid to see a reason to curse Israel, and his eyes did not register an angel that did not fit the task. The commentators read the blindness as a man whose eyes had stopped seeing what his job did not want him to see, sharpening a question about another leader whose eyes also worked but who reached for force when speech had been asked.

4. Why Moshe Struck and Bilam Rode On

The reading that Bilam's blindness came from his professional frame rests on a longer tradition. The Izhbitzer Rebbe, in his commentary *Mei HaShiloach* on Parshat Chukat, reads Moshe's strike at *Mei Merivah* through the same lens and names the failure *bitul*, the Hebrew word for the reduction of self-interference with perception. The Izhbitzer does not treat *bitul* as a mystical achievement but as the ordinary condition a person has to be in if a new instruction, or an angel standing in the road, is going to register.

On the Izhbitzer's reading, Moshe struck the rock even though God had told him to speak, drawing on what had worked at Horeb 40 years earlier rather than hearing what God was asking in the moment. Bilam, on the commentators' reading, shows the same pattern in a different professional context, trusting his reputation as a prophet whose curses worked and missing the angel standing in his path. Placed next to each other, the two readings point at the same problem: a person so governed by what has worked or by who he thinks he is that he cannot register what the moment actually asks.

Moshe Gersht, on the *18Forty Podcast*, describes *bitul* as the small daily discipline of treating one's own conclusions as provisional and entering a familiar moment with the possibility that one has not yet grasped what it requires. The practice is neither a mystical altered state nor performative humility but the willingness not to be governed by prior convictions when the present moment is asking something different. Moshe lacked that willingness at the rock, and the commentators say Bilam lacked it when the angel stood in his path.

Rambam named the same disposition in classical halachic terms. He treats *gaavah*, excess pride, as a character trait so corrosive that he recommends overcorrecting toward the opposite extreme rather than his usual middle path. David Foster Wallace, in his Kenyon College commencement address "This Is Water," makes the same argument in secular vocabulary, saying that the self silently interprets every situation as being about itself before the person is ever aware the interpretation has happened. For the davener aware his Mincha is the same one he has said three times a day for decades, the question is what it would take to stand in it without being governed by everything habit has already concluded about the prayer.

5. What Trains Perception When God Is Hidden

The davener walks into Mincha and begins *Ashrei* before he has noticed that his mind has already decided this will be the same Mincha he has said for 30 years. That is davening by rote, which is the mistake the parsha has been circling since the opening chapter, when Moshe is told to speak to the rock and strikes it instead. The Ramchal, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, gives the opposite of this mistake a name in *Mesillat Yesharim*. He calls it *zehirut* (watchfulness), the discipline of pausing before an action to notice what habit has already concluded about the action the moment requires.

Rav Dov Singer, on the *18Forty Podcast*, teaches prayer as the opposite of davening by rote. Prayer, Rav Dov says, is the practice of noticing what is already running in the mind before the words of the siddur begin, so that the words land on whatever honest state the davener is in rather than on the mental static he carried into the room. Both Rav Dov and the Ramchal are naming the same discipline from two different traditions, and both ask the davener to interrupt the autopilot before Mincha begins rather than mid-prayer after the mind has already wandered.

In her 2017 book *How Emotions Are Made*, Lisa Feldman Barrett, a psychologist and neuroscientist at Northeastern University, argues that perception is a prediction the brain generates from prior experience, and the brain revises its prediction only when incoming sensory input cannot be reconciled with what the prediction expected. Barrett's argument draws on decades of laboratory research into how the brain constructs what a person sees, hears, and feels. The pattern she describes is the pattern the Ramchal named centuries ago, and he prescribed *zehirut* as the discipline that interrupts the default before the davener opens the siddur.

Back in the hallway of his shul, the davener is about to say the same Mincha he has said for 30 years. If he jumps into Mincha without pausing first, he is making the same mistake Moshe made at the rock, acting on what habit told him the moment required rather than on what the moment was actually asking. The parsha's answer, the one the Ramchal and Rav Dov describe in their different vocabularies, is the small act of noticing before davening begins, so that in the second before he opens his siddur, he sees what his mind has already concluded about the Mincha he is about to say.

Questions for Reflection

1. **Moshe's sin at the rock was not a collapse of character but a single swapped verb, a strike where speech was commanded. How would you recognize that same shape of failure inside a practice you have been doing faithfully for years?**
2. **What does the parsha ask of a reader whose davening has not yet yielded the clarity she was told it would yield, and who is not sure what she is supposed to do in the meantime?**
3. **Where, in a practice you have been performing for years, has the conclusion you drew long ago stopped being the conclusion the moment still supports?**

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