

Legends of Miriam's Well

וַיָּשָׁב הָעָם, בְּקֶדֶשׁ ; וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם, וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם. *(Numbers 20:1,2)...and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there.*

וְלֹא-הָיָה מַיִם, לָעֵדָה ; וַיִּקְהְלוּ, עַל-מִשְׁחָה וְעַל-אֶהָרֹן. *And there was no water for the congregation;*

זֶה אֲזַיְשִׁיר יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת : עָלֵי בְאֵר , עֲנוּ-לָהּ. *21:17 Then sang Israel this song: Spring up, O well—sing ye unto it—*

יח בְּאֵר חֲפְרוּתָה שְׂרִים, כְּרוּתָה נְדִיבֵי הָעָם, בְּמַחֲקָק, בְּמִשְׁעָנָתָם ; וּבְמִדְבָּר, מִתְנָה. *18 The well, which the princes digged, which the nobles of the people delved, with the sceptre, and with their staves.*

Pirke Avot 5:6:

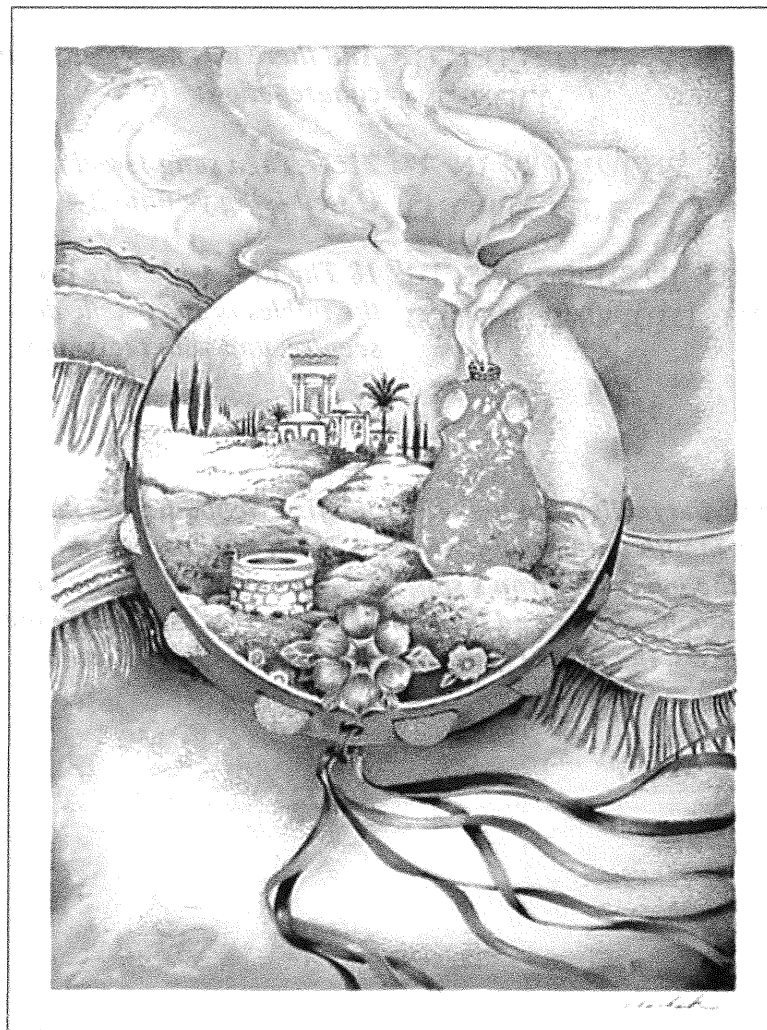
Ten things were created at twilight on the eve of the first Sabbath: the mouth of the earth, (Numbers 16:32); the mouth of the well (Numbers 21:16); the mouth of the ass (Numbers 22:28); the rainbow; the manna; Aaron's staff; the Shamir, writing; the inscription on the tablets of the Ten Commandments; and the tablets themselves. Some also include the evil spirits, the grave of Moses, the ram of Abraham; and others add the original tongs, for tongs must be made with tongs.

WHEN RABBI Hayyim Vital came to study this wisdom (of the Kabbalah) with his master Rabbi Isaac Luria of blessed memory, his master went to Tiberias and took him along. A little boat was there. As they sailed in the boat on the water opposite the pillars of the old synagogue, his master took a glass and filled it with water from between the pillars and gave him the water to drink. Then he said: "Now you will obtain much of this wisdom, for the water you drank came from the well of Mariam."

After that, he began to reach the depths of this wisdom.

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

Parashat Hukat 5779



Miriam's Tambourine Lithograph

Artist: Michael Muchnik

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

and looked at the boy. ¹The boy's mother saw this and quickly came and took him away. ²She said to him: "Come away from Rabbi Yohanan, so that he does not do to you as he did to your father, Resh Lakish." For Resh Lakish had died after an argument concerning Torah with Rabbi Yohanan which had ended with an offended look from Rabbi Yohanan. Resh Lakish's widow was afraid that Rabbi Yohanan was about to be offended by her child's precocity, and that this might lead to the child's death.

³The Gemara now turns to the fifth in the series of statements by Rabbi Yohanan ("provider" in the mnemonic). Rabbi Yohanan said: God sometimes causes rain to fall for the sake of an individual righteous person who needs it. ⁴Sustenance, on the other hand, is granted only for the sake of many worthy people who need it, but not for the sake of an individual. In this context, "sustenance" refers to blessings beyond those needed for bare subsistence. ⁵Rabbi Yohanan explains: We see that God sometimes causes rain to fall for the sake of an individual, ⁶as it is written (Deuteronomy 28:12): "The Lord will open for you [second person singular] His good storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your [second person singular] land." We see from the use of the second person singular in this verse that God promises rain to each individual if he merits it. ⁷Sustenance, on the other hand, is granted only for the sake of many worthy people who need it, ⁸as it is written concerning the manna that God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4): "Behold I will rain down bread for you [second person plural] from the heavens." In this verse God uses the second person plural. From this we see that the manna, which provided much more than basic subsistence, was not granted by God on an individual basis, but only to the Children of Israel as a whole.

⁹The Gemara now raises an objection against Rabbi Yohanan's statement by citing a Baraita which implies that sustenance, too, is provided for the sake of an individual, if he is extremely meritorious: ¹⁰"Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Yehudah says: Three good leaders rose up for Israel, and these are they:

LITERAL TRANSLATION

and looked at him. ¹His mother came [and] took him away. ²She said to him: "Come away from him, so that he does not do to you as he did to your father."

³Rabbi Yohanan said: Rain [falls] for the sake of an individual. ⁴Sustenance [is granted] for the sake of the many. ⁵Rain [falls] for the sake of an individual, ⁶as it is written: "The Lord will open for you [singular] His good storehouse...to give the rain of your [singular] land." ⁷Sustenance [is granted] for the sake of the many, ⁸as it is written: "Behold I will rain down bread for you [plural]." ⁹An objection was raised: ¹⁰"Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Yehudah says: Three good leaders rose up for Israel, [and] these are they:

SAGES

Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Yehudah. A Tanna of the last generation, Rabbi Yose was the son of the Tanna Rabbi Yehudah (ben Il'ai). He was apparently a close disciple of his father, though he occasionally disagreed with him about the Halakhah, and he was a colleague of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. He also discussed the Halakhah with other Sages of his generation. In his work as a Halakhic authority he was apparently closely associated with Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, and his teachings are mentioned a number of times in the Mishnah, and very often in the Tosefta and elsewhere. He was also very prolific in the area of Aggadah, and some well-known sayings are transmitted in his name.

וְחָזָא בִּיה. ¹אֲתֵינָא אִימִיה. ²אֲמַרָה לִיה: "תָּא מִקְמִיה, דְּלֹא לִיעֲבֹד לָךְ פְּדֻעֲבֹר לְאֲבוּךָ." ³אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: מָטָר בְּשִׁבִּיל יָחִיד. ⁴פְּרֻנְסָה בְּשִׁבִּיל רַבִּים. ⁵מָטָר בְּשִׁבִּיל יָחִיד, ⁶דְּכִתִּיב: "יִפְתַּח ה' לָךְ אֶת אוֹצְרוֹ הַטּוֹב... לָתֵת מָטָר אֶרְצְךָ." ⁷פְּרֻנְסָה בְּשִׁבִּיל רַבִּים, ⁸דְּכִתִּיב: "הִנְנִי מִמְטִיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם." ⁹מִיִּתְיָבִי: ¹⁰"רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בְּרַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: שְׁלֹשָׁה פְּרֻנְסִים טוֹבִים עָמְדוּ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, אֵלּוּ הֵן:

RASHI

דלא ליעבדו לך כדעבד לאבוק - שלא ימן עימי כך כמו שנתן נאצין והמיתו, נבנא מניעא (פדא). מטר בשביל יחיד - שאם אין לך מטר אלא לאדם אחד, כגון שזרע אחר וזמן זריעת בני אדם, או שזרע עיר שכולה נכרים ואין למטר - נא כחכותו. ופרנסה, שפע טובה ומחיה לכל העולם, אינו נא לעולם כחכות אחד אלא בשביל רבים. שאם רבים צריכין שזרע, שמשלח ברכה במחשבה - הקדוש ברוך הוא עושה, אם זכו. אכל יחיד האריך שימזכרו תבואתו - אין הקדוש ברוך הוא משנה בעצרו דין השנה, אלא כפי צרכותיה. ואף על פי שמוריד בשביל יחיד מטר זה להשביח תבואתו, שלא יהו גרועות משל אחרים - אכל לעשות שדו כשדו שזרע - לא. מטר ארצך - של אחד משמע. ממטיר לכם - לשון רבים.

NOTES

Sustenance is granted for the sake of the many. According to Rashi, when Rabbi Yohanan says that rain falls even for an individual, he is referring to rain that that individual requires so that his crops will not fail or produce yields inferior to those of his neighbors. And when he says that sustenance is provided only when it is merited by the community, he is referring to a state of

prosperity that is not granted solely for the sake of an individual. Maharsha explains that rain, which naturally leads to prosperity, falls even for the sake of a single worthy individual, but sustenance provided by supernatural means, such as manna from Heaven, is provided only when the entire community is considered worthy.

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ¹And three good gifts were given at their hand when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness: The well, from which they drank; the pillar of cloud, which guided them and protected them from harm; and the manna, which they ate.

²The well was given to the Israelites by God because of the merit of Miriam. ³The pillar of cloud was given because of the merit of Aaron. ⁴The manna was given because of the merit of Moses. ⁵We know that the well was given because of Miriam's merit, for when Miriam died, the well disappeared, ⁶as it is said [Numbers 20:1]: 'And Miriam died there,' ⁷and immediately afterwards in the next verse it is written: 'And there was no water for the congregation.' At the beginning of their wanderings, the Israelites repeatedly complained about the lack of water, until a well miraculously opened up for them [Exodus 17:1-7]. From that time until the death of Miriam nearly

forty years later there were no further complaints about lack of water. Thus we see that the well that had sustained them all that time was given to them because of Miriam's merit. ⁸But even though the well disappeared when Miriam died, it returned because of the merit of both Moses and Aaron. As soon as the well disappeared and the people complained about the lack of water, God commanded Moses and Aaron to go together to a rock and command it to deliver up water [Numbers 20:8]. ⁹We know that the pillar of cloud was given because of Aaron's merit, for when Aaron died, the clouds of glory disappeared, ¹⁰as it is said [Numbers 21:1]: 'And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the south, heard that Israel had come... he fought against Israel.' The verse implies that the king of Arad had received a report that led to this attack. ¹¹What report did he hear? He heard that Aaron had died, the topic of the verses immediately preceding [Numbers 20:22-29], and that this had led to the disappearance of the clouds of glory that had hitherto protected the Israelites from attack. ¹²Accordingly, he thought that he had been given permission to go to war against Israel, and this led to his attack. ¹³And this is the meaning of what is written in the verse immediately preceding the one that mentions the attack by the king of Arad [Numbers 20:29]: ¹⁴'And all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, and all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron for thirty days.'

LITERAL TRANSLATION

Moses, and Aaron, and Miriam. ¹And three good gifts were given at their hand, and these are they: The well, and the cloud, and the manna. ²The well was because of the merit of Miriam. ³The pillar of cloud was because of the merit of Aaron. ⁴The manna was because of the merit of Moses. ⁵[When] Miriam died, the well disappeared, ⁶as it is said: 'And Miriam died there,' ⁷and it is written after it: 'And there was no water for the congregation.' ⁸But it returned because of the merit of both of them. ⁹[When] Aaron died, the clouds of glory disappeared, ¹⁰as it is said: 'And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, heard.' ¹¹What report did he hear? He heard that Aaron had died and the clouds of glory had disappeared, ¹²and he thought [that] permission had been given to him to go to war against Israel. ¹³And this is [the meaning of] what is written: ¹⁴'And all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead.'

RASHI

בארה של מרים - סלע, וזין ממנו מים, והיה מחגגלגל והולך עם ישראל. והוא הסלע שבו הכה משה, שלא היה רגוע להולך ממנו נשעילי, לפי שמהם מרים. ונסתלקו ענני כבוד - ענני רקיע וענני עשן, ושאר עננים אינן של כבוד. חזרה בזכות שניהן - שכן כתיב "ודברתם שריכם אל הסלע ונתן ממינו".

NOTES

But it returned because of the merit of both of them. Some commentators ask: If the miraculous well from which the Israelites drew their water was returned to them after Miriam's death because of the merit of Moses and Aaron, then their merit should certainly have sufficed for the well not to disappear when Miriam died! It has been suggested that, although the well

returned because of the merit of Moses and Aaron, it did not sustain the people after Miriam's death in the same manner as it sustained them during Miriam's lifetime (*Ahavat Eitan*). *Maharsha* suggests that the well disappeared when Miriam died in order to show the Israelites that during her lifetime the well was provided primarily because of her merit.

Miriam's Well

THE LEGENDS OF THE JEWS

By Louis Ginzberg

VOLUME-3 -- MIRIAM'S WELL

Relieved as they were of all the cares of subsistence through the gift of manna, it was plainly the duty of the Israelites to devote themselves exclusively to the study of the Torah. When, therefore, they slackened in the performance of this duty, punishment in the form of lack of water immediately overtook them. This was the first time that they actually experienced this want, for at Marah nothing more than alarm that this need might come upon them, had caused them to murmur and complain. In their distress they once more unreasonably cast reproaches upon their leader, and disputed with him, saying: "Wherefore is this, children, that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us, and our children, and our cattle with thirst?" Moses replied: "As often as you quarrel with me, you tempt God, but God performeth wonders and excellent deeds for you, as often as you dispute with me, that His name may sound in glory throughout the world."



In spite of the injury they had done him, Moses prayed to God that He might aid them in their distress and also stand by him. "O Lord of the world!" said he, "I am surely doomed to die. Thou biddest me not to be offended with them, but if I obey Thy words, I shall certainly be killed by them." God, however, replied: "Try thou to act like Me; as I return good for evil, so do thou return to them good for evil, and forgive their trespass; go on before the people, and We shall see who dares touch thee." Hardly had Moses shown himself to the people, when all of them rose reverently from their seats, whereupon God said to Moses: "How often have I told thee not to be angry with them, but to lead them, as a shepherd leads his flock; it is for their sake that I have set thee on this height, and only for their sake wilt thou find grace, goodwill, and mercy in My sight."



Then God bade him go with some elders to the rock on Horeb, and fetch water out of it. The elders were to accompany him there, that they might be convinced that he was not bringing water from a well, but smiting it from a rock. To accomplish this miracle, God bade him smite the rock with his rod, as the people labored under the impression that this rod could only bring destruction, for through its agency Moses had brought the ten plagues upon the Egyptians in Egypt, and at the Red Sea; now they were to see that it could work good also. Upon God's bidding, Moses told the people to choose from which rock they wished water to flow, and hardly had Moses touched with his sapphire rod the rock which they had chosen, when plenteous water flowed from it. The spot where this occurred, God called Massah, and Meribah, because Israel had there tried their God, saying, "If God is Lord over all, as over us; if He satisfies our needs, and will further show us that He knows our thoughts, then will we serve Him, but not otherwise."



The water that flowed for them on this spot served not only as a relief for their present need, but on this occasion there was revealed to them a well of water, which did not abandon them in all their forty years' wandering, but accompanied them on all their marches. God wrought this great miracle for the merits of the **prophetess Miriam**, wherefore also it was called "**Miriam's Well**." But this well dates back to the beginning of the world, for God created it on the second day of the creation, and at one time it was in the possession of Abraham. It was this same well that Abraham demanded back from Abimelech, king of the Philistines, after the king's servants had violently taken it away. But when Abimelech pretended not to know anything about it, saying, "I wot not who hath done this thing," Abraham said: "Thou and I will send sheep to the well, and he shall be declared the rightful owner of the well, for whose sheep the water will spout forth to water them. And," continued Abraham, "from that same well shall the seventh generation after me, the wanderers in the desert, draw their supply."



This well was in the shape of a sieve-like rock, out of which water gushes forth as from a spout. It followed them on all their wanderings, up hill and down dale, and wherever they halted, it halted, too, and it settled opposite the Tabernacle. Thereupon the leaders of the twelve tribes would appear, each with his staff and chant these words to the well, "Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it; nobles of the people digged it by the direction of the lawgiver with their staves." Then the water would gush forth from the depths of the well, and shoot up high as pillars, then discharge itself into great streams that were navigable, and on these rivers the Jews sailed to the ocean, and hauled all the treasures of the world therefrom.



The different parts of the camp were separated by these rivers, so that women, visiting each other, were obliged to make use of ships. Then the water discharged itself beyond the encampment, where it surrounded a great plain, in which grew every conceivable kind of plant and tree; and these trees, owing to the miraculous water, daily bore fresh fruits. This well brought fragrant herbs with it, so that the women had no need of perfumes on the march, for the herbs they gathered served this purpose. This well furthermore threw down soft, fragrant kinds of grass that served as pleasant couches for the poor, who had no pillows or bedclothes. Upon the entrance to the Holy Land this well disappeared and was hidden in a certain spot of the Sea of Tiberias. Standing upon Carmel, and looking over the sea, one can notice there a sieve-like rock, and that is the **well of Miriam**. Once upon a time it happened that a leper bathed at this place of the Sea of Tiberias, and hardly had he come in contact with the waters of **Miriam's well** when he was instantly healed.

The Legend of Miriam's Well

(Penina Adelman, "Miriam's Well")

At twilight on the second day of Creation, God embedded a precious liquid jewel in the earth, a miraculous well of pure, sparkling water. From one generation to the next, the well belonged to those who knew how to draw up its water. Filled with *mayim chayim*, living waters, the well was a reminder to all who drank or drew from it, that the Torah, the way of the Jewish people, is also a well from which all may drink and be restored ⁵

Possession of the well passed from Abraham, the first patriarch ⁶ to his concubine, Hagar ⁷, and then to his son, Isaac. ⁸ Each of the patriarchs and matriarchs in turn discovered anew this source of living water in the desert. ²

During their Egyptian slavery, the Children of Israel lost access to the well itself. Worse, they lost the memory that such waters had ever existed.

Only by the merit of Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, did the well reappear to them during their desert wanderings. But why was the well revealed in the name of Miriam?

The power of her voice and her intimate understanding of water were the reasons she was thought worthy to be the keeper of the well.

She convinced her father, Amram, to restore conjugal relations with her mother, Yocheved, because in a dream she learned that a liberator of Israel would be conceived from their union. ¹⁰ Later she sang to the Nile River, persuading it to protect her baby brother, Moses. She had placed him in the reeds close to the banks to save him from Pharaoh's evil decree that all Jewish baby boys should be destroyed at birth.

As a midwife in Egypt, she had also used her voice in her work. Known by the name Puah, which means "breath", she used to puff gentle sounds and songs into the ears of a woman about to give birth. With a voice calming as the rippling of water, Miriam coaxed reluctant newborns out of the womb and into the world. ¹¹

After the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, Miriam and the women took up instruments as they danced and sang the song of redemption. ¹² Once again, Miriam's reverence for water inspired her to lead a joyful song of salvation. Thus was Miriam's unique connection with the sources of redemption begun both in Egypt and the desert exile of her people. ¹³ It was believed then that God gave the well in Miriam's name, since Moses could barely speak, let alone sing, while the voice of Aaron, the priest, was so loud it frightened both children and animals.

Later, when Miriam passed from the earth, the well ran dry and disappeared just as in Egypt. In despair, the people complained loudly to their leader, Moses, that they would die of thirst. But Moses was unable to sing the waters of Creation up from the depths as his sister had. It was then that God told Moses and the people of Israel how to address the well and urge it to bring up the waters of life.

"Then Israel sang this song,
Spring up, O well, sing to it."¹⁴

Slowly they were answered with the well's nurturing waters. Accompanying them to Mt. Sinai where they received the Torah, Miriam's Well remained with them. Its waters caused herbs to grow which the women used as perfume. Soft billowy grass sprouted from its waters which some used to make a bed for the night. But later, when they entered the Promised Land, Miriam's Well disappeared. It was thought that it had vanished because they were in their homeland once again and it was natural to drink from other wells. But some missed Miriam's Well and never stopped their search for it. They were the students of Torah who sought its sustenance in the wisdom of the sacred text.

Centuries later, in the village of Safed in the north of Israel lived the kabbalists – Jewish sages studying the mystical meanings in the Torah. They rediscovered Miriam's Well, claiming that it was found not far from them near the Sea of Galilee. One drink from its pure waters was said to alert the heart, mind, and soul and make the meanings of the Torah become more clear.

It was then that water from that well was taken in pouches to wherever Jews had settled. In each generation, it was believed, there lived wise men and women who would sprinkle these waters on the ground and cause new wells to spring forth. Centuries later, the hasidim of Eastern Europe attested to its ability to reappear, wherever Jews sang to it.¹⁵

In our own time it is said that Miriam's Well is near those who cast their buckets into any well at the end of the Sabbath as all wells are filled with those refreshing waters at that time.¹⁶ In this way the well now belongs to us Jewish women as we draw up from the depths of tradition the essentials of our sustenance.

In the manner of Miriam's Well, after crossing the Sea of Reeds, we have taken up our instruments and begun to sing our songs, to utter the words and tell the stories arising from our longings for the waters of her well. Our spiritual thirst has caused us to search our heritage and the Torah for ways to drink the clear waters of creation.

The story sparks discussion. Then the women tell other tales they recall: of Miriam as redeemer, prophetess, midwife, singer, dancer, waterbearer. They tell stories and anecdotes heard from mothers and grandmothers and fathers and grandfathers about birth; of their own experiences in birthing their children or helping friends and relatives during delivery. They speak of birth in other contexts: spiritual, intellectual, emotional.

5. cf. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2.

6. Gen. 21:24-25.

7. Gen. 21:19.

8. Gen. 26:18-23.

9. Genesis Rabbah 54:5, 60:5.

10. Ginzberg, vol. 2:262-265.

11. Ginzberg, vol. 2:262-265.

12. Ex. 15:20-21.

13. Cohen, Norman. "Miriam's Song: A Modern Midrashic Reading," *Judaism*, Spring 1984.

14. Numbers 21:17-18.

15. Vilnay, Ze'ev, *Agadat Eretz Yisrael*, p. 182-184.

16. Kitov, Eliyahu. *The Book of Our Heritage*, vol. 2, 157-162.

Miriam's Well

Poem

By Barbara Holender

Due to the merits of Miriam, a mysterious well, created on the eve of the first Sabbath, accompanied the children of Israel in the desert.

It followed her everywhere
like a lover, easing us to rest,
springing from hidden places
in our wanderings.

Always, we were thirsty. Angered
by our wailing, she'd stamp her feet.
Even from the pools of her heelprints
we drank.

Once in anguish
she beat the rocks with her bare hands
again and again, weeping.
Water gushed, cleansing her blood,
soaking her hair, her robe.
She cupped her hands, rinsed her mouth,
spat; she splashed, she played.
Laughing, we filled our bellies.

She was the one we followed,
who knew each of us by name.
Healing rose from her touch as drink
from the deep, as song from her throat.

She was the well. In our hearts
we called her not Miriam, bitter sea,
but Mayim, water.

From All the Women Followed Her, ed. Rebecca Schwartz (Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001), p. 37. Printed with permission of the editor.

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Weekly Torah Commentaries

Parashat Hukat

Miriam--Water Under The Bridge?

Miriam's death should motivate us to recognize people today who provide nurture and support that often goes unnoticed.

By Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

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Careers of public figures take on a life of their own, ebbing and flowing with shifts in public opinion and the latest values. One Jewish figure whose popularity is at an all-time high is the prophet Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron.

While featured prominently in the Torah, Miriam's claim to fame always paled in the face of her more visible brothers. After all, Aaron was the first *Kohen Gadol* (high priest), the link between the Jewish people and their religion, and Moses was the intimate friend of God, transmitting sacred teachings to the people.

Compared to those two leaders, Miriam simply faded into the background. True, we celebrate her beautiful song at the shores of the Red Sea, but even that poem is overshadowed by Moses' far-lengthier song. Today, Miriam's fame rests less on any specific accomplishment and more on the fact that she was a woman.

Three thousand years ago--and in most parts of the world even today--being a woman was itself disqualification from public recognition or accomplishment. With so few female heroes, Miriam stands out precisely because we are now more sensitive to just how difficult it is for a woman to gain public recognition. Today's parasha comments on the death of this prophet, that "Miriam died there and was buried there, and the community was without water."

Rashi (11th Century, France) noticed the strange juxtaposition of Miriam's death and the shortage of water, and assumed that there must be a connection between the two. "From this we learn that all forty years, they had a well because of the merit of Miriam." Miriam's Well entered the realm of Midrash as testimony to the greatness of this unique leader.

As the Jews wandered through the wilderness, lacking adequate water would have been fatal. However, the power of Miriam's integrity, piety and caring was such that God provided a moving well of water, one which followed the people throughout their wanderings until the moment of her death. Without Miriam, there was no more water.

Miriam's place in Jewish legend points to two lessons we can carry with us through our own personal wildernesses. While male prophets emphasize the power of words, the centrality of rules of conduct, of sanctity and of justice, Miriam's prophecy was one of deed. Rather than stirring speeches or administration of justice, Miriam focused on teaching her people how to sing in moments of joy, and she saw to their sustenance during their period of exposure and fragility.

Miriam's example, paralleled by countless women after her, is one of action--deeds of love and support. Without Miriam's efforts, no one would have been able to listen to the words of Moses or to study God's Torah. Acts of caring and love--that

is the special gift that women give humanity. Notice, also, that no one comments on her well, on how important and valued her contribution is until after she has died.

The tragic reality is that for most women, after-the-fact recognition is often the only kind that is given. The women who work in the homes raising children, the women who work in the schools teaching students, the women who work in hospitals tending the sick, these and countless other women perform the difficult, tedious tasks that sustain and make human life possible.

While medallions and press releases accompany the splashier achievements of some men, many women quietly provide wells of nurturing and support without public attention or commendation. Only when they are no longer able to serve are their services noticed, and then only because they are missed. Why didn't anyone notice Miriam's well while she was still alive?

It may be too late to change Miriam's status among her own generation, although many Jewish men and women are now, belatedly, giving her the prominence that her compassion and nurturing deserve. But it is not too late for our generation to re-examine its own values and heroes today.

Do we sufficiently honor those whose contribution is quiet support of others? Do we still relegate such vital care to one specific group, or have we each undertaken to make ourselves not only disciples of Aaron, not only children of Moses, but also personifications of Miriam--using our hands and hearts, just as she did, to irrigate the lives of our people and of all people?

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oday's Torah Portion: Hukat

SUMMARY:

The wilderness narrative is interrupted at the beginning of this portion for a detailed explanation of a very obscure, confusing ritual. When a person comes in contact with a dead body, he is to be purified by being sprinkled with the ashes of a red heifer. The rabbis sought in vain to determine the rationale for this rule.

We then approach the opening scene of the final act of the drama describing Israel's forty years of wandering. Miriam's and Aaron's deaths are reported. The old generation is dying off and a new one is set to enter the land. Moses remains, however, as the towering father of his rejuvenated people until he, too, falters seriously in dealing with an uprising at Meribah, where he strikes a rock to produce water instead of speaking to it as God had commanded. As punishment, Moses is denied the chance to enter the Promised Land.

Then we read of a series of military engagements on the East Bank of the Jordan River, victories over Arad, Bashan and the Amorites. The latter two campaigns loomed large in the folk memory of subsequent centuries (see Psalm 136). They are classified as victories over "mighty kings." In another incident, after the people complain bitterly about their food, many die as the people are attacked by serpents. To remedy the situation, Moses is instructed to mount a copper serpent on a standard, and those who were bitten were instructed to look at this standard, after which they recovered.

ISSUES:

- I The therapeutic effect of the copper serpent led to its being adopted as the symbol of the AMA, but there are serious questions raised about this passage. Isn't it an idol of sorts and therefore a violation of the second commandment?

SOME EXPLANATIONS:

- A The serpent was a popular cultic item in later times, especially in the days of King Hezekiah (see II Kings 18:4), and this incident was written back into the Torah by those generations to show that the snake originated in God's command and therefore had a Divine "OK".
- B Wisdom of Solomon (apocrypha): "He who turned toward it (the snake) was saved, not by the snake, but by God." The Mishna adds that it helped raise Israelite eyes heavenward, toward God. If that is so, what makes this snake different from statues of Greek gods brought to the Temple by Antiochus? What of the Buddha? What of millions of Hindu gods? What of crucifixes? Do people worship the "thing" or an idea behind the "thing"?

- c. A modern scholar traces the bronze serpent to the Jerusalem of pre-Israelite times. Several have been found by archeologists in other parts of Israel too. While in other societies it carried meaning as a fertility idol, for Israel its meaning changed to one of healing and God's protective power. In Christian scriptures, looking at the serpent is a symbol for believing in the Messiah. How do symbols change their meaning over time and across cultures? Can you think of any objects that have? For Jews? For you personally?
- 2 For the Kids: What were the names of the kings defeated by the Israelites? Extra credit: Can you find, in our prayer book, where they are mentioned? (It appears in the Introductory Psalms section.)
- 3 The law of the Red Cow instructs us to seek purification after coming in contact with death. It is read also just before Passover (on Shabbat Parah) to remind us to approach the holiday in a purified state (by cleansing our homes of hametz). Although this custom is no longer followed (the Mishna says it was done only 10 times in history), even today, we wash our hands after returning from a cemetery as a way of "*washing away*" death.
- Why do you think we do this? Is there any connection between this and other rituals surrounding death? How does this tie into the idea that Judaism is a religion of "*life*" focusing on the world, this life?
 - The Midrash states that even Solomon couldn't figure out the rationale for this commandment, leading commentators to suggest that some mitzvot were enacted simply to test Israel's (blind) faith in God. Do you do things without needing an explanation for them? As a parent (or child), do you think an explanation is necessary for every request? How can trust be built up so that explanations aren't always necessary?
- 4 How great was Moses' sin of hitting the rock instead of speaking to it? Commentators connect it to a loss of basic trust in God (again, the theme of trust). Moses was fearful of looking foolish, afraid that God would fail him. But for that, did Moses deserve to have a lifetime of service wiped out?
- Perhaps it was because Moses and Aaron didn't act strongly enough to put down the protestations of the people. This was, after all, a new generation, one that hadn't seen the miraculous Exodus. But "*the disillusionment of old age rendered them mute and passive.*" (Plaut) Isn't it interesting that Moses had been told to "*talk*" to the rock to bring forth water; the power of speech is paramount? The people needed the guidance of Moses' words, and those words were nowhere to be found.

