

Yearning for Miriam: Hukat 2020

Listen you rebels! *Shim'u na ha-morim!* With these words, Moshe lashes out in anger at the Israelites, in the tragic moment where Moshe's leadership seems to fail. In Hukat, the first of this week's double portion, the people of Israel are gathered before Moses and Aaron. Once again, there is no drinking water in the camp. Once again, the people complain – rant - as they have so many times before: why did you take us out of Egypt? We will die here! We wish we had died already!

God directs Moses and Aaron to take Moshe's rod, and in the presence of the community, to speak to a rock and order it to yield water. They assemble the people, but Moshe speaks not to the rock but to *them*: "Now listen you rebels! Shall we get water for you out of this rock?" He strikes the rock twice with his staff, water gushes forth and the crisis is averted. But immediately afterwards, God imparts disastrous news to Moshe and Aaron. "Because you did not affirm my sanctity in the sight of the people, **you** will not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."

It is a shocking and tragic moment. After all they have done as leaders of this people, Moses and Aaron are now fated not to see the fulfillment of their mission. We wonder what went wrong for Moshe, why, after decades of strong leadership, he should have faltered. He has shown himself capable of facing one tough challenge after another. In fact, when faced with rebellion and unrest from the people, Moses has often shown greater patience and fortitude than God!

We look closely at the text to see what might be causing this pitch of emotion, this loss of self-control by Moshe. And just before the scene at the rock, we read the following: "In the first month, the whole Israelite community arrived at the desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. Now there was no water for the community..." (Num. 20:1–2).

Miriam has just died and there is no water. The sages of the midrash made a connection between those occurrences. They imagined a miraculous well of water that accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness because of the merit of Miriam. And that when she died, there was a return to dry, desert conditions.

Thus we infer from the Torah text that during the incident of the rock, as the people converge on him, Moses was in a state of deep grief. Moses was in mourning for his older sister, and that older sister was a very important figure in his life. Miriam also has lessons to teach all of us, so let us remember her this week as we read of her death.

The Torah makes only six brief mentions of Miriam, but in each instance she plays a significant role in the life of her brother and/or of the Israelite people. We know that as a young girl she watches over her baby brother as he floats in a basket on the Nile to escape the king's death decree. She courageously approaches Pharaoh's daughter and arranges, ingeniously, that the princess hire a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus returning the infant Moses to his birth mother for his early years.

In the midrash, the rabbis expand further on Miriam's actions. They conjure scenarios in which Miriam and the other Israelite women help lift the spirits of the enslaved, beaten down Israelite men. They imagine Miriam as inspiring her father, and all of the Israelite men, to continue to live with their wives and build families.

Miriam is called a prophet, the only woman to be named as such in the Torah, and she is described as the partner of Moses and Aaron in leading the people. At the Red Sea, she leads the women in song and dance, with musical instruments. Rashi wonders, how can it be that, on the run from Egypt in great haste, the women packed musical instruments? Because, he responds, Miriam had faith that they would have cause for celebration, so she suggested that the women bring along their instruments.

In the Torah and in the midrash, Miriam was a source of hope and affirmation of life. She was a nurturer and redeemer of the people in her own right, and also a nurturer and redeemer of her brother. So in our parsha, perhaps it is not the Israelites' demands that led Moses to lose control of his emotions. Maybe it was his own deep grief. The Israelites have lost one of their leaders and their water, and Moses has lost his big sister, who watched over him as a child, stood at his side through years of leadership and presumably nurtured him. It was not only the people who thirsted for the sustaining waters of Miriam's Well, but Moses as well.

So, while it is true that Moses lost his temper and did not obey God precisely at the rock, those details are secondary to the human drama played out that day. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, "the real story is about Moses the human being in an onslaught of grief, vulnerable, exposed, caught in a vortex of emotions, suddenly bereft of the sisterly presence that had been the most important bass note of his life."

At times of loss, we are vulnerable, our emotions are raw and tender, our world has turned topsy-turvy. At a Jewish burial, it always moves me the way we turn the shovel upside down to convey the sense that normal life has been up-ended. So it is for us now, in this time of COVID19: we are anxious, we have so many questions that cannot be answered, so many dilemmas which cannot be easily resolved. Our world is turned upside down.

And when we are raw and vulnerable, it is hard to be patient, with others and also with ourselves. We are thrown together with the same people, without many of our usual outlets and structures, and we must work to be our best selves. Like the Israelites, like Moses and Aaron, we too thirst for comfort, for the nurturing presence of a Miriam. In order to support one another through these hard times, and sustain our own strength, let us remember and try to cultivate her qualities:

- Courage, doing what is right even against all odds;
- Affirmation of life, as our highest and most important value. At this time, that means wearing a mask and following other precautions, even when we are tired of them and they are inconvenient. And finally –
- An ability, like Miriam's, to express joy and to anticipate it. Let us carry our musical instruments with us through these times, with the knowledge and the faith that there are times of celebration to come.

Shabbat Shalom