

Parashat Chukat 5773, 2013:

The Will and Well of Miriam

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 20:1-2, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

The Babylonian Talmud (*Ta'anit* 9a) notes the connection of the phrases “Miriam died there and was buried there,” and “The congregation had no water ...,” and comments in the following manner:

R. Jose the son of R. Judah says: “Three good leaders had arisen for Israel, namely, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and for their sake three good things were conferred [upon Israel], namely, the Well, the Pillar of Cloud and the Manna; the Well, for the merit of Miriam; the Pillar of Cloud for the merit of Aaron; the Manna for the merit of Moses. When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is said, And Miriam died there, and immediately follows [the verse], And there was no water for the congregation; and it returned for the merit of the [latter] two [i.e. Moses and Aaron].” (This, and all Talmud translations, *The Soncino Talmud*, underlining my own)

In sum, the Well (that flowed from the rock) that accompanied the Jewish people throughout their 40 years of wandering in the desert was *b'zechut* Miriam (in the merit of Miriam). This idea is derived from the juxtaposition of our two highlighted expressions wherein we find that the Well ceased to exist upon Miriam's demise. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on our above-cited Talmudic passage, therefore explains: “**had no water**: From here [we learn that] all forty years they had the well in Miriam's

merit. — [*Ta'anith* 9a]” (This, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Two other major sources, however, state unequivocally that the Well was not *b'zechut Miriam* but rather, *b'zechut Avraham*. The first dissenting view, also from the Babylonian Talmud, discusses three of Avraham's actions that he performed for the wayfarers (i.e. angels) in the beginning of Parashat Vayera:

... the School of Ishmael taught likewise: As a reward for three things [done by Abraham] they [his descendants] obtained three things. Thus: As a reward for, “[and he took] butter and milk,” they received the manna; as a reward for, “And he stood by them, they received the pillar of cloud;” as a reward for, “Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched,” they were granted Miriam's well. (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Metzia* 86b)

The contradiction between this Talmudic segment and *Talmud Bavli Ta'anit*, was addressed by the world-renowned Talmud commentator, Rabbeinu Shmuel Eliezer Ben-Yehudah Halevi Edels (1555-1631, known as the “Maharsha”) in his explanation of our passage:

One needs to be exact in their analysis: In the first chapter of *Ta'anit* our Sages said that the manna was in the merit of Moshe, and the Well was in the merit of Miriam, and the Pillar of Cloud was in the merit of Aharon. From that source we have a fundamental contradiction: “Why was the Well called the Well of Miriam?” [- if it was in Avraham's merit?] One can answer this in the following manner: Based upon the merit of Avraham the Jewish people would have deserved all of these gifts for but a short period of time. Once, however, [Hashem added] the merits of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam [to these wonders and miracles,] the manna, the Pillar of Cloud, and the Well lasted for a very long time – the 40 years [the Jewish people wandered in the desert]. Therefore, when Aharon passed away the Pillar of Cloud ceased, when Miriam died the Well departed, and when Moshe expired the manna was no more. (Translation, underlining, and brackets my own)

In sum, even though the Well came into existence because of Avraham's numerous acts of kindness toward the angels, it was known as the Well of Miriam, since it was on account of her merit that it remained with our people during their desert wanderings.

The second source in opposition to *Talmud Bavli Ta'anit* is that of *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah Bereishit* 48:10. Here, too, the Well is stated as something created in Avraham's merit:

Please take now a small amount of water: Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Simai: "The Holy One blessed be He said to Avraham: 'You have said: "Please take now a small amount of water," I hereby swear to you that I will repay your children in the desert, in their habitation, and in the Messianic future [for your act of kindness]. Thus the Torah states [in reference to the Well]: "Then Israel sang this song: Ascend, O' well sing to it!" This was the case in the desert... (Translation and brackets my own)

The difference that obtains between this Midrashic source and our Talmudic passage in *Talmud Bavli Ta'anit* is directly addressed by the second Sochatchover Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain (1855–1926, known as the "Shem Mishmuel" after the title of his nine-volume work of Torah explication). Before undertaking this task, however, Rav Bornsztain noted that the link between the Well and *Avraham Avinu* (our father, Abram) was already explicitly stated by *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) in *Sefer Tehillim* 105:41-42: "He opened a rock and water flowed; in the desert ran rivers. For He remembered His holy word with Abraham His servant." Given that this is the case, we are certainly mystified by the connection of the Well to Miriam. Undaunted, the Shem Mishmuel approached this significant difficulty in the following fashion:

...the physical aspect and hardness of the rock becoming softened and transformed into sponge-like matter – and like a pool of water – this was a result of Avraham's merit when he declared to the wayfarers to "Please take now a small amount of water and wash your feet" in order to purify them from the filth of idol worship as Rashi has already stated... The rock, however, becoming a source that acted as a spring replete with flowing waters – this was in the merit of Miriam, since in her very nature she longed to connect to her Father in Heaven – from the earth to the celestial heights – just as a spring flows [from the depths of the earth to the surface]... (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, in Rav Bornsztain's view, Avraham's *zechut* was the source of the rock's physical change, while Miriam's *zechut* was responsible for its continuous flow of water throughout the 40 years of our people's desert journey.

What act(s) did Miriam do to deserve this marked degree of *zechut*? Once again, we can readily turn to the words of *Chazal* (our holy Sages) to answer our question:

- *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah Parasha I, Midrash Tanchuma* (Warsaw and Buber), *Parashat Bamidbar II*, and *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Parashat Bamidbar* suggest that Miriam's merit stemmed from her having led the Jewish women in *shira al hayam* (in song at the Sea of Reeds)
- Rabbeinu Bahye ben Asher ibn Halawa (mid 13th Century-1340, known as Rabbeinu Bachya) in his Torah commentary on chapter 20 of our *parasha*, opines that Miriam's reward in regards to water derived from her having stood by her baby brother Moshe after he was placed in his reed basket into the Nile River: "His sister stood from afar, to know what would be done to him." (*Sefer Shemot* 2:4)
- Rabbeinu Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550-1619, known as the "Kli Yakar" after the name of his commentary on the Torah) in his glosses on *Sefer Shemot, Parashat Beshalach* 17, maintains that Miriam was deserving of such great merit since "... she provided food for the newborn baby boys. As the Torah states: 'So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this thing, that you have enabled the boys to live?''" (*Sefer Shemot* 2:18) Miriam, thereby, demonstrated tremendous *gemilut chasadim* (bestowal of loving kindness), a point the Kli Yakar underscores in his commentary on our *parasha*. Thus, the Well was quite fittingly in her merit.

On measure, Miriam emerges as an amazing woman. Whichever approach we follow, she clearly had an indomitable will that was dedicated to serving the Master of the Universe. Moreover, she was the ultimate *ba'alat chesed* (master of kindness) who steadfastly protected her baby brother's life and those of the many newborn males of the Jewish people whom she saved. Thus, it was through Miriam's *zechut* that the Jewish people had sufficient water to survive in the wasteland of the Sinai desert. With Hashem's help, may

Miriam's multifold merits continue to protect us, now, and forevermore. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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