

Parashat Chukat 5781, 2021:

The 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, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the many topics presented in our *parasha* is the passing of 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 juxtaposition of the phrases “Miriam died there and was buried there,” and “the congregation had no water ...,” is intriguing. *Talmud Bavli*, *Ta’anit* 9a suggests the following rationale for this linkage:

R. Jose the son of R. Judah says: “Three good leaders had arisen for Israel, namely. Moshe, Aharon 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 Aharon; the Manna for the merit of Moshe. 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 [that is, Moshes and Aharon].” (This, and all Talmud translations, *The Soncino Talmud*, underlining my own)

According to the *Gemara*, the well that accompanied the Jewish people throughout their 40 years of wandering in the dessert was *b’zechut* Miriam (in the merit of Miriam). Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on this idea, therefore explains: “**had no water**: From here [we learn that] all forty years they had the well in Miriam’s merit.”

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

... the School of Ishmael taught likewise: As a reward for three things [done by Avraham] 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 passage and *Talmud Bavli Ta'a'nit* 9a, was addressed by the Maharsha (Rabbeinu Shmuel Eliezer Ben-Yehudah Halevi Edels, 1555-1631) in his interpretation of our passage:

One needs to be exact in their analysis: In the first chapter of *Ta'a'nit* our Sages said that the manna was in the merit of Moshe, 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, namely, 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 and brackets my own)

According to the Maharsha, even though the well came into existence because of Avraham's numerous acts of kindness toward the angels, it is forever 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'a'nit* 9a is that of *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 48:10. Once again, the Well is viewed as having been 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’a’nit* 9a is directly addressed by the Shem Mishmuel (Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain (1855–1926). He notes that the link between the well and *Avraham Avinu* was explicitly noted by *Dovid HaMelech*: “He opened a rock and water flowed; in the desert ran rivers. For He remembered His holy word with Avraham His servant.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 105:41-42) Why, then, is the well linked to the merits of Miriam, rather than Avraham?

The Shem Mishmuel suggests the following:

...the physical aspect and hardness of the rock [that traveled with our people in the desert] becoming softened and transformed into sponge-like matter, and like a pool of water, 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 ... The rock, however, becoming a source that acted as a spring replete with flowing waters — this was *b’zechut* 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)

According to the Shem Mishmuel, Miriam emerges as a spiritual giant with an indomitable will, wholly dedicated to serving the Master of the Universe. Hence, while Avraham’s *zechut* was the source of the rock’s physical transformation, Miriam’s *zechut* was responsible for its continuous flow of water throughout the 40 years of our people’s desert journey. It is, therefore, known until today as the Well of Miriam.

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993, known as “the Rav” by his students and followers) further expands upon the greatness of Miriam:

Miriam is responsible for the emergence of Moses as a leader and redeemer of his people. If not for her, he would never have been imbued with great passionate love for his poor brethren. She suggested to the princess that a Hebrew wet-nurse be employed for the infant, preventing Moses from disappearing in anonymity and ignorance. (*Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, page 118)

For the Rav, Miriam was ultimately responsible for Moshe becoming *Moshe Rabbeinu* and the leader and redeemer of our people. As such, the Exodus did begin with Moshe, but rather, was a process that began before him: “The consummation, the full realization [of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*] happened through Moshe, but the Jewish consciousness, the Jewish *emunah*, the faith in the promise of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* [regarding the redemption], was not just incidental.” (Unpublished public lecture on Parashat Shemot; December 30, 1980, this, and the following transcription my own) It was Miriam who safeguarded the *emunah* of our people in her role as their leader prior to Moshe’s return from Midian. As the Rav states:

If not for her, perhaps, *Yetziat Mitzrayim* would not have taken place... So basically, after the people left *Mitzrayim*, the leader of the people was Moshe. Before they left from *Mitzrayim*, when Moshe was yet in Midian, during his long sojourn in Midian, the leader of the people was *Miriam HaNaviah* [Miriam the Prophetess].

May Miriam’s Torah leadership and bravery serve as beacons of truth to help bring the *geulah shlaimah* (the Final Redemption) soon and in our days. Then, as in the time of Miriam, the stirring words of Yeshayahu will be fulfilled: “And you shall draw water with joy from the fountains of the salvation.” (12:3) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.