

Parshiot Chukat-Balak 5783, 2023

The Fountains of Salvation

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, 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, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Chukat contains a mysterious passage that focuses upon a well:

From there to the well, that is the well of which Hashem said to Moshe, “Gather the people, and I will give them water.” Then Israel sang this song: “Ascend, O well, sing to it! A well dug by princes, carved out by nobles of the people, through the lawgiver with their staffs, and from the desert, a gift.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 21:16-18, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At first glance, it seems that this is an actual well, as Hashem said Moshe, “I will give them water,” an interpretation that Rashi (1040-1105) supports: “Then Israel sang this song, was said at the end of forty [years], but the well was given to them at the beginning of the forty [years].” In contrast, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (the Ohr HaChaim, 1696-1743), offers a strikingly different interpretation. In so doing, he maintains the well is not a well at all, instead, it is a metaphor for the Torah:

It is possible that this *shirah* [is not to be taken as literally having been sung over a well. Instead, it] was said in regard to the Torah. Nevertheless, one ought not to view that generation’s song [to the Torah] as an indictment regarding those that did not sing such a new song when the Torah was given as a permanent possession [to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai]—when it would have been fitting and proper to sing just such a song of praise. For without a doubt, this song of the Torah wherein it is called “a well of water,” received [this appellation] because ... the Torah is compared to water ... (Translation and brackets my own)

The Ohr HaChaim’s association of Torah with water is based upon the Talmudic expression, “*ain mayim elah Torah*” (“there is no use of the term ‘water’ that does not symbolize Torah”):

For it was taught: “And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water,” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:22) regarding which those who expound verses in an allegorical manner said: “water can only mean Torah,” as it says: “Behold! All who thirst, go to water [Rashi, water = Torah], and whoever has no money, go, buy, and eat, and go, buy without money and without a price, wine and milk.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 55:1) Therefore this means that when they went three days without Torah, they immediately became exhausted... (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Kama* 52a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my brackets and emendations)

Sefer Bereishit 37:24 focuses upon the nature of the pit into which Yosef was thrown by his brothers, and once again, water plays a significant role: “And they took him and cast him into the pit; now the pit was empty there was no water in it.” *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 22a explains our *pasuk* in this manner:

Rav Natan bar Manyumi taught in the name of Rav Tanhūm: What is the meaning of the verse that is written with regard to Joseph: “And they took him, and cast him into the pit; and the pit was empty, there was no water in it”? By inference from that which is stated: “And the pit was empty,” don’t I know that there was no water in it? Rather, why does the verse say: “There was no water in it?” The verse comes to emphasize and teach that there was no water in it, but there were snakes and scorpions in it. (*Koren Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor)

Initially, almost all of Yosef’s brothers sought to kill him, they settled, however, on tossing him into a pit, irrespective as to what dangers may have lurked therein. Their behavior toward Yosef ensured that the pit would be filled with snakes and scorpions, code words, in this instance, for blatant insensitivity and callousness. Little wonder, then, that “there was no water in it,” for when cold-heartedness reigns supreme, the Torah is pushed aside.

May the time come soon and, in our days, when the prophet Yeshayahu’s words will be realized. For, then, at long last, Hashem will be recognized by the entire world as the Master of the Universe:

Here is the G-d of my salvation, I shall trust and not fear; for the strength and praise of the Eternal Hashem was my salvation. And you shall draw water with joy from the fountains of the salvation. And you shall say on that day, “Thank Hashem, call in His Name, publicize His deeds among the peoples; keep it in remembrance, for His Name is exalted.” (12:2-4)

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** 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: [The Ray](#)