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Where is Miriam's "Well"

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Forty years have elapsed and the Jewish people are positioned to enter the land. The previous generation has all but passed and gradually the leadership would perish as well. Our parsha highlights the passing of two of these leaders- Miriam and Aharon. Subsequent to Miriam's death a water shortage develops and the crisis is only resolved through Moshe's miraculous intervention. Unfortunately, as he didn't strictly adhere to the Divine instructions, Moshe was punished by being banned from entering the land of Israel.

Based on the juxtaposition of this water crisis with Miriam's passing, Chazal assert that the supernatural water supply throughout the previous forty years was due to Miriam's merit. During their journey, the Jews were accompanied by a "well" referred to as Be'er Miriam- literally Miriam's reservoir- which provided sweet water amidst the parched desert terrain. Evidently, the Jews developed a personal fondness with this cistern – an affection which they didn't sense regarding other desert miracles. Years earlier Miriam herself had led the Jews in song as they witnessed the ocean miracles. Forty years later the "well" itself participated in this melodic chant. Despite Miriam's passing her "well" continued to escort the Jewish journey and this was indeed reason to celebrate!

Jewish tradition claims that Miriam's "well" continued to accompany the Jews far beyond the termination of the desert journey. The final verse of the desert song describes a "lookout point" atop a mountain (v'nishkafah al pnei hayeshimon) from which the "well" can still be viewed. Several Talmudic sources assert that the "well" was ultimately implanted into the Kinneret sea which itself can be viewed from the overlooking city of Tiberias. Though this silent tradition existed during the first 1500 years of Jewish exile it became extremely popular in the 16th century during the

Golden era of Jewish settlement of the north of Israel. Many Jews migrating from Spain, relocated to northern Israeli cities such as Akko, Tzefat and Teveriah. During this period, the great Kaballist, Rav Yossef Ka'aro, tagged the location of this well to an oasis on the southern bank of the Kinneret. Drinking from the lake where they believed Miriam's "well" had been lodged, he and his students believed that this water would convey supernatural abilities facilitating the study of kaballah and mystical works. Other people tagged the site of this "well" to an area in the middle of the Kinneret sea, viewable from the Old City of Tiberias. To this day, many local fisherman speak of an underwater vortex in the middle of the Kinneret which causes atypical undertows, known as a dangerous area for both swimmers and boats. In fact, about ten years ago a project of re-mapping the Kinneret was launched and a member of the team recorded unusual data in a northwest section of the lake and discovered a large underground water vent. In this week's Torah section Miriam's "well" was extended beyond her death; Jewish legend has it relocating to northern Israel where it silently observed repeated Jewish settlement.

The Midrash assigns the Heavenly desert clouds to the merit of Aharon. However, as we entered Israel, these heavenly clouds dissipated and were replaced by the Temple; the clouds of Aharon 'transform' into Jerusalem- the epicenter of the Divine presence and the capital of the Jewish homeland. By contrast, Miriam's "well" reinforces the northern region of Israel surrounding the Kinneret lake and Tiberias. At different stages of history, as Jerusalem became less habitable Jews sought refuge in Miriam's northern haven. During the period surrounding the destruction of the Second Temple (70 AD) Roman persecution of Jews rendered Jerusalem less viable and an alternate Jewish center was established in the North- centered upon Tiberias. In the

beginning of the 3rd century, Rebbi Yehuda Hanasi, whose yeshiva was located in Tiberias, composed the Mishnah- the first formal written rendition of the Oral Law. Thirteen hundred years later in the aftermath of the Spanish Inquisition, the north of Israel once again was revived as an epicenter of Jewish life, culture, scholarship and mysticism.

This enchanting “well of Miriam” has also penetrated modern Jewish folklore and culture. In 1909 Shai Agnon published a story entitled “Miriam’s Well or Fragments of the Human Experience” in which he extolls the Kinneret as the lake which G-d himself has encompassed and which contains the buried “well” of Miriam. The image of Miriam’s “well” has also been employed to name various educational institutions, synagogues and streets in modern day Israel -particularly in the northern Kinneret area.

As this desert “well” originated outside the land of Israel, Jews even attempted to access it in the Diaspora. During the Medieval period, Western European Jews customarily drew fresh water immediately after Shabbat, asserting that during this hour Miriam’s “well” flowed from the Kinneret in Israel and streamed to all underground aquifers; drawing long distance from Miriam’s “well” in Israel would

insure a successful and healthy week to Jews across the globe. Jewish communities far removed from Israel felt the presence of Miriam’s “well” and were able to taste the Kinneret lake from afar. Just as Miriam and her “well” had escorted the Jews through their desert journey she and her water basin remained palpable throughout the Jewish Diaspora.

In light of this role of Miriam’s “well” it is intriguing to consider Miriam’s original heroism in Egypt- particularly in the struggle for the survival of her younger brother Moshe. Left with little choice Miriam had cast him into the Egyptian river and had paused to observe the fate of her infant brother; unable to intervene, she gazed upon

her brother and watched from afar. From that moment she began ‘watching from afar” and she hasn’t ceased gazing upon Jews. In our homeland her “well” established Tiberias -the northern capital of Israel- as an alternate to what was, oftentimes, trying conditions in Jerusalem. Even Jews in the diaspora felt her watching gaze as they drew Kinneret-flavored water every Saturday night.

Finally, it is fascinating to consider the human role in extending Miriam’s “well”. In our parsha Miriam’s “well” is extended, in part, through human intervention. The “well” – once unconditionally and automatically present – was now “burrowed by princes and dug by noble volunteers”. After Miriam’s passing, the supernatural “well” was rehabilitated in part by human effort. Her death marked an important transition: Desert experience was governed by purely supernatural conditions; water sources emerged miraculously and without human effort. Entering the land of Israel called for a collaborative effort in which supernatural potential would be unlocked by human effort. The desert “well” would only survive if humans contributed.

The past winter saw the land of Israel blessed with unusually high rainfalls which have replenished the water level of the Kinneret. However previous rain shortages had severely depleted the Kinneret threatening the long-term sustainability of the lake. In response to the looming crisis, the pumping of desalinated water into the Kinneret had been planned with the hope of replenishing the water level of the Kinneret and reinforcing the health of the surrounding ecosystem. Once again we have lent Miriam as assistive hand. Once again we have rallied to extend the well of Miriam during a very delicate

transition. Once again we have asserted that life in Israel demands human contribution to Divine potential.

Awaiting Redemption

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s parsha, Chukas, our three great leaders - Miriam, Moshe and Aharon - meet their end on ever la’Yarden (the eastern side of the Jordan River). Miriam dies in Kadesh; Moshe and Aharon are banned forever from the Holy Land; and Aharon dies atop Hor Ha’Hor (Bamidbar Ch.20).

When we read this parsha, do we mourn for our leaders

who never merited to walk the breadth and depth of Eretz Yisrael? Do we recall that Moshe asked five hundred and fifteen times to be allowed to enter the Land (515 is the Gematria - numeric equivalent - of the word וַיִּתְּנָהּ, And I implored G-d at that time [Devarim 3:23], when Moshe repeatedly davened for the Divine decree to be rescinded)? Do we appreciate the severity of the punishment, handed

down swiftly from Above, banning our leaders from the Land of Israel? Or, perhaps, are we so used to the story of Moshe's end that we forget the impact of this gezeirah (Divine decree); not only on Moshe as a leader, but its effect on Jewish destiny.

R' Soloveitchik zt'l teaches, "In studying the parshios dealing with end of Moshe's life, we are confronted with a touching tragedy - the tragedy of a teacher who was too great for his pupils, of the master who is too exalted, too deep, too profound for his generation. It is the tragedy of the rebbe who has boundless knowledge, unlimited inspiration, sweeping erudition, is great in every respect, but whom his generation does not appreciate. Moshe died because his nation was not worthy of him ...

"The failure of Moshe to enter the Land changed Jewish history, because had he entered Eretz Yisrael, the people never would have been exiled. Moshe would have been anointed as Moshiach, Jewish history would have found its ultimate fulfillment and realization. If Bnei Yisrael had proven themselves worthy of communing with Moshe, of being his disciples, if they would have had the receptive intellectual and emotional capacity to absorb Toras Moshe immediately, then Moshe would have entered and conquered the Promised Land. No opposing power, no matter how great, could have exiled the Jews ...

"Moshe was ready to be Moshiach. However, the Messianic era depends on the people being ready as well. If Moshe's message had the necessary impact on the people, this would have been the generation that heralded Moshiach. Because his students instead behaved like the freed slaves on the previous generation, the Messianic era was postponed for a very long time. Moshe had to die without entering the Land ... Only when the people are ready to fully commit themselves to Moshe's teachings and he is accepted as teacher by the entire nation, with all willing to be his disciples, will the hour of redemption arrive" (Chumash Masores HaRav, Bamidbar, p.164-165).

The Thursday before last, my family and I took a "tour" (for lack of a better word) of the Har Herzl Military Cemetery in Jerusalem. It was one of the most meaningful 3.5 hours I ever spent. The sacrifices for our Land are many, too many, and young, too young. We stood before the kevarim of Uriel Peretz and his brother, Eliraz. We stood before Max Steinberg's kever. We paid our respects to Shlomo Auman. We learned the story of the fall of the Etzion Bloc, as we visited the section of the graves of the

kedoshim who fell in their attempt to defend the Etzion Bloc. We stood before rows and rows of graves, on that hot June day, in our holy city, in our holy land. We visited the final resting place (Baruch Hashem!) of Zechariah Shlomo Baumel, whose tzitzis - which were returned with his remains - lie next to his matzeivah (tombstone). We stood in awe before young men and women, holy Jews, who fell defending our people and our Land; HY"D z'l. And we cried at the incomprehensible loss of life that this Land demands.

Had Moshe entered the Land, he would have been Moshiach, and Jewish destiny would have been fulfilled. No churban, no destruction, no exile; no if's, and's or but's. No waiting, no "ani Ma'amin b'emunah shalaimoh b'vi'yas ha'Moshiach," it would have all been unnecessary. And alas ... it was not meant to be.

So while we give thanks to Hashem for the tremendous and unbelievable gift of Medinat Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael, we must remember the final redemption has not yet arrived. We still await its coming. As we prepare to enter the Three Weeks of Mourning for Churban Tzion v'Yerushalayim, let us pray for the final geula.

Dovid Golovanchic, twenty-two years old, was killed in an IDF training accident, in July 2017. At a Yom Tefilla in Efrat, Dovid's mother, Esther told the following story: A student of the Baal Shem Tov (BeSh"t) (d.1760) wanted to go visit Eretz Yisrael. He went to the BeSh"t before his departure to get a bracha for his trip. The BeSh"t gave him his blessings but said to him: Remember one thing. When people ask you questions, think before you answer. With that, he gave him his bracha and the talmid went on his way.

He came to Eretz Yisrael and enjoyed seeing the land, he marveled at its beauty and holiness. Before he was ready to travel back to his hometown, he went to the Kotel. A man came over to him and asked him what his name was and where he was from. He said, "I am a talmid of the Baal Shem Tov, have you heard of him?" The man said, "Yes I have." "Tell me," the man said to the talmid, "How is it in your hometown in galus, I heard it is hard." The talmid replied, "Yes it is hard in galus, but B"H, we are managing." And with that the talmid went on his way and returned home.

After several months, he went to the Baal Shem Tov to tell him about his trip. The BeSh"t said to him, "Tell me did you remember what I said to you, did you think before

you answered questions.” The talmid said, “Yes rebbe I was very careful.” He told the BeSh”T of the man he met at the Kotel, whom he answered and said: yes it is hard in galus but B’H we are managing. The Baal Shem Tov looked at him sadly and replied, “My dear talmid, the man at the Kotel was Eliyahu Hanavi... and you told him we are

managing. If you would have said that we cannot manage even one more day in exile, Moshiach would have come” (told over by Zahava Farbman, Soul Sisters, 7.20.18).

May we merit to witness the fulfillment of Jewish destiny, with peace and tranquility for our people and our Land, amen. בברכה שבת שלום.

When Our Teachers Fail to Understand Us

Rabbi Adam Friedmann

The failure of Moshe and Aharon at Mei Merivah is among the most tragic moments in the Torah. A midrash explains the story with a parable:

A king told his son’s tutor, “Do not call my son a fool.” Once the child angered the tutor, and the tutor called him a fool. The king said to him, “I commanded you not to call my son a fool, and you went and called him a fool? A wise person does not walk with a fool.” So too G-d commanded Moshe and Aharon in Shemot 6:13, “Do not call my children fools.” Once Moshe belittled them at Mei Merivah, G-d told them, “I commanded you not to call my children fools. Now that you have called them fools, a wise person does not walk with a fool. Therefore you will not bring [them into the land].” (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana 14) [In Bamidbar 20:10, Moshe called the Jews *morim*. This midrash explains *morim* as a version of the Greek *mōros*, meaning fool.]

This midrash depicts Moshe as a frustrated teacher who impatiently denounces his students’ incompetence. Why did this happen? The midrash conveys Moshe’s perspective on the events leading up to Mei Merivah. The well which had sustained the Jews was gone, and thirst was taking hold. The Jews fought with Moshe. They alleged that he had brought them into the desert to die. They asked why he took them out of Egypt only to bring them to a wasteland. As readers of the Torah, we’ve encountered this situation and these claims before. (Shemot 17:1-7) Moshe remembered them too, and realized with horror that after experiencing forty years of miraculous living, Bnei Yisrael had not progressed even an inch. They were making exactly the same mistaken claims as they had upon their first baby steps outside of Egypt. Moshe, the great spiritual teacher, despaired. After so many years of instruction, his students had learned nothing. This despair led to the outburst at Mei Merivah.

But Bnei Yisrael had changed drastically. Where the

earlier generation simply feared death from thirst, the new generation complains about an undignified and unholy demise (“If only we had died ... before G-d”). The lack of water is the very last thing they mention in their list of complaints. And while we may presume that the Jews who left Egypt complained about leaving out of some desire to return there, the new generation indicates just the opposite. They ask why Moshe brought them out of Egypt to bring them to this place (i.e. the desert), which has no agricultural resources. They are not asking to return to Egypt. They are anxious to finally arrive at a place where they can build their own civilization. The Jews who confronted Moshe at Mei Merivah did not expect to die of thirst; they knew that G-d would provide. But they were restless. They sought a life of dignity and holiness, and a land of their own.

This tense moment is a ripe pedagogical opportunity. G-d tells Moshe to show Bnei Yisrael that He sees how they have changed. That the staff of a distant authority which had symbolized G-d’s providence to their fathers could morph into the more intimate spoken word. Moshe and Aharon, too, stood on the cusp of glory. To become teachers par excel lence, and transcend the limitations of the old master encountering young, uncomprehending students. But Moshe reacted as though the present Jews were rehashing the complaints of the past. The great sanctification of G-d collapsed. In the end, that kedushah was attained through Moshe and Aharon’s removal from leadership. As if G-d said to the Jews, “It’s not Me who misunderstands you, just My messengers.”

How could Moshe and Aharon not have sensed the change in Bnei Yisrael? This is a tragic mystery. And one that charges us all to look carefully at ourselves and those we would educate, and see if despite surface appearances, there isn’t great spiritual potential just waiting to be revealed.

Self-Monitoring

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

One of the key techniques used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is self-monitoring. Keeping track of thoughts, emotions, or behaviors is a powerful intervention that affects change. For example, research by Dr. Aaron Beck demonstrates that when people who are depressed are asked to record thoughts that are self-critical, the number of such thoughts tends to decrease over time. The act of tracking itself causes the change. In addition, tracking also provides valuable information that can be analyzed to reveal a deeper understanding of what contributes to the thoughts, emotions, or behaviors and their exact consequences.

As Bnei Yisrael approached the land of Canaan, they requested from Sichon, the King of the Emori, to pass through his land. Not only did Sichon decline the request, but he waged war against Bnei Yisrael. This turned costly for Sichon, as he was defeated and Bnei Yisrael took over the land of the Emori. In what seems like an odd tangent, the Torah dedicates several pesukim explaining the history of Cheshbon, one of the cities taken over by Bnei Yisrael. Cheshbon, we are told, used to belong to Moav, but was conquered by Sichon from Moav before losing it to Bnei Yisrael. “About this” conquest of Sichon over Moav, the pasuk relates, “the poets would say: ‘Come to Cheshbon; let it be built and established – the town of Sichon’” (Bemidbar 21:27). Who are these poets and why do we care about what they used to say about the war between Sichon and Moav?

Rashi explains that the poets here are Bilaam and his father Beor, and the Torah is hinting at a backstory to set the stage for the next chapter in the Chumash. Originally, Sichon was unable to defeat Moav. It was only after Sichon hired Bilaam to curse Moav that he was able to conquer the land. When Balak the King of Moav later tells Bilaam that he knows that whomever he blesses will be blessed and whomever he curses shall be cursed, he is speaking from personal experience. Balak knows that he lost to Sichon because Bilaam cursed Moav, so he tries to hire Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael.

While Rashi—a self-identified peshat commentator—

attempts to expound the pesukim within the context, Rabbi Yochanan, quoted in the Gemara (Bava Batra 78b), seems to make no such attempt. The message of the pasuk is a religious and moral one. The pasuk needs to be read homiletically. The word for poets is “ha-moshlim,” which can also be understood as meaning a ruler or master. Cheshbon, the name of the city, literally means an accounting. Rabbi Yochanan reads the pasuk as telling us that those who are rulers over themselves, meaning those that exhibit self-control, are skilled at monitoring and analyzing their religious decisions. They calculate the loss incurred by fulfilling a mitzvah against the reward of accomplishing it and the pleasure derived from committing an aveirah against the loss suffered in the end. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in his classic mussar work, *Mesillat Yesharim*, uses this statement of Rabbi Yochanan as a springboard to discuss how essential self-monitoring is to religious self-improvement.

Yet, even though Rabbi Yochanan’s reading seems to be completely removed from the context of the pesukim, Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz argues that this message of self-monitoring is enhanced when understood within the context of Sichon and Moav. Rabbi Eybeschutz suggests that Cheshbon was a border town with a small population that the king of Moav paid little attention to because of its seeming insignificance. Sichon took over Cheshbon with ease and it then served as a strategic location for him to conquer other cities of Moav. The message for self-monitoring, Rabbi Eybeschutz writes, is that we too often ignore the “Cheshbons” of our behavior: those crumbs that don’t count as calories or the one small sin that nobody really cares about anyway. These “unimportant” oversights often lead to worse outcomes over time.

To gain a better mastery of ourselves, we need to improve our self-monitoring skills. Whether improving our mental health by tracking of our thoughts, emotions and behaviors in a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy framework or enhancing our religious commitment through tracking mitzvot and aveirot, we can become moshlim if we take an honest cheshbon.

A Lesson in Fear

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

Towards the end of the Torah portion of Chukat, Moshe sends messengers to Sichon, King of the Amorites, to ascertain whether the Jewish people would be able to pass through their land. Sichon refuses, leading his army to battle. The Jews emerge victorious, as Sichon and his army are defeated, and his land conquered. Up next was Og, King of Bashan (Bamidbar 21:33):

“Then they turned and headed north toward the Bashan. Og, the king of Bashan, came out toward them with all his people, to wage war at Edrei.”

If what happened to Sichon was a precedent, the fate of Og should have been sealed. Instead, we are witness to a strange message from God to Moshe (ibid 21:34):

“The Lord said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I have delivered him, his people, and his land into your hand. You shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites who dwells in Heshbon.”

The story continues with Og and his army destroyed and land conquered.

Where does the Torah record this supposed expression of fear by Moshe? Nowhere. Yet it is clear Moshe was afraid of something. What was he afraid of? More importantly, how was it appropriate for him to be afraid at this point? After leading the Jews to victory over Sichon, why would he assume matters might be different with Og and his army?

There are two well-known Midrashim that offer solutions to the above problem, and they are cited by various commentators. One Midrash points us to a verse in Mishlei (28:14):

“Fortunate (ahsrei) is the man who is always afraid, but he who hardens his heart will fall into evil”.

Obviously, taking this literally is preposterous, as always being afraid precludes the ability to do anything else of value. The idea of Moshe's fear must be of a more limited scope. The Midrash explains that this concept of “constant” fear is a trait of the righteous. Even though God has promised something to the individual, he cannot abandon the feeling of fear. The (classic) example cited has to do with Yaakov and his upcoming showdown with Esav. The Torah records Yaakov expressing fear, the logic being that he may have sinned during his dealings with Lavan. If such a sin took place, God's plan would change and the promise rescinded. The Midrash draws us back to Moshe and his fear. Moshe's

concern was tied to the possible stealing of loot by the Jews during the conquest of Sichon and his land, or a possible recent sin committed by the Jews. God responds, assuaging his fear, promising Moshe that even though Og was a great warrior, he had nothing to fear. While we can understand the source of the fear, we must still ask if such a fear is reasonable. Mankind is not perfect, not by any means. The specter of sin is always present, and it would be impossible to expect a constant state of perfection from any human being. Was Moshe being reasonable in this situation?

The other Midrash, referenced by Rashi, alludes to the “history” of Og. While not recorded in the Torah, Og is presented by the Sages as someone who lived quite the long and adventurous life. He is traditionally known as the messenger who delivered the news to Avraham that his nephew, Lot, had been taken captive. Now, Og was leading an army to his borders, ready to attack the Jews. Moshe's fear was tied to that initial interaction between Og and Avraham. Og's message was responsible for Lot being saved, and Moshe feared the merit afforded Og for this righteous action might be an obstacle to a potential victory. Siftei Chachamim challenges this literal understanding of Og's actions, citing a different place where Rashi considers the delivery of the message to Avraham one nefarious in nature. In truth, Og was trying to draw Avraham into battle against Lot's captors. Assuming Avraham would be killed, Og could then marry Sarah. Nonetheless, even though his intentions were evil, there still might be a merit tied to the result. In this case, Lot being saved, regardless of what Og was thinking, was the source of Moshe's fear. Putting aside how literal to take the history, Og clearly is not portrayed as a good person, and his aggressive attitude towards the Jews reflects a deep-seated hatred. How could Moshe believe Og was deserving of this merit?

In the first possibility, if taken literally, Moshe's fear is attached to an extremely unrealistic expectation. Furthermore, the approach of always being fearful seems a bit difficult to comprehend. It would be more reasonable to assume a change in perspective between the episode of Sichon and that of Og. Og was known as a great warrior, an Achilles-type reputation that would give pause to any military general prior to initiating battle. The Jewish people had fought and defeated Sichon, and while it was possible

there was some degree of Divine involvement, the Jews may very well have had the superior army. In other words, there was nothing about the battle that implied a necessary direct involvement by God. However, with the case of Og, Moshe realized there would be a greater challenge, requiring assistance from God. Once there is an “expectation” of Divine intervention, a thorough investigation is required. One cannot assume that because there is a need, God will respond. Creating a dependent relationship with God at our beckoning is a distortion of the highest magnitude. One must always be fearful when engaged in the arena of Divine intervention. Moshe saw this moment as very likely needing God’s assistance, but also understood there was no rationale to expect it. God reassures Moshe, that there is no need to fear. Yes, it is possible sin had taken place, but that would not create an obstacle to the Divine intervention.

The second Midrash is a bit more difficult to understand. Setting aside the history of Og, how can we understand Moshe’s fear? The point being made by Siftei Chachamim is critical to the entire approach. Of course, intentions are important when evaluating a person’s character. However, one must also consider the possible sanctification of God that results from the action. Yes, Og was not righteous, not by any means. However, the result of his message to

Avraham was an opportunity to showcase to the world Divine justice as well as the proper attitude one person should have to another when in a plight such as Lot’s. We are able to appreciate several important ideas from this episode. As such, Moshe’s concern was well placed. People did not assume Og was a righteous person; rather, Og and his army being crushed by the Jews could be interpreted by some as a profaning of God. Og was indirectly responsible for an introduction of profound new ideas and concepts concerning God, and his death at the hands of the Jews might send a terrible message. Thus, Moshe’s fear was tied to the potential distorted outcome from the destruction of Og. God reassures Moshe, confirming that while the fear had a rational basis, there would be no profaning of God resulting from the battle.

The interpretations offered by the above Midrashim are critical to bringing forth the appropriate understanding of Moshe’s fear. What could be interpreted on a literal level as an almost sacrilegious expression of lack of faith was in truth a concern tied to a rational concept. As is the case with these instances throughout the Torah, the Sages help guide us to the deeper idea and a more profound comprehension of the proper attitudes we must have in our service of God.

Can Death Be Sweet?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week’s Torah portion, parashat Chukat, we learn of the death of Aaron at Mt. Hor.

G-d speaks to Moses and Aaron at the border of Edom and says, Numbers 20:24, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲתֶרְךָ אֶל עַמִּי, Aaron shall be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land of Israel because of the rebellion מִי מְרִיבָה —May Meh’riva, the Waters of Strife. G-d then instructs Moses to go, together with Aaron and his son Elazar, to the top of the mountain where Aaron will die.

The text itself is stark, but moving. Perhaps because Aaron was such a beloved figure in Israel, the Yalkut Shimoni embellishes Aaron’s demise even further.

The Midrash records that Moses was reluctant to tell Aaron that he would die, so he, indirectly, engaged him in conversation regarding a scriptural passage that Moses said he found difficult and distressing. Together, Moses and Aaron read the selection in the book of Genesis regarding the sin of Adam, and the introduction of death

to the world. Moses gently informed Aaron that both he and Aaron must pass on. Immediately, Aaron felt the imminence of his own demise.

The Midrash relates that the People of Israel were unaware of the reason why Aaron, Elazar and Moses had gone up the mountain. Had they known the real reason, they would have strongly protested, or at least prayed that the decree be rescinded. When Moses, Aaron and Elazar reached the top of the mountain, a cave opened for them, in which they found a burning lamp and a couch. The Midrash dramatically describes that Aaron proceeded to remove each of his priestly garments, one by one, and placed them on Elazar. At that point, Moses said poignantly to Aaron, “Just think Aaron, my brother, when Miriam died, you and I attended to her. Now that you are about to die, I and Elazar are attending to you. But, when I die, who will attend to me?” The Al-mighty said to Moses, “As you live, I will attend to you.”

As we shall soon see, Moses' concern was entirely warranted.

Moses then said to Aaron, "My brother, go up and lie on this couch," and he went up. "Stretch out your arms," and he stretched them out. "Shut your eyes," and he shut them. "Close your mouth," and he closed it. At once, the Divine Presence came down, kissed Aaron, and his soul departed. Then, as Moses and Elazar kissed Aaron on his cheeks, the Cloud of Glory rose up and covered Aaron. The Holy One commanded Moses and Elazar to go. They departed, and the cave was sealed.

The Midrash relates that the People of Israel refused to believe that Aaron had died. After all, in last week's parasha it had been reported that Aaron had been able to stop the Angel of Death and stop the plague in which 14,700 people died. When the people became rambunctious, G-d beckoned some of His angels to open the cave and bring forth Aaron's bier which then floated in the air, while other angels sang praise before it. Thus, all of Israel saw Aaron, as it is written in Numbers 20:29: וַיֵּרְאוּ כָּל הָעֵדָה כִּי גָּעַ אֶהְרֶן ,And all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead.

In Numbers 20:26 Rashi informs us: מִיָּד הַמֵּד מִשָּׁה לְאוֹתָהּ . מִיָּתָהּ . When Moses saw Aaron's death by the kiss of G-d, he too coveted that death, and eventually, when Moses's time came, he also passes on with the kiss of the Al-mighty. But there, the parallel ends.

Great Power, Great Responsibility

Yonatan Kurz

When reading this week's parsha and encountering the infamous incident at מַרְיָבָה , a question comes up: If Moshe clearly was never supposed to hit the rock, why did Hashem command him to take the staff to מַרְיָבָה in the first place?

The Drashos HaRan and the Derush Hashem both say that the very existence of the staff would help in the miracle, as it would supposedly serve as a sign that Hashem was completely with Bnei Yisrael. The Rashbam says that this command of Hashem was not with the intention for Moshe hit the rock as he had done in רַפְדִּים but rather to show Bnei Yisrael the difficulty of their bitterness, as they were causing him an extreme amount of frustration.

The Or HaChaim says that this commandment was to show Bnei Yisrael that Moshe had Hashem's permission and was wielding the supreme power in his hands. However, with such great power comes great responsibility.

While Moses also died with the kiss of G-d, there was no one to attend to Moses. But for G-d's presence, he died alone. Moses, the teacher of all of Israel, the inspiring pedagogue of Aaron's surviving sons, had no one to attend to him. Not one of his children are reputed to have been present at his death. In fact, in Judges 18:13, which tells of the infamous idol of Michah, we are told that Michah sought out a descendent of Levi to serve as a priest for his idolatry. The Levite that Michah found to fulfill the priestly functions was none other than Yonaton ben Gershom ben Menashe. The Rabbis say that the name Menashe is really a disguise for the name "Moshe" – Moses. It is hard to believe, but rabbinic tradition has it that Moses' grandson, became an idolatrous priest!

How powerful a contrast of the two leaders, Moses and Aaron. Moses dies alone, and is buried in an anonymous grave. Aaron dies in his full glory. He truly has a "sweet death." For what could be sweeter than for a person who leaves the physical world, and knows that his children are following in his own footsteps, committed to serve the Jewish People, and will be donning the same priestly garments that Aaron himself wore during his own lifetime. Because they love him so much, all of Israel mourns for Aaron for thirty days. Not so Moses, who was left alone and bereft. Is this the price of leadership?

Moshe was representing Hashem's remarkable capacity, and that staff was symbolic of the massive task he had before him. After being able to restrain himself from responding to Bnei Yisrael's complaints time and time again, this instance proved to be too difficult for him, and because Moshe could not withhold his anger on one occasion, he received his greatest punishment.

We are often given a similar task of being incredible ambassadors of Hashem by having to represent Klal Yisrael in a public setting. However, sometimes it can be far too easy for us to forget that this incredible burden rests on us. Rather than act out in times that may test our anger and patience, we must instead uphold this great responsibility that has been bestowed upon us by HaKadosh Baruch Hu. May we continue to be great examples and envoys of Hashem by being שְׂמִים שֶׁמֶּקֶדֶשׁ for generations to come.