

The Waters of Miriam

Rabbi Daniel Fridman

Miriam's death in this week's Torah portion is immediately followed by an absence of water, leading to a crisis in the camp. Drawing upon this textual connection, the Sages determined that in Miriam's merit, a water source traveled along with the Jewish people through the desert¹. Consequently, Miriam's passing led to the cessation of this special Divine blessing of a water source in the arid deserts through which the Jewish people were traveling. It was, of course, this very absence of water, and the incident of *Mei Merivah* which would eventually lead to Miriam's two brothers, Moshe and Aharon, losing the privilege of entering the Land of Israel.

Reaching beyond the textual juxtaposition, it still seems reasonable to wonder as to the deeper basis for the association between Miriam and a source of water. After all, this is surely not the only occasion during which the Jewish people thirsted in the desert².

Perhaps we might suggest that the rabbinic association between Miriam and sources of water harkens back to Miriam's first, and defining, appearance in the Torah. When three month old Moshe floated down the Nile in his makeshift bassinet, it was his sister Miriam, standing on the edge of the water, who was simply unwilling to allow her brother to suffer the same terrible fate as so many Jewish babies had before him.

It was Miriam who was determined that the waters of the Nile not take her baby brother's life from him. As we know, her faith was rewarded; Moshe lived, and redemption would, decades later, come to the entire Jewish people. The waters of destruction, in credit to Miriam, became, to borrow from Isaiah's formulation, 'the wellsprings of salvation³.'

In this sense, Miriam's association with water is, in essence, about hope and optimism in the face of what most rational people would consider a hopeless situation⁴. And perhaps, this is the key to understanding the rabbinic connection between Miriam and the waters which the Jewish people survived on throughout their sojourn in the

¹ Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 9a. This passage notes that in the shared merit of Moshe and Aharon, the waters eventually returned.

² For the two other occasions, see Shemot 15:22, and Shemot 17:1.

³ Yeshayahu 12:3

⁴ The Sages' association between Miriam and the characteristic of optimism is famously celebrated in the Aggadic passage detailing Miriam's insistence that her separated parents remarry, even in the face of Pharaoh's decree calling for the mass murder of the Jewish boys. See Talmud Bavli Sotah 12a.

desert. For millions of people to travel in the desert, far from natural sources of water, seems like a hopeless, even suicidal proposition. It required enormous faith in the Almighty, who celebrates the trust and commitment of the Jewish people to follow Him into the desert in that most beautiful of Prophetic verses, “I have remembered the kindness of your youth, your bridal love, your following me into the desert, into the barren land⁵.”

If there was one individual who modeled this spirit of faith and optimism, who believed in survival and redemption when only tragedy and death seemed a foregone conclusion, it was Miriam. Thus, how fitting it truly is that the rabbis associated her merit, that is to say, her fortitude, her optimism, her undying hope for the future, with the wellsprings which the Almighty miraculously provided the Jewish people in the desert.

⁵ Yirmiyahu 12:2.