

The Waters of Miriam

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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.

There she stood, "*me'rachok*"³, at a distance, not only of the spatial variety, but in the darkness and seeming hopelessness of the moment, when the Merciful and Gracious One was silent in the face of the drowning of innocent babies. It is striking that neither her mother nor her father, in the simple reading of the text, were present. It must simply have been too painful. And yet, this young girl stood fast, undaunted.

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 See Yirmiyahu 31:3.

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 Yeshayahu's formulation, 'the wellsprings of salvation'⁴.

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 situation⁵. 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 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 land"⁶.

If there was one individual who modeled this spirit of faith and optimism, who, from her earliest years, believed in survival and redemption when only tragedy and death seemed a foregone conclusion, it was Miriam. And indeed, the Torah tells us that even when Miriam was banished from the camp for seven days as a result of *lashon ha'ra*⁷, the Jewish people simply could not proceed in the desert without her, *vi'ha'am lo nasa ad he'asef Miriam*⁸.

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.

⁴ Yeshayahu 12:3

⁵ 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.

⁶ Yirmiyahu 12:2.

⁷ Without excusing Miriam's clear sin, it seems relevant to point out that even this failure was a product of her optimism and faith. After all, had Miriam remained silent when her own parents separated as a result of Pharaoh's decree, Moshe would never have been born altogether. (see footnote 5). Miriam was convinced, out of a deep love for her younger brother, and faith in the institution of marriage and family, that Moshe's prophetic standing would be synthesized with the normal patterns of familial life. C.f. Ramban to Devarim 24:9, as well as Ramban's glosses on Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvot, Shichichat Ha-Esin, Number Seven.

⁸ BaMidbar 12:15. See Talmud Bavli Sotah 9b which makes this connection explicit. Though the passage might well indicate that the nation waited for Miriam as a *reward* for her waiting for Moshe, it seems equally plausible to me that the *z'chut* referenced by the Talmud indicates that Miriam's courage and faith was simply a necessity for the Jewish people to be able to move forward in the barren desert.

And, for us, millenia hence, the Sages' affirmation that Miriam was amongst those over whom the Angel of Death had no sovereignty⁹, and who was not subject to any desiccation, is testimony to the fact that the ultimate lesson of Miriam's life- boundless optimism and faith, in the face of looming catastrophe- is alive and well.

As members of the nation described by Yirmiyahu as "survivors of the sword"¹⁰, there is no question that our historical resilience in the face of ceaseless persecution and oppression is a reflection of the extent to which Miriam's indomitable spirit lives within all of us, and, like a wellspring in the desert, has sustained us.

⁹ Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 17a.

¹⁰ Yirmiyahu 31:2. See the view of R. Yochanan (Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 110b), who cites this verse as proof, contra the draconian position of R. Akiva, that the dor ha'midbar indeed does have a portion in the World to Come.