

Sermon | Parshat Chukat
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On Wednesday, Congress voted to establish Juneteenth as a federal holiday. The Senate passed the bill unanimously on Tuesday, and on Wednesday, the House voted overwhelmingly in support of the bill. If I am being honest, then I have to admit that I do not recall learning much at all about Juneteenth when I was a student. Of course I learned a great deal about the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation (including its practical limitations), but I did not learn about Juneteenth. In case you did not either, here is the short story: Despite the fact that the Civil War ended on May 9, 1865, and the Emancipation Proclamation, which was limited in power and scope, had been issued in 1862, black slaves in Texas were not emancipated until June 19, 1865. On that day, black slaves in Texas were emancipated when General Order No. 3 was read by Union Army Major General Gordon Granger in Galveston, Texas. The typical story that we tell about slavery in this country and how it came to an end is incomplete. And that is why it is so significant that Congress declared Juneteenth to be the newest federal holiday. Greater awareness will hopefully be coupled with greater opportunities to bring this part of our history into the mainstream narrative of who we are as a country, from where we have come, and to where we aspire to be. Sharing the stories which have been historically muted helps us to enrich our understanding of the world, and hopefully is a step towards justice and righteousness for all. And this is true both in our country as Americans, as well as in our community as Jews. Studying this week's *parsha*, Chukat, provides us with an opportunity to amplify historically muted stories, and thereby it reminds us of the value of bringing these stories, people, and voices into the conversation.

Numbers 20 begins, “The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקְבֹּר שָׁם, Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.”¹ Five Hebrew words; that is what Miriam gets to describe her death and burial. Sister of Aaron and Moses. Prophetess. Song leader. Miriam dies and the Torah immediately directs our attention to the grumblings of the Israelites when they find themselves without water.

This chapter starts with one death and ends with another, but the two scenes could not be more different. The closing scene depicts the death of Aaron the High Priest, brother of Miriam and Moses. The story of his death spans eight verses, which detail the process by which Aaron will ascend Mount Hor, transfer his status as High Priest to his son, and then die on the mountaintop. When Moses and Eleazar return to the community at the base of the mountain the entire congregation mourns his passing for thirty days. The juxtaposition is stark. Miriam gets five words. Aaron gets eight *verses*, some of which are even repetitive. I am not suggesting that Aaron should get fewer. I am well aware of the fact that they lived in a patriarchal society, one in which Aaron’s role as High Priest was arguably more significant for the day-to-day functioning of the community than his sister’s role. But Miriam deserves more.

We could look to the narratives in which Miriam’s role is pivotal, and highlight how critical she is to moving the biblical narrative forward. She is *the* key figure in Moses’ earliest days, watching over him and orchestrating his safe return home to be nursed by his mother before returning to Pharaoh’s palace. She is also a leader for her people after the exodus from Egypt. When Moses leads the men in song after the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, Miriam leads

¹ Numbers 20:1-2.

the women (albeit in a shorter song and after being absent from the exodus narrative since Moses was weaned).

There are also *midrashim* and commentaries about Miriam that seek to amplify and elevate her role in the narrative. These oral traditions were preserved by our sages and shared with subsequent generations to give us a more vivid depiction of Miriam and her life. One *midrash* is about Miriam's early years as a child in the house of her parents, Amram and Yocheved. When Pharaoh issued his decree about casting the newborn sons into the river, Amram was distressed and decided that it would be better for he and Yocheved to divorce than face the awful fate of their future sons being cast into the Nile. Amram and Yocheved were influential leaders, so other couples followed suit and divorced. But Miriam, wise beyond her years, turned to her father and rebuked him: "Father, your decree is more harsh than that of Pharaoh, as Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, but you decreed both on the males and on the females."² Thereafter, Amram remarried Yocheved, and the other Israelites remarried as well. Thus the family was reunited, paving the way for Moses to be born. The rabbis depict Miriam as a young woman with incredible foresight and a pragmatic understanding of their predicament. She helps to not only reconcile her own parents, but brings hope to the entire people. Miriam is a conciliator and unifier.

Another *midrash* about Miriam is derived from the verses of the *parsha* that I shared earlier. According to the Talmud, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were each significant sustainers of the Jewish people, שְׁלֵשָׁה פְּרִנְסִים טוֹבִים, and each was the agent for a significant gift.³ Moses

² Sotah 12a.

³ Taanit 9a.

brought the manna, Aaron brought the pillar of cloud, and Miriam brought the well. How do we know that she was responsible for the well? Because of the verses from Parshat Chukat! Immediately after Miriam dies, the Torah tells us that there was no water for the Israelites. Therefore, we can infer that the well of water was given due to Miriam, and that it was taken away once she died. In this depiction of Miriam, she is perfectly on par with her brothers. Each of them offers an invaluable gift to the Israelites. Aaron guides them through the wilderness, Moses sustains the people with food, and Miriam sustains them with water.

In each of these *midrashim*, we see how even the ancient rabbis of our tradition sought to elevate Miriam's role and establish a greater sense of parity between her and her brothers, even when the biblical text depicts the dynamic differently. When you examine the totality of a character, you learn a great deal more about them and create space to hear their voice and understand their role in a different light. Alice Ogden Bellis, author of *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, writes, "Miriam emerges from the bits and pieces as a multifaceted character: mediator, cultic figure, prophet, musician, beloved leader, strong, even threatening personality."⁴ When we elevate these otherwise muted and hidden stories, we are enriched. We have a greater understanding of our past and deeper appreciation for the tradition.

And this brings us back to Juneteenth, and the importance of hearing the stories of our fellow Americans, especially those stories that have typically be muted, overshadowed, and marginalized. On Thursday night, I attended a Zoom event hosted by the Tzedek Initiative of Congregation Agudath Israel in Caldwell, NJ in partnership with USCJ. It was called "Juneteenth Through the Eyes of Jews of Color." The panel was made up of four Jews of Color, and each

⁴ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, p. 92.

shared their perspectives on what Juneteenth means to them and how we in the Jewish community can be better allies to people of color within our own communities. One of the panelists, Kendell Pinkney, a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, challenged us to ask ourselves “Which stories will we open our ears to hear?” We talk a lot in the Jewish community about collective memory, about passing down stories from generation to generation. Whose stories, exactly, have we passed down? Which have we forgotten or overlooked? Perhaps we can mark Juneteenth by committing to hear the stories of Jews in our community who have different stories than the vast majority of us.

From the rabbis of the Talmud to modern feminist biblical scholars, generations of Jews have read the biblical text and scratched their heads at the seemingly sparse voices of women. Many have tried to elevate their stories, give voice to their experiences, and thereby enrich our tradition with new *hiddushim*, more nuanced understandings of the wisdom of Judaism. The celebration of Juneteenth reminds us to do the same as it applies to people of color, in American society overall and in our particular Jewish corner of the world.

May we open our ears to hear the silenced stories and raise up the muted voices. Happy Juneteenth, and Shabbat shalom.