

The Death of Miriam
Parashat Chukkat
July 13, 2019
Cantor Jamie Gloth
Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA

The first Jewish President is elected. He calls his mother. “Mama, I’ve won the election. You’ve got to come to the inauguration ceremony.”

“I don’t know. What would I wear?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll send you a dressmaker.”

“But what would I eat? I only eat kosher food.”

“Mama, I am going to be the president. I can get you kosher food.”

“But how will I get there? Washington has so much traffic.”

“I’ll send a limo. Just come Mama.”

Reluctantly, she finally agrees, “Okay, okay, if it makes you happy.”

The great day comes and Mama is seated between the Supreme Court Justices and the future Cabinet members. Just as the inauguration is about to begin, she nudges the gentleman on her right. “You see that boy up there, the one with his hand on the Bible? His sister’s a doctor!”

This morning’s Torah portion, *Chukkat*, contains **a lot**. Our commentators explain that it encompasses a period of 38 years. So I decided to focus in on only one small part. After the events following the return of the spies and the rebellion of Korach, we read this morning about the deaths of both of Moses’ siblings, Miriam and Aaron. Throughout the Torah, they are constantly overshadowed by their brother. But upon a closer look at their lives and careers, it hardly seems fair.

Let’s start with Miriam, who seems to live and die with little fanfare. Although older than her more visible brothers, her fame always seemed to pale compared to theirs. After all, Aaron was the first High Priest, and Moses had an intimate audience with God. Coupled with the fact that she was a woman in a man’s world, it was impossible to top anything they did.

In fact, I was surprised to learn that Miriam appears in the Torah only five times. Isn’t that incredible? Only twenty-one verses are dedicated to Miriam. It just goes to show, I guess, that the reality of history is what we make of it. My image of Miriam is a clever girl, an inspiring musician with a beautiful and mighty voice, and a holy, religious leader—a prophetess. When she speaks, she speaks her mind, even if it means criticizing her brother, the leader of the Israelite people. I feel like we know her.

But where do I get this perception? It is barely borne out in the biblical texts. In fact, in a few cases, mentions of Miriam are almost afterthoughts. We do not know if she had any children because it is not recorded whether she ever married. Even her death in this week’s *parasha* seems like it is just stuck in there: **“The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at**



Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.” (*Bamidbar* 20:1) And then it is immediately followed by, **“The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.”** (*Bamidbar* 20:2)

What’s missing in that passage? Do you notice anything missing? Did anyone mourn for Miriam? Did anyone take notice when she died? If they did, it is not mentioned. There is no comment on her death, just as there are very few comments on her life. All we hear is that when she died, they ran out of water and so they ganged up on Moses and Aaron and demanded that they give them water. Isn’t that strange? Her death does not even get a whole sentence—just half a verse. She died, they ran out of water, and they complained to Moses and Aaron. She didn’t even deserve at least a whole verse? Not even a proper obituary? Would it have killed anyone to wait at least a day after her death before they started rebelling again against Moses and Aaron? Forget about *shiva*; wasn’t she entitled to at least a day of mourning?

Miriam had been a faithful servant of the people. She was the one who guarded the basket of Baby Moses when it was hidden on the banks of the Nile. She was the one who came forward and persuaded the daughter of Pharaoh to hire the mother of Moses to be his nursemaid. She was the one who led the Israelites in dance and song after the crossing of the Sea. And she served her people faithfully and well for forty years. Why then is she treated so coldly, dare we say it—so cruelly—at the end? Why is she permitted to simply fade away into the background? For Aaron, they mourned for thirty days; for Moses they mourned seven days; why not anything for Miriam?

There seems to be some connection between the way Miriam lived and the way she died. Her life was always for the sake of others. We first meet her on the bank of the Nile, and then we meet her again at the bank of the Sea of Reeds. The first time she is there only for the purpose of saving her brother. She works her charm, makes the deal, and then immediately disappears from the story. The second time, she leads the Israelite women in a song of glory and gratitude. Unfortunately, her song is brief, just two lines, as if her song is not as important as that of her younger brother Moses, whose song is recorded in full. Hers is cut off, curtailed. Then, right after her song at the Sea, the Israelites run out of water and rebel. It is as if they have no time to focus on her song now; they need water and they need it quick; so her song gets cut off, and the focus moves from her to the search for drinkable water. And then, when she dies, the same thing happens. There is no time to mourn for her, to eulogize her, to pay attention to her death, because the Israelites need water, and they need it fast.

These three incidents in which Miriam and water are somehow connected are what lead the sages of the Midrash to draw a link between Miriam and water. Rashi wrote that from this we learn that all forty years, they had a well because of the merit of Miriam. When she died, the well dried up. As the Jews wandered through the wilderness, lacking adequate water would have been fatal. The power of Miriam’s integrity and piety, however, was such that God provided a moving well of water, until the moment of her death. Without Miriam, there was no more water.

That is the Midrash, but in the Bible itself, the Israelites do not seem to recognize any connection between Miriam and water. She died unappreciated, just as she lived unappreciated. In fact, the commentator Alshich wrote that the lack of water following Miriam’s death came as a punishment for lack of proper respect to her in death. The source of their water dried up, for it was as if her merit did not matter to them. In a sense, Miriam herself is like water—unnoticed, colorless, and unappreciated until it is needed, or until it evaporates.

Let's look now at Moses' brother Aaron. Aaron's death is very different. Listen to how the Torah describes it, also in this week's Torah portion:

At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron: "Let Aaron be gathered to his kin... Take Aaron and his son Eleazar, and bring them up on Mount Hor. Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son, Eleazar,. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead. Moses did as the Lord commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son, Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days. (*Bamidbar* 20:23-29)

Miriam's death gets only five *words*; Aaron's gets eight whole *verses*. Why the disparity? Aaron was especially close to Moses, and so his death was obviously a tragedy for Moses, especially right on the heels of Miriam's death. But the Torah goes out of its way to emphasize that the enormity of the tragedy of Aaron's death is felt by the entire Israelite people. Why does the text stress that the whole community saw, and that the whole community mourned for Aaron, but nary a peep about Miriam?

Baked into our history, our culture and our society are the seeds of inequality which we continue to experience today. Miriam is an accomplished prophet in her own right. She was a great leader, reminding the Israelites to celebrate their safety and escape from Egypt. Her piety ensured the Israelites had water throughout their journey. And it is because of her quick thinking that baby Moses would float down the Nile river and the exodus from Egypt could begin. Perhaps it is time to change the ingredients and re-bake our history and celebrate the accomplishments of both women and men equally.

Many of us have the custom of placing a Miriam's cup on our *seder* table to recall Miriam's accomplishments and her role in our journey to freedom and the promised land. Last year, Temple Aliyah officially changed its *minhag* to include the matriarchs at the beginning of the public recitation of the Amidah during our prayer services. We are intentional in our effort not only to ensure that women and men participate equally in the leadership of our community (i.e. our current president), but that decisions are made in a way that honors all our beliefs and our needs. Equality in religious worship, equality in recognizing the great accomplishments of biblical women is fine, but that is not enough. Equality must be recognized in our workplaces and in our society not as an afterthought but as the starting point.

The U.S. Law which requires equal funding for women and to allow equal participation is called Title IX. This opened doors for women like the recent U.S Women's Soccer Team World Cup champions, but we are still not there. Equality starts at the beginning when we are intentional.

As you probably know, the women's team's compensation, compared to that of the men's soccer team, remains the subject of considerable controversy. Chants of "equal pay" erupted after the team's victory over the Netherlands and during its triumphant victory parade in New York City. The team sued the U.S. Soccer Federation, its parent

organization, in March over gender discrimination. That followed a wage discrimination complaint in 2016 with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Weeks after the team filed the lawsuit against U.S. Soccer, 35 senators, including Massachusetts' own Sen. Elizabeth Warren, called for equitable pay for the team in a letter to U.S. Soccer Federation President Carlos Cordeiro. And with all this national attention, at least now more people are talking about it.

Back to the Torah: We know that in reality, it was Moses who had the most powerful relationship with God, but God knew that in order to lead a people, authority had to be spread out and carefully delegated among the leaders. When one realizes that it was Miriam who was in charge of the water, then it is not surprising that Moses, distraught over his sister's untimely death, struck the rock as a result of the pain and anger that he felt because of her death. And when Aaron dies, and the people are angered and complain bitterly to Moses, do we consider that moment just one more in a long line of "kvetching in the desert," or do we understand the fear they felt as a result of their having lost two special leaders in the wilderness?

Even though the Israelites didn't, this week, we should mourn Miriam's passing, not just as the sister of Moses and Aaron, but as a fierce and dedicated leader who worked to meet the needs of her people in her time. By properly acknowledging more Miriams—and more world class women soccer players—we can start to create a society of equality for all. May we continue to learn to appreciate the unsung heroes and leaders in our midst.

Shabbat shalom.