

Parshat Chukat 5778

When one looks at the journey of B'nei Yisrael throughout their forty years in the desert one sees that three water crises take place. The first occurs three days after B'nei Yisrael come out of Egypt and cross the Yam Suf. That water crisis is solved when Moses throws a stick into the bitter water and it becomes sweet (Beshalach 15:23-26). Soon after the second water crisis, the B'nei Yisrael are so desperate for water Moshe fears the people will stone him. This situation is averted when Hashem tells Moshe to hit the rock, which he does and water appears (Beshalach 17:1-6). The third water crisis takes place in this week's Parsha (Chukas 20:2-11) forty years after the first two incidences. The question is asked why the sudden lack of water after so many years?

Rashi brings a famous Midrash which states that the rock Moshe hit after the second water crisis became Miriam's well, which sustained B'nei Yisrael in the desert until she died.

Rabbi David Fohrman explains that if one looks closely one can find Miriam's presence throughout each water crisis: Miriam's shira takes place just before the first water crisis; at the second water crisis Moshe hits the rock and it becomes Miriam's well and before the third water crisis Miriam dies. Not only that, but if one take the letters of Miriam's name מרים and remove all vowels we can make three different Hebrew words:

1) מרים = Bitter, 2) מרים = Lift up, 3) מרים = Rebel

These three words can be found throughout the water crises. The word מרים appears at the first water crisis. The Pasuk says: 'כי מרים הם' - 'because the water was **bitter**.' At the third water crisis the word מרים is used (from the root מרים). The Pasuk says: 'וירם משה את ידו' - 'and Moshe **lifted up** his arm' in order to hit the rock and lastly, also at the third water crisis, the word מרים can be found when Moshe say to the people: 'שמעו נא המרים' - 'Listen, you rebels.' One can see Miriam everywhere in the water crisis. Why is she so strongly connected to these events?

If one looks back at Miriam's life it seems that Miriam is repeatedly saving Moshe from water. One of the first major events which introduces us to Miriam is when she watches her brother at the Nile and ultimately persuades Pharaoh's daughter to allow Yocheved, Moshe's mother, to be his nursemaid. This provided Moshe with a vital connection to his family and his people. If one examine the story

of Moshe being saved at the Nile we can see that it is a microcosm of the saving of B'nei Yisrael at the Yam Suf. At the Nile one Jewish child, Moshe was threatened by one Egyptian, the daughter of Pharaoh by a river. Later on the entire Jewish people are threatened by an army of Egyptians at the Yam Suf. Just like Miriam saved Moshe at the Nile by standing and watching with faith that something would happen, so too the B'nei Yisrael stand and watch at the Yam Suf for Hashem to bring a salvation. The pasuk even uses similar wording on both occasion. In the story of Miriam the Pasuk says: 'וַתִּצַּב וַתִּשְׁמַע' - 'and his sister **stood** from afar' (Shemot 2:4). At the Yam Suf Moshe says to the B'nei Yisrael: 'קִמְּדוּ וּרְאוּ' - '**stand** and watch' (Beshalach 14:13). Miriam taught the Jewish people that sometimes they just need to stand, watch and have faith. Hashem has a master plan. That's why when the B'nei Yisrael do have faith and the sea splits, Miriam sings her song as she taught B'nei Yisrael this valuable lesson. Subsequently, when the people threaten to stone Moshe during the second water crisis, Hashem tell Moshe to hit the rock which ultimately becomes Miriam's well. Yet again Miriam saves Moshe through water. For forty years Miriam's well sustains the people but then she dies and the well disappears. The B'nei Yisrael complain and Moshe speaks to the people saying 'שמעו נא המרים' - 'Listen, you rebels.' However, we can interpret the Pasuk another way as if Moshe is saying 'שמעו נא מרים' - 'Listen, Miriam...' If you look at it this way Moshe appears to be speaking to his deceased sister asking her how the B'nei Yisrael can ever get water from this rock when she is no longer alive.

It is interesting to note that when Moshe and Aron die the B'nei Yisrael mourn but when Miriam dies they don't mourn as they suddenly have another water crisis on their hands. However, one person does appear to mourn, Moshe. Rabbi Sacks explains that the lack of water was the first trial that Moshe faced without his sister and for the first time Moshe appears to lose control of his emotions. This is a common effect of bereavement. This explains why Moshe hit the rock. He wanted to go back to a time during the second water crisis when Miriam was alive and the rock becomes her well. However, on this occasion Hashem was showing Moshe that even though Miriam was not there, one can still learn from her to have faith. Hashem asks Moshe to trust him and speak to rock even though it doesn't make sense. Moshe in mourning for his sister did not allow himself to have this faith resulting in him hitting rather than speaking to the rock. Miriam teaches the B'nei Yisrael that when we can't figure out what to do, Hashem will find a solution, even one that seems impossible.

Adapted from Rabbi David Fohrman