

## *Chukat*

Families, leaders, and families of leaders are important themes in *Parashat Chukat*. This is perhaps timely as our media speculate about the possible candidacies of a second member of *mishpachat* Clinton and a third member of *mishpachat* Bush in the next Presidential campaign.

In Chapter 20, beginning on p. 883 of the *Etz Hayim*, we are informed in verse 1 of the death of Miriam: "Miriam died there and was buried there," and, in what seems to be an abrupt change of topic, in verse 2 and onwards, the Children of Israel once again gather before Moses and Aaron (presumably, while they were still mourning their sister) to *kvetch* about their traveling conditions. God (verse 8) instructs Moses: "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water..."

v. 10: "... he [Moses] said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?'"

v. 11: "And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank."

v. 12: "But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity ... you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.'"

And later, vv. 23-29, we read of the death of Aaron, preceded by a ceremony of passing on his priesthood to his son, Eleazar, and followed by 30 days of mourning by "all the house of Israel."

Our commentators raise many questions about these events, including the following.

### **The text mentions no mourning of Miriam, as contrasted with the mourning of Aaron? Why? What do we learn from this?**

Our bat mitzvah, Madeline, is named for her great-grandmother, Miriam Winter, so I know Madeline will be highly attentive to the following:

Miriam, Moses' older sister, is prominently associated with water. A Midrash from the Talmud (*Sotah*), cited on pp. 321-322 of the *Etz Hayim*, has it that Miriam as a small child argued with her father over Pharaoh's decree to drown the male children of Israel; Miriam's initiative made it possible for Moses to be born. Torah tells us that Miriam watched over the infant Moses as his tiny ark floated up the Nile to Pharaoh's daughter, and Miriam arranged for her, and Moses', mother to be Moses' nurse for Pharaoh's daughter; and that Miriam led the women in dance and song at the Sea in celebration of the Exodus. Rashi, citing the Talmud (*Taanit*), (see p. 884 of the *Etz Hayim*) notes the people's complaint concerning water occurring in the verse following Miriam's death and concludes that due to the merit of Miriam, a miraculous well accompanied the wanderings of the Children of Israel and supplied their water needs.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand of the Ner Israel Yeshiva in Baltimore, citing the *Kli Yakar* commentary, writes<sup>1</sup> that the minimal press given to Miriam's death indicates that the people got used to the presence of Miriam's well. They took it, and her, for granted (how many mothers and big sisters are entitled to make this complaint!), and therefore they were punished by the removal of the well when Miriam's merit could no longer generate this benefit for them. Rabbi Frand comments:

Many times, I have walked out of a funeral with the emotion "I did not fully appreciate this person while he was still alive." This is exactly what happened with Miriam. The Well was in her merit. But she died and it was "another day at the office" for the rest of the nation. Her righteousness and merit had been taken for granted. The Torah is telling us this is not right. When such a person dies, it is incumbent – at least retroactively – to try to understand who she was and to give her the tribute she deserved.

### **Why does verse 2 tell us the people "joined against Moses and Aaron," but verse 3 says "The people quarreled with Moses" (and not Aaron)?**

Rabbi Frand, citing the *Baal Brit Avraham* commentary, explains that the people wouldn't complain to Aaron because Aaron was more beloved than Moses. The virtues of Truth, Justice, and Peace are not always in harmony. Although these virtues were all present in both Aaron and Moses, Aaron was more associated with Peace (think of the priestly blessing, invoking peace); Moses with Torah - Truth and Justice, which are not always pleasant. Note we tend to rank Moses above Aaron, but this does not always mean that Peace is secondary to Truth and Justice. On the contrary, Torah teaches us we must use our heads when these virtues seem in conflict, e.g.,

- When God partially quoted Sarah to Abraham at the announcement that they would have a child, but omitted Sarah's remark about Abraham being old for the sake of *shalom bayit* – peace in the home.
- Deut. 6:18 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 1028) "Do what is right and good..." Since it would seem sufficient to say "Do what is right..." we learn from "and good" not be so zealous in pursuing truth and justice ("right") that we overlook the "good" – peace, which is sometimes advanced by our passing up what law and justice entitle to us.

### **What was the offense of Moses? What was the offense of Aaron?**

In addition to the obvious – striking the rock instead of speaking to it – Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch<sup>2</sup> pointed to Moses' angry denunciation of the people – "Listen, you rebels..." to make the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.torah.org/learning/ravfrand/5774/chukas.html>

<sup>2</sup> Cited in the commentary of Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz at <http://learn.jtsa.edu/content/commentary/hukkat/5774/moses%E2%80%99s-misstep-words-not-deeds>

point that Moses should not have lost his cool. Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor<sup>3</sup> says Moses' offense was in asking if "we," rather than God, should provide water, thus denying the miracle. The *Etz Hayim* commentary (p. 885) indicates that after Moses struck the rock the first time, Aaron might have intervened to prevent the second strike.

**It's clear from the text that Moses and Aaron did not perform God's command, but was what they did so serious an offense that they should be barred from entering the Promised Land?**

There are many commentaries on this question. One that I like is that it wasn't so much a punishment as a recognition that time had come for, as President Kennedy said, "a new generation of leaders." Moses was 120; Aaron, 123. They had led *B'nai Yisrael* for 40 years. Ask Janet Gunner – 3 years as our shul's president was plenty for her, and she's nowhere near 120. The time had come. Imagine entering the Promised Land with Joshua as the leader of the Children of Israel and Moses and Aaron still hanging around. No matter how deferential they would be, their enormous stature would mean their very presence would threaten to undermine Joshua's leadership.

This interpretation points to the importance of both preparing and passing on leadership roles in a smooth and timely fashion. As a result, it is our tradition that a Jewish community must build a Hebrew school before it builds a synagogue; we encourage our youth to assume leadership roles at our services and to run youth groups; our Federations have Young Leadership campaigns. While our tradition teaches us to revere the wisdom and the achievements of our elders, the continuity of our people depends on the preparation of its future leaders.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*