

Service of the Heart (תדובע בילה): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Evening . . . Mixtures and Beauty

The rhythm of light and darkness is deeply embedded in our humanity. Even if we do not know the precise time (in hours and minutes), we are conscious of the cycle of day and night. The onset of night, as evening falls, is often associated with some sense of foreboding, and the dawning of each new day holds hope and promise. Light is associated in many sources with good, with hope, even with messianic redemption: "a sun of righteousness . . . and healing" (Malachi 4:2). Our liturgy speaks of the transition between day and night, and uses the phrase "*uma'avir yom umeivi laila*" (God causes the transition from day to night). Using a verb that suggests an unfolding process, rather than an abrupt disjunction, reflects the natural flow of dusk, sunset, and night.

The end of the blessing (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, 28) presents a fascinating and even inspiring play on words. After using the verb *ma'avir* to describe the process of transition, the text uses the double entendre "*ma'ariv aravim*" (brings on the evening; more literally, God evenings the evening). We are very familiar with the Hebrew word *erev* as "evening," but only one transition of letters turns it into our earlier verb *avar* (transition). It is important to recall one other meaning associated with this same Hebrew root. The word *arev* can also mean "lovely" or "beautiful," as in the blessing for the Torah, where we say each day, "*Ha'arev na . . . et divrei Torat'kha*" (Make the words of Your Torah beautiful, 63), and in describing the beloved "*Ki koleikh 'arev*" (For your voice is beautiful (Song of Songs, 2:14).

So perhaps we can offer an interpretive meaning of the text that supports us as we enter into evening and night. God has built this "transition into darkness" into the fabric of our world, and just as we see the onset of evening, we recall the beauty in transitions and in the mixture of light and darkness, and we affirm divine power within and over us. We praise/bleed God for the beauty of evening, for guiding us even into darkness.

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Hukat 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Shira Epstein, Assistant Professor of Education, JTS.

Miriam's Legacy of Leadership

If you were asked to rapidly rattle off the top three iconic biblical leaders, which would you name? There is a high probability that Moses would appear on the list or, possibly, Aaron or Abraham. Even if valued, Miriam most likely would not make the cut. In Parashat Hukat, Miriam appears in one verse: "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" (20:1). Immediately following her death, "The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (20–2). I imagine that this week, clergy, junior congregation facilitators, teachers, and camp counselors will discuss and advance text studies that explore the following: the Israelites' restlessness and mistrust of their leaders to guide them to health and safety; Moses's impatience with the Israelites' enduring lack of gratitude and culture of complaint; the fallout of Moses's riffing on God's instructions to order a rock to produce water.

This brief mention of Miriam, however, inspired a series of midrashim that honor her as a leader and protagonist from Shemot through Bemidbar. According to the varied accounts of Miriam's Well, Moses's and Aaron's sister was the true source of the *meyyim hayyim* (waters of life) in the desert. Some versions of the midrash suggest that Miriam's Well was as old as the universe itself, created on either the second day (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, 3) or on the eve of the very first Shabbat (Avot 5:6). While our biblical narratives are infused with chance meetings and negotiations at wells, Miriam's Well was uniquely designed, and provided nourishment and comfort of care for the Israelites as they traveled with the Mishkan throughout the desert:

It [the well] resembled a rock the size of a beehive, from which, as out of a narrow-necked jug, water coming out in a trickle shot high up in the air like a geyser. The well rolled up mountains with [the people of] Israel and went down into valleys with them. Indeed, whenever Israel encamped, the well rested close by on an elevated spot opposite the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. (Tosefta Sukkah 3:11–13; Numbers Rabbah 1:2)

Many have adopted the modern ritual of placing a Miriam's Cup of *meyyim hayyim* alongside Elijah's Cup of wine at the Passover seder to celebrate Miriam's agency and leadership in the Exodus narrative. This ritual enables us to induct Miriam into the league of male voices within Haggadah. After all, God

created the *mayyim hayyim* to honor Miriam as a woman of enduring initiative: she watched over Moses as he floated down the Nile, and much later, lead the people in song and music immediately upon safely crossing the Sea of Reeds (Sefer Ha-Aggadah).

The legend of Miriam's Well offers a deeper understanding of Chapter 20. The Israelites were parched because, with Miriam's death, the Well disappeared (Talmud Bavli, Tractate Ta'anit 9a). Rashi comments on this, saying that the rock that "Moses . . . struck . . . twice with his rod" (20:11) was the no-longer-functional Miriam's Well. When the Israelites complained that there were "no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates" (20:4), they were expressing their profound alarm that the *mayyim hayyim* that had once watered their gardens herbs, seeds, and trees had dried up (Sefer Ha-Aggadah). Read through the lens of the legend of Miriam's Well, it is no wonder that the Israelites were disoriented by the sudden disappearance of their constant water source. Likewise, Moses's striking of the rock can be seen in a more compassionate light—as a desperate attempt to revive what had until now sustained the multitudes of people in his charge.

The story of Miriam's Well suggests that her death left a void that stretched beyond the lack of material sustenance. Miriam added a dimension of creative thinking and artistic, active, joyous participation within the Exodus narrative. Miriam's legacy of leadership is that she modeled for the recently released slaves how to unshackle their former identity, and to take pleasure in what free people have time, mind-space, energy, and desire to do—join together in song and dance:

And the women dancing with their timbrels followed Miriam as she sang her song, sing a song to the one whom we've exalted, Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long." (Debbie Friedman, "Miriam's Song")

While many discussions of Miriam's positive contributions to the Exodus focus solely on her role in ensuring Moses's survival, her leadership at the Red Sea demonstrates that she was not simply an adjunct character. She was an innovator of creativity. It would not be surprising, then, that immediately following her death, the Israelites' grief would manifest through a limit of creative thinking about potential sources of sustenance, or that when water reappears in Chapter 21, so does the Israelites' artistic creativity. We are told that the Israelites arrived in Beer, "which is the well where the Lord said to Moses, 'Assemble the people that I may give them water'" (21:16). It is here that "Then Israel sang this song: 'Spring up, O well—sing to it'" (21:17).

The reading of Parashat Hukkat offers an opportunity to honor Miriam and her legacy of Jewish leadership. While one of the central mitzvot of the Passover seder is to tell the story of the Exodus, we infuse the evening with multisensory delight, with song and movement, with the joyful celebration that Miriam modeled. We ask our nieces, nephews, children, and neighbors' children to sing along with the tunes that they know best. Next year, when we prepare for our own seders, we can opt to include a Miriam's Cup if we desire. Or we can whistle, clink a glass with our fork, or just sing with extra abandon. This is Miriam's legacy.

Music and lyrics by Debbie Friedman (based on Exodus 15:20–21), © A SIDE MUSIC LLC

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary Written by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

No Single Solution

At its essence, Parashat Hukkat brims with questions and mystery. From its opening with the curious purification ritual of the "red heifer" to the water crisis at Kadesh to the bizarre copper serpent of Moses, we seem to be wrestling with far more queries than answers. One of the most cryptic episodes of this week's parashah is connected to drought in the immediate aftermath of Miriam's death. The People rise up against Moses and Aaron, demanding water to drink. Moses and Aaron "fall on their faces." God tells Moses to take his brother Aaron, rod in hand, assemble the community, and speak to the rock. Moses strikes the rock, water flows, and God punishes Moses. God turns to Moses and Aaron, declaring, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you will not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them" (Num. 20:12). What was Moses's egregious act that he deserves such a severe punishment?

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hachohen explains,

Many commentators exhausted themselves in an effort to understand why this excessive punishment is levied against Moses for striking the rock rather than speaking to it. Clearly, Moses intended good as he wanted to bring quenching waters his people; he struck the rock exactly as he had done before immediately after the Israelites left Egypt . . . Torah, however, is coming to teach us that a leader who ceases believing in the power of the spoken word, who fails to believe in his power or persuasion, and who begins to raise his voice forcefully in place of rational explanations, is no longer fit to lead the Israelites into the Land of Israel. The ethical authority of a leader ceases the moment a leader begins to use violence and force; and it is for this reason that Moses is punished. The purpose is to demonstrate a vital lesson to future generations and leaders: when it is possible to achieve one's goal through the spoken word and through explaining one's self, it is forbidden to use coercion, force or the power of the stick (*Likrat Shabbat* [trans. from the Hebrew], 161–162).

Too often, in the heat of a moment, we resort to force, power, or coercion. Even when we are impatient with others and feel that we are indeed fully "in the right," as wise leaders we must take a step back, decompress, and use healing words that bring about a constructive resolution. Moses tragically missed his opportunity—and even more tragically, it led to the loss of his redemptive moment of bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land.

While thoughtful, rational words are important, it is also vital to learn another lesson. Whereas striking the rock "worked" in the immediate aftermath of the Exodus, it failed Moses in this context. A leader cannot act in a simple rote, formulaic, or Pavlovian way. Solutions must be tailored to each unique circumstance. Becoming aware of the power of thoughtful words and the uniqueness of every moment ultimately allows each of us to enter a "promised land" with an even more promising future.

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