

### PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Julia Andelman, Director of Community Engagement, JTS

#### The Blessing of a Sister

Among the many momentous events that occur in this week's short but action-packed parashah, we read of the deaths of both of Moses's siblings, Miriam and Aaron. The different weight that the narrative gives to the deaths of these two leaders has been noted often; while Aaron's death—and the associated preparations before and mourning after—is described poignantly over the course of seven verses (Num. 20:23–29), Miriam's death is dispensed with in a mere five words, reporting only the facts and location of her death and burial (Num. 20:1). The latter provides a classic example of the type of verse that would prompt our traditional commentators to declare, *ein hamikra hazeh omer ela darsheini*—loosely translated, this verse is crying out for a deeper explanation.

As it happens, the next verse—"The community was without water and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (Num. 20:2)—creates the perfect opportunity for the Rabbis to "correct" for the Torah's de-emphasis on Miriam at the end of her life and to celebrate her leadership of the Israelites by associating her with a traveling well of water that sustained them in the desert until she died (BT Ta'anit 9a). Dr. Shira Epstein gathers several midrashim about Miriam's well, and explains its powerful significance, in a previous JTS commentary on this parashah.

Miriam's connection to water goes back not only to when she led the Israelite women in song and dance after they miraculously crossed the Sea of Reeds on dry land (Exod. 15:20–21), but even earlier, to when she watched over her baby brother Moses as he lay in a basket in the Nile, waiting to see what would happen to him and ensuring—once Pharaoh's daughter found him—that it was his own mother who nursed and cared for him in his early years (Exod. 2:4–9). I am intrigued by the idea that the locus of Miriam's heroic act during childhood—water—becomes the focus of her communal leadership as an adult. As a child, she ensures her brother's safety from the unpredictable twists and turns of the waters of the Nile; in adulthood, she ensures the Israelites' survival through the unpredictable realities of nomadic desert life through the gift of water—and it is on the shores of water that she helps teach them to celebrate life's miracles as well. By the water, she takes initiative as a child in the context of family; by and through water, she nourishes and inspires as an adult in the context of community.

The Rabbis further develop the theme of Miriam's early prescience and agency as an older sister in another midrash (BT Sotah 12a–b). Upon hearing of Phar-

great thirst, and God turns to Moses, giving him explicit instructions for solving the people's misery. Moses must take his rod and *speak* to a rock. Counter to these directions, Moses strikes the rock, and water pours forth. Moses is then severely punished by being barred from Israel. The exegetical query that has and continues to plague Bible commentators is that of identifying the precise transgression that leads to this severe decree against Moses. A parallel story appears in Exodus 17. And there Moses indeed *strikes* the rock, leading us to believe that his misstep in this week's parashah must be something other than "hitting" the rock. What is the precise crime that warrants such a dramatic punishment?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch identifies one possibility among many. He writes,

At God's command, Moses took the staff again in his hand out of the Sanctuary where it had reposed for nearly forty years, and with this badge of his mission coming from God, he assembled the nation. But when, after nearly forty years, he saw himself directed to the people with the staff of God again in his hand, the staff which nearly forty years ago he had required for the people as testimony and credential of his mission (see Exodus 4:1–15), it hurt him grievously to think that in all these forty years, and with all that he had done in those forty years, he had still not won the confidence and trust of his people, and in the bitterness of these feelings he forgot his orders, and spoke, instead of quietly addressing the rock, words of deep reproach to the people (calling them *ha-morim*, "rebels"), and in passionate agitation struck the rock—whereupon water in abundance gushed forth and satisfied the thirst of the people and their animals. (*Commentary on Numbers*, 368–9)

Hirsch's explanation is insightful. He pins Moses's offense on his growing impatience with the Israelites. Quite beautifully, Hirsch gives us a sensitive window into the soul of Moses—the angst with which he has wrestled as well as how his leadership has been pushed to its limits by Israelite behavior. For Hirsch, it is because Moses speaks to the people in a denigrating and harsh way (calling them "rebels" in Numbers 20:10) that, ultimately, he must pay the high price of not entering the Promised Land.

Joseph Bekhor Shor, the medieval exegete from France, adds his own complementary insight by highlighting the second half of Numbers 20:10: Moses's transgression lay not in calling the Israelites rebels but in saying to them, "Shall we get water for you from this rock?" instead of "Shall God bring forth water from this rock?" By substituting himself and Aaron in the place of God, he gave the impression of diminishing God's role in this miracle.

May we learn to respect others through polite language (even in moments of anger and impatience), and may we always be cognizant of God's creative and miraculous role in the world.

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ah's decree that baby boys must be thrown into the Nile, Miriam and Aaron's parents divorce out of despair, and the rest of the Israelites follow suit. Miriam, only five or six years old at the time, convinces her parents to consider the larger picture and reunite, and again all Israel does the same. This averts the untimely end of the nascent nation, and allows for the birth of the prophet and leader who will bring the people out of slavery. Even before playing a crucial role in reshaping Moses's life and destiny at his most physically vulnerable moment, at the shores of the Nile, Miriam plays a part in actually giving him life; for, according to this midrash, he would not exist if not for her.

This year, the connection between the miraculous well that is associated with Miriam in adulthood and the tender image of her waiting at the banks of the Nile in the hope of protecting her brother (after having personally ensured his birth) resonated with me in a very personal way. My family recently celebrated my son's second birthday. He and his 11-year-old sister adore each other, despite the significant age gap between them and the completely different stages of childhood they are in. After the initial shock of no longer being an only child, she has risen beautifully to the challenge of being an older sister—entertaining her brother, teaching him, putting up with him, taking care of him, and protecting him from harm. She can make him laugh like no one else can, and she delights in each new moment of his developmental progress just as much as we, his parents, do. When I pictured Miriam watching over her baby brother Moses, foreshadowing the midrashim on Miriam's well, the faces of our own two children were immediately superimposed onto theirs in my mind, because I know that our daughter would watch over our son with the same vigilance and devotion that defined Miriam's relationship with her brother.

As I watch our daughter protect and guide our son in her own unique way, I wonder what elements of her childhood leadership we will be able to trace into her adult life in the years to come, just as Miriam's leadership in connection with her little brother blossomed into an adult version of itself as she matured. How will the traits and values that define her now as a sister evolve and take on new significance as she grows? I, like my son, was blessed to grow up with an older sister who cared for me, inspired me, entertained me, taught me, and anchored me in the world. I can only assume that, like Miriam, certain aspects of my sister's adult character and the gifts she brings to the world have their roots, at least in some small way, in the seriousness with which she undertook her unique role in my life, and the confidence and joy with which she guided me as we grew up together—she always leading the way by two-and-a-half years in our shared journey.

While most sibling relationships in the Torah are models of discord and competition, the biblical texts about Miriam and Moses, and the many rabbinic sources that elaborate on them, tell the story of a very different sort of sibling relationship: one of protection, care, and wise foresight, defining a partnership of leaders that lasts from birth to death. We focus on Moses as the Israelites' greatest prophet, teacher, and leader; but it was only the insight and initiative of his older sister—a prophet even as a child, according to the Rabbis—that made his leadership possible. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, in the same parashah in which Miriam dies, Moses loses his bearings and goes so far astray in his own leadership that he forfeits the opportunity to enter into the

Promised Land (Num. 20:7–12). Even as the emissary between the Israelites and God, Moses remained a little brother, powerfully supported and influenced by his sister's gifts and presence. For those of us blessed with loving and caring older siblings, our realities have always included them. How much might we take for granted the extent to which we implicitly rely on their guidance and spiritual reinforcement?

Of course, we must also acknowledge that, over the course of years, siblings will inevitably annoy, anger, and hurt one another at times, even in loving relationships. Those whom we look up to the most can often disappoint us the most profoundly. Miriam and Moses themselves go through such an episode, when Miriam maligns Moses for marrying a Cushite woman, and is punished severely for it (Num. 12). And yet their relationship weathers this storm. Perhaps Miriam and Moses can serve to inspire us during times of struggle in our own sibling relationships. It can sometimes take a loss or separation to make one realize how fundamentally important one's sibling really is in one's life, as attested to by Moses's sudden failure of leadership after Miriam's death. The Rabbis use the brief account of Miriam's death as a springboard to imagine and explore her gifts, as they evolve from childhood to adulthood, in the fullest way. Let us follow their example, reflecting upon and appreciating the blessings of sisterhood and brotherhood while there is still plenty of time to celebrate and acknowledge them. The Talmud compares Torah to water (BT Bava Kama 82a); let us see Miriam, through the water that is a core theme of her life, as representing and championing the Torah of sisterly compassion, care, and love.

The Rabbis assert that the obligation to honor one's parents extends to honoring one's older brother (BT Ketubbot 103a), and many commentators include one's older sister in this reading as well. How fitting; for, under the best of circumstances, an older sibling plays a role in the rearing of a younger sibling alongside his or her parents, and remains a treasured advisor and companion long after those parents are gone. I know that my son will benefit from the nurturing care of his older sister throughout their lives, just as I have benefited from the care of my older sister, and just as Moses benefited from the care of his. May the older sisters in our midst be endowed with Miriam's tender devotion to her younger brother; and may the younger brothers and sisters be blessed to grow up with such a deeply caring presence watching over them from the shores of their own Niles, sustaining them spiritually in their own deserts, and celebrating with them when they cross their own seas.

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## **A TASTE OF TORAH**

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

### **Moses's Misstep: Words Not Deeds**

With the loss of both Miriam and Aaron, Parashat Hukat marks a liminal and tragic point in the Israelite wanderings toward the Land of Israel. In the aftermath of Miriam's death, however, a dearth of water strikes the Israelites. They cry out in