דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Come and Knock on a Rock

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> John Ritter was ready for a change. "At the beginning of the seventh season [of *Three's Company*], the stuff about the three of us scrambling around for rent money was starting to get repetitive. . . . They had an episode about hiding a dog from Mr. Roper in the beginning [during season one] and then they had one about hiding a cat from Mr. Furley near the end [during season eight]. . . . That's when I knew it was time to move on."
> —*Come and Knock on Our Door: A Hers and Hers and His Guide to* Three's Company, by Chris Mann

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, across the Sea of Reeds, and in a number of battles. He was also a lawgiver, a teacher, an adjudicator, and an advocate on behalf of the Israelites. Then, after his 40 years of tireless effort, the divine right to lead the Israelites was taken from Moses. Why? Because he struck a rock (Num. 20:6–13). True, God had actually commanded Moses to *speak* to the rock; but still, the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. Interestingly enough, this was not the only time Moses was commanded by God to bring forth water from a rock. In the other instance, and under strangely similar circumstances, Moses hit a rock and everything worked out fine (Exod. 17:1–7).

Often, when we take on a new role, we feel excitement as we strive to succeed. As time passes, however, we may become complacent and lose our edge. This may be the time to step down, knowing that our best work is behind us.

Earlier in his career, Moses struggled to overcome personal challenges. He had a speech impediment and was incredibly humble, yet he pushed himself and became a tremendous orator and leader. Forty years later, Moses faced a new challenge, but he did not give it the attention it deserved—he merely did what he had done before. He was somewhat nonchalant and, perhaps, too comfortable in his role. Moses's finesse had faltered. The incident with the rock was evidence that it was time for a new leader to take the helm and lead the Israelites into the Promised Land.

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Parashat Hukkat 5776 **פרשת חקת תשע"ו**

Courses of Grief

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Bereft, I combed through the grass in Central Park at dusk when I realized I had lost my late husband's house keys. Yes, on some level, I knew it wasn't about the keys. His sudden death two months earlier had devastated me in much more profound ways. And yet, I felt desperate to find those keys!

Many are the paths of grieving, and they are irrational and ever shifting. This week's parashah, which includes the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, gives us the opportunity to reflect on the grieving process.

Aaron's death is the more well known. An influential leader and the first high priest, Aaron merited a public ritualized mourning. God prepared the people for his death by instructing Moses to enact the transfer of the high priesthood from Aaron to his son, Eleazar. The three men ascended Mount Hor, where Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and dressed Eleazar in them. When only Moses and Eleazar descended from the mountain, with the latter dressed as high priest, this signaled to the people that Aaron had died. And then the Torah tells us that all the people bewailed his death for 30 days; Aaron was the first biblical figure about whom we are told that the people mourned for such a period (Num. 20:23–29).

Miriam's death is simply recorded; nothing is said about the circumstances of her death or the people's reaction to it (Num. 20:1). Notable because her death is one of only four women's deaths mentioned in the Torah (the others being Sarah, Rachel, and Rachel's nurse Deborah), Miriam was buried, but we don't know by whom. She had led the women in song as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and had earned the designation of prophet, one so rare for a woman. Did her death not also elicit public mourning?

Surely silence about how the people mourned Miriam's death reflects to some degree a gender bias in the Torah that privileges men's stories. But there are other matters to consider, as well. According to Rashi, Rashbam, and other commentators, Miriam's death took place in the 40th year of wandering in the desert. The oldest of the three siblings, who had watched over Moses when he was placed in the river, Miriam could have been a full generation older than her brother, and thus quite elderly at her death. She had likely long since faded from public view, a function both of her advanced age and the fall from grace symbolized by her affliction with a skin disease after she spoke out against Moses's wife (Num. 12). Moreover, most of her generation had surely already died—the tradition tells us that none would enter the Land—and in the 40th year, few of the remaining Israelites who had exited Egypt would have remembered firsthand Miriam's crucial role in the Exodus. So perhaps the people didn't think they needed to mark Miriam's death in a public manner.

Yet through this account, the parashah offers us another insight into human grief. In the verse immediately following Miriam's death, we learn that the Israelites cried out because they lacked water. Their emotions reached a fever pitch when they exclaimed that they wished they had died with their peers during the rebellion of Korah rather than dying of thirst in the desert (Num. 20:2–5). But maybe the Israelites' sense of deprivation wasn't just about the lack of water. Perhaps they were caught unaware by the intensity of grief that they didn't realize they harbored, and they fixated inconsolably on the water, as if quenching their thirst might soothe their heartbreak. Many commentators note the association of Miriam with water, notably watching over her brother on the banks of the river Nile and dancing at the sea. In this parashah as well, the ritual purification by fresh water is described in the verses immediately preceding the report of her death (Num. 19), and then water is absent after her demise. Thus, commentators speculate that as long as Miriam was alive, the Israelites had drinking water; with her death, the water dried up. While the people grieved Aaron's death, they felt they literally would not survive Miriam's.

Sometimes, dying occurs gradually, and those who love, admire, and depend on the dying can prepare their hearts and minds for the impending loss. The dying can implement a succession plan at work and share last thoughts with family and friends. But sometimes death is sudden, and we feel as if we've been sucker punched. However death occurs, the course of grief shifts in unpredictable ways. At times we recognize our sorrow, and at other moments we realize how sad we are only after we have no water—or have lost our keys.

By juxtaposing the distinct treatment of Miriam and Aaron's deaths and their aftermath in this parashah, the Torah models the idiosyncratic courses of grief. It gives voice to the profoundly human and sometimes irrational ways in which we grieve, while hinting at rituals that might help us mourn our losses. And Rabbinic Judaism then built on what's modeled in this parashah: with water, we cleanse the deceased before burial and wash our hands as we exit the cemetery. The 30-day period marks one of the stages of grief during the year of mourning. These wise practices, and others that guide the bereaved individually and communally through the days, weeks, and months after a death, are reserved not only for men or high priests; we all benefit from structured ways to cope, even if they'll never fully shield us from the unanticipated ways in which our grief may linger.

So, yes, when my late husband died, it wasn't about the keys, and yet in some way it was, for losing the keys signified yet another way in which my physical connection to him had slipped agonizingly through my fingers. Among the many lessons of this parashah, then, the Torah signals us to acknowledge, embrace, and mark our losses fully, for as individuals and as a community we each need to find our own way out of the deserts of our grief.

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