

Chukat  
[Numbers 19:1 – 22:1](#)  
Triennial Cycle 19:1 - 20:21  
Haftarah: Judges 11:1 – 33 (alt. Judges 11:12 – 27)  
39<sup>th</sup> Weekly Parashah  
“Decree”

חֻקַּת

Shabbat shalom. Gut Shabbos. Shalom aleichem.

The first part of today’s Torah portion is what the Sages have described as among the least comprehensible parashot in the Torah. And if they were confused, imagine how I feel. How do I create a moment of [drash](#) (learning) from this week’s parashah? Easy. I will skip the hard part.

This week’s Torah portion has an elaborate set of rituals around the red heifer. You might call this pasuk, “How now, red cow?” Moses tells Aaron to find a red cow, like that’s so easy to do. And not just any red cow, but one that has not been yoked and is without blemishes. Then, Eleazar must slaughter the cow in a certain way, sprinkle blood in a prescribed fashion, and burn the remains in a certain way. And then, he can’t just take his cloak to the cleaners or go around high-fiving people. Eleazar must bathe specially, and he’s impure for seven days.

From here, the parashah becomes more understandable and relatable. Here’s where it gets interesting.

“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.” The Israelites start kvetching about being in the desert, not having any water, they wander day and night, and they likely have no WiFi. At least in Egypt, they had figs and pomegranates. In short, they are missing the comforts of slavery in Egypt.

וְלָמָּה הֶעֱלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהַבְיֵא אֵתֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַרָּע הַזֶּה לֹא מָקוֹם זָרַע וְתֵאֵנָה וְגֶפֶן וְרִמּוֹן וַיִּמָּוֶה אֵין לִשְׁתּוֹת

*Velamah he’elitunu mimmitzrayim lehavi otanu el-hammakom hara hazzeh lo mekom zera ute’enah  
vegefen verimmon umayim ayin lishtot.*

Why did you bring us up from Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? And there is no water to drink.”

Moses strikes the rock – twice. Water flows in abundance. But the water that flows is not pure glacier-fed water from the Alps. The water that flows is “the Waters of M’Reebah,” meaning the people quarreled with God. From there, the Israelites were prevented by Edom from passing through that corner of the desert to get that much closer to the Promised Land, so they kept wandering.

Striking the rock is a tempting piece to discuss, as is Moses' denial of entry into Israel. Out of all the many things to discuss in this powerful parashah, I will discuss Miriam.

Miriam was just one of four women to have the honor of prophet, and God spoke through her just as God spoke through Moses. Every Jewish person who came after her owes her a great debt. Without her, there would be no Jewish people. The same, of course, applies to many people in our tradition, but I want to take a moment to celebrate her life as we note her death.

When Aaron died, "the entire House of Israel mourned him" (Num. 20:29). Moses' death is foreshadowed and strung out, and he too was mourned (Deut. 34:8). But here, the Torah kills Miriam off and buries her off in six words, almost as an afterthought.

וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם

*Va'ta'mot sham Mir'yam v'ti-ka-veir sham*

Miriam died there and was buried there.

That's it. There are more words spilled on the sprinkling of the cow's blood than on the death of Miriam. Nu? As Miley Cyrus might say, does Miriam have to buy her own flowers and write her own name in the sand? Today, I will help Miriam write her name in the sky.

Miriam was a literal and figurative rock on which the Jewish people leaned, and she was closely associated with water. When she was young, she watched over Moses as Moses was rescued from the basket floating down the Nile. She arranged for Moses' survival in the Pharaoh's palace. On the far side of the Red Sea, Miriam led the women in singing and dancing in the Song of the Sea. Miriam's well accompanied the Israelites wherever the Israelites wandered, and when she died, the water died with her. Yet, with all of this the Torah gives us just six words of her death and burial.

Miriam exercised what some call quiet power. There are leaders in the Torah and our lives who have that sort of force. The Torah does not mention that Moses grieved, but he must have. I think God grieved, too. Perhaps Miriam's quiet power is reflected in her quiet death.

There is a direct correlation between Miriam's death and the water ceasing to flow for the Israelites. The literal and figurative life had run out for the Jewish people for a moment. While no official mourning is mentioned in the Torah, perhaps the short widow between Miriam's death and Moses' striking of the rock was the period of *aveloot* (mourning). Perhaps God was trying to remind the people that amid their kvetching, they needed to show

some *ha'karat ha'tov* (gratitude). Water is life, and without Miriam, there would be no life. The Jewish people owe Miriam their lives.

Rashi suggests that a rock rolled with the Israelites on their wanderings and that this rock was the source of Miriam's well (Ta'anit 9a). He adds some humanity to the story by saying that Moses was so overcome by the loss of his sister that he could no longer bear the complaints of the people. We have all been there, haven't we? In a combination of grief and anger, Moses disobeyed God and hit the rock. While that strike gave the people what they needed, and maybe Moses felt good for just a moment, that act closed the door for Moses' entry into the Promised Land.

Even though her death and burial are fleetingly mentioned, we know how much Miriam meant to Moses. In Bamidbar (Num. 12:1), Miriam and Aaron were talking against Moses because of his Cushite wife. Miriam was riddled with leprosy at the time, and Aaron turned to Moses, asking him to intercede on behalf of their sister. In what Lord Rabbi Jonathon Saks (z"l) called "the shortest prayer on record," Moses said five words –

אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ

*El na re'pay na lah*

Please, God, heal her now.

Even as Miriam speaks unkindly about Moses, he prays for her healing.

A *drash* on this parashah by Rabbi Ismar Schorsch suggests that throughout the Israelite wandering, it was Miriam who used her quiet power to check Moses' anger and frustration. Hitting the rock was Moses' first official act without his sister. Rabbi Schorsch wrote that "with Miriam's death, Moses had lost the compassion essential to his role as intercessor [between God and the people]." Rabbi Saks wrote that without Miriam, Moses "could never have become the human face of God." Without Miriam, Moses had lost his rock.

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were the greatest leadership team in Jewish history and one-third of that team has just died. Even in death, we remember Miriam's legacy. We celebrate Miriam by singing the Shirat Ha'Yam, the Song of the Sea. It is Miriam's dancing and singing that connects us today to our demonstrations of faith and our appreciation for God as our protector. Miriam said *Shiru Ladoni*, sing out to the Redeemer a new song; tell about the miracles God has given us. We sing about Miriam at every Shabbat, and we celebrate Miriam at every seder table.

This is a good time to express the concept of *ha'karat ha'tov*, literally an expression of goodness. The children are annoying you, but at least you have children. I stained my shirt, but at least I have a shirt. I have no water, but *Dayeinu*, I am no longer a slave. Yet, on the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites were

metaphorically lost. They made their own water bitter. They were incapable of thankfulness when things turned sour.

Anne Lamont said that “[t]he opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness, and discomfort and letting it be there until some light returns.” Even when things suck, we have a faith built on gratitude.

Every morning, we wake up and say the *Birkat ha-Shachar*, blessing the dawn. We say “modeh (modah) ani.” Thank you, God. You have returned by breath and my compassion.

The parashah took just six words for Miriam’s death and burial. While Miriam might seem to get the short end of the stick, her life’s work is part of our tradition. Her power was quiet, her death was silent, but her contributions are eternal. For that, we offer her *HaKarat HaTov*.

I will conclude, if I may be so bold, to offer a blessing to you and a hope that you will bless me in return. Join me in taking a moment to think about and to offer a prayer of thanks for those people around us who have toiled in the background but whose flame burned even when no one else could see it. Some of those people may be in the Olam Ha’Bah, the world to come, but shine as brightly in our hearts as if they were standing here today. Some of those people might be with us here in the physical world. Some may be in the chair next to us.

Let us all take a moment to learn the lessons of Miriam. Sing and dance, even if our heart breaks. Let us be a wellspring to others. Let us be the human face of God.

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