

ONEG SHABBAS

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A Drinking Solution: Miriam's Well

Miriam Passes & Water is Lacking

Early on in our Torah portion, we read of the passing of Miriam, followed by the observation of the absence of water, immediately followed by fighting (Num. 20:1-5):

(1) 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. (2) The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. (3) The people quarreled with Moses, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of The LORD! (4) Why have you brought The LORD's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? (5) Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!"

(א) וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צִן בַּיּוֹם הַרְּאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֻׁב הָעָם בְּקֶדֶשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם; וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן: (ג) וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר וְלֹא גִּוְעַנּוּ בְּגֹעַ אֲחִינוּ לִפְנֵי ה': (ד) וְלָמָּה הַבֵּאתֶם אֶת־קְהָל ה' אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לָמוֹת שָׁם אֲנָחְנוּ וּבְעֵינֵינוּ: (ה) וְלָמָּה הִעָלִיתֶנּוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהָבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַרָּע הַזֶּה לֵאמֹר לֹא מָקוֹם זֶה וַתֹּאמְרוּ וְכִפְּרוּ רִמּוֹן וַמֵּיִם אֵין לְשָׁתוֹת

For readers of this publication, this final word likely stands out to us - "drink". Indeed, while verse 2 mentions there was no water for the community, part of their complaint in verse 5 is that there is no water to drink. Of course, water can be used for bathing or other such uses, but not even having water to drink is a critical matter.

Miriam and Water

Another aspect of the above is the difficulty in ignoring the juxtaposition of Miriam's passing and the absence of water. In fact, this connection is articulated by a turn-of-the-third century sage (*Ta'anit* 9a):

Rabbi Yossi, son of Rabbi Yehudah, says: "Three good sustainers rose up for the Jewish people; they are: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And three good gifts were given through their agency, and these are they: the well, the cloud, and manna. The well in the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud in the merit of Aaron; manna in the merit of Moses.

רבי יוסי ברבי יהודה אומר: שלשה פרנסים טובים עמדו לישראל, אלו הן: משה ואהרן ומרים. ושלש מתנות טובות ניתנו על ידם, ואלו הן: באר, ענן, ומן. באר – בזכות מרים, עמוד ענן – בזכות אהרן, מן – בזכות משה.



Commenting on Rabbi Yossi, son of Rabbi Yehudah's connection of these three siblings to these special occurrences for our ancestors, an anonymous sage of the Talmud then states (*Ta'anit* 9a):

When Miriam died, the well disappeared, as it is stated: "And Miriam died there" (Num. 20:1), and it says thereafter in the next verse: "And there was no water for the congregation" (Num. 20:2). But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.

מתה מרים – נסתלק הבאר, שנאמר: "ותמת שם מרים", וכתוב בתריה: "ולא היה מים לעדה", וחזרה בזכות שניהן

It certainly seems as if this well disappeared when she passed, although what does it mean that the well returned in Moses' and Aaron's merit? Sharing her take on this Talmudic perspective, Maharat Ruth Balinsky-Friedman shared on episode 36 of *The Jewish Drinking Show*:

There's a connection between Miriam and water especially because, right after she dies, then they complain about there not being any water and so what the Gemara then alleges is that, when Miriam died, the well disappeared, which is why the people then complain that there's no water, but that, luckily, through Moshe and Aharon's merit, it then returned. It seems to be confined to the wilderness and also like we said, a logical thing to think is: "How are you going to have water?" There must have been some magical access to water. We know there was magical access to food with the *man*, so water, there also must have been.

It certainly seems as if this well disappeared when she passed; indeed, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) (popularly known as Rashi) drawing upon both Rabbi Yossi, son of Rabbi Yehudah's statement, as well as the anonymous statement from the Talmud (ד"ה ולא היה מים) (לעדה):

From this verse, we understand that they had this well for 40 years on account of Miriam's merit.

מכאן שכל ארבעים שנה היה להם הבאר בזכות מרים

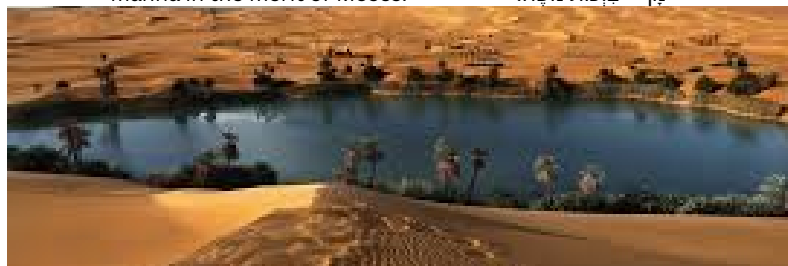
While it does not ostensibly seem as if it was necessarily Moshe and Aharon's merit that the waters returned, yet, they still maintained some merit in that they were commanded to speak to the rock to yield water (Numbers 20:8), almost as if it would be restarting the relationship between the leaders and the rock [in order to provide water].

How come Moshe and Aharon didn't merit the well in the first place? This is something that Rabbi Shabbethai ben Yoseph Bass (1641-1718) considers (שפתי חכמים, במדבר כ"ב, ד"ה הבאר בזכות מרים):

For immediately after Miriam died, they no longer had water. You might ask: Why was the well not in Aharon's

שהרי מיד כשמתה מרים לא הי' להם עוד מים. ואם תאמר למה

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or Moshe's merit? The answer is that it was in the merit of Miriam waiting for Moshe by the water, to see what would happen to him when he was placed there in the box [as a baby] (Ex. 2:4). In return, this merit of the well, i.e., the water that The Holy One Blessed Be He provided for the congregation was on her behalf.

לא היה הבאר בזכות אהרן או משה, וי"ל בזכות שהמתין למשה על המים לראות מה יעשה לו כשהושלך בתיבה, לכן נעשה לה זכות זה של באר דהיינו מים שנתן הקב"ה מים לעדה בשבילה

Miriam's Well

For more on the topic of Miriam's Well, you can check out the "Miriam's Well" episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show*, featuring Maharat Ruth Balinsky-Friedman.



The episode is available on YouTube and wherever you prefer listening to podcasts, as well as at JewishDrinking.com/MiriamsWell

The Well Created on the Twilight of Creation

Perhaps one of the most famous mentions of this well is not one that explicitly mentions Miriam, but does specify that the "mouth of the well" is one of the ten items that were created on the twilight of the creation Shabbat (Avot 5:6). Specifying Miriam's connection with this well is Rabbi Obadiah ben Abraham of Bartinura (1445-1515), who wrote (ברטנורא על משנה אבות ה"ו, ד"ה ופי הבאר):

Miriam's well that went with Israel in the wilderness on all of the journeys. And some say, that it opened its mouth and uttered song, as it stated, "rise up, O well; answer it" (Numbers 21:17).

בארה של מרים שהיתה הולכת עם ישראל במדבר בכל המסעות. ויש אומרים, שפתחה פיה ואמרה שירה, שנאמר (במדבר כא) עלי באר ענו לה

Description of The Well

One early rabbinic text provides quite the description of how this well worked to provide our ancestors with enough water to drink (Tosefta *Sukkah* 3:3)

...And thus was the well that was with Israel in the wilderness: it was like a rock perforated like a sieve, bubbling and rising like the mouth of this flask. It would go up with them to the mountains and descend with them into the valleys. Wherever Israel encamped, it would rest across from them, at a high place opposite the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. The leaders of Israel would come and circle it with their staffs and recite over it the song, as it is said: "Spring up, O well—sing to it!" "Spring up, O well!" (Numbers 21:17). And the waters would bubble up and rise like a pillar upward, and each person would draw with his staff—each according to his tribe and each according to his family, as it is said: "The well which the princes dug..." (Numbers 21:18).

וכך היתה הבאר שהיתה עם ישראל במדבר דומה לסלע מלא [כברה] מפרפרת ועולה כמפי הפך הזה עולה עמהן להרים ויורדת עמהן לאיות מקום שישאל שורין הוא שורה כנגדן במקום גבוהה כנגד פתחו של אהל מועד נשיאי ישראל באין וסובבין אותה במקלותיהן ואומרים עליה את השירה (במדבר כא) עלי באר ענו לה עלי באר והמים מבעבעין ועולין כעמוד למעלה וכל אחד ואחד מושך במקלו איש לשבטו ואיש למשפחתו [שנא] (שם) באר חפרוה שרים וגו'

Midway Through 2025

Now that we have hit the midway point of 2025, I wanted to take a moment both to share the episodes published of *The Jewish Drinking Show* so far this year, as well as to thank the members of our Board of Directors:

- Ep. 167 – Drunken *Birkat HaMazon*
- Ep. 168 – Drunken *Shema*
- Ep. 169 – The Jew Who Owned George Dickel Whisky with Clay Shwab
- Ep. 170 – Biblical Beverages with Professor John Anthony Dunne
- Ep. 171 – Wine and Drinking in the Book of Daniel with Professor Caryn Tamber-Rosenau
- Ep. 172 – Women Drinking on Purim? with Rabbanit Debbie Zimmerman
- Ep. 173 – Teenagers in Hospitals in Israel on Purim with Dr. Eric Scheier
- Ep. 174 – Shul Kiddushes with Prof. Michal Shaul
- Ep. 175 – A Kosher Wine Concierge Service in Israel with Eli Freedman
- Ep. 176 – Shmaltz Brewing Transitions Through Experimentation with Rabbi Jesse Epstein
- Ep. 177 – Rabbi Yehzekel Landau's Responsum on Isinglass in Mead with Rabbi Elli Fischer
- Ep. 178 – Rabbi Yair Hayim Bacharach on Jews Drinking Gentile Wine with Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

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Conclusion

While there is no explicit connection of the well of water flowing with Miriam, it is hard to ignore in this week's Torah portion that it stopped flowing upon her death. As such, our sages articulated this implicit connection, providing us with the consideration that her merit yielded water through this rock/well during her lifetime. Moreover, it was able to furnish enough water supply to provide sufficient hydration in the desert for our ancestors. Fortunately, for our ancestors, God then commanded Miriam's brothers to speak to the rock to yield water for our ancestors. I'm wishing you a plentifully hydrated Shabbat!

L'chaim 🍷



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