

ONEG SHABBAS

THE UNOFFICIAL PARASHAH SHEET FOR KIDDUSH CLUBS

פרשת מטות-מסעי - Volume 5, Issue 38 10-11 July 2026 - כ"ו תמוז תשפ"ו

Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

To Drink or Not to Drink: The Lack of Potable Water at Rephidim

With the appearance of the phrase “to drink” (לשתות) appearing in this week’s Torah portion, I was curious to discover how frequently it appeared in the Torah and how it appears (I am hoping that readers of this publication may also share in this curiosity). It turns out that this week’s Torah portion features the final appearance of this word in the Torah (Num. 33:14):

They set out from Alush and	וַיֵּצְאוּ מֵאֱלֻשׁ וַיַּחֲנוּ
encamped at Rephidim; it was there	בְּרִפְדִּים וְלֹא־הָיָה
that the people had no water to	שָׁם מַיִם לֵעָם
drink.	לִשְׁתוֹת

Appearances in Genesis & Exodus

Of the nine appearances of this word, the first three appear in Genesis, all regarding animals drinking, whether camels (Gen. 24:19 and Gen. 24:22) or goats (Gen. 30:38). The first three appearances of this term in the book of Exodus concern the Egyptians unable to drink water, due to the first of the ten plagues (Ex. 7:18, 7:21, & 7:24). The final appearance of this word in the book of Exodus describes the lack of water for the Israelites to drink at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1).

Appearances in Numbers

In the book of Numbers, the first appearance is in a strange complaint by the Israelites, complaining about the lack of water to drink (Num. 20:5), discussed previously in this space for Parashat Hukat. With this term being absent in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the final appearance in the Torah, as I mentioned earlier, is the recap of the lack of water to drink at Rephidim (Num. 33:14), previously mentioned in the book of Exodus.

Surely, water is not only an important beverage, it is perhaps the most important beverage to drink, not only for humans, but, as we read in the book of Genesis, for animals, as well. So the lack of potable water in a desert (or anywhere, really) becomes a vital issue of life and death.

Why Only Rephidim?

When we read of this phrase in our parashah, as mentioned at the outset of this essay, why is this the only time we read of this retelling? The first time we read of this story, we read of a riot breaking out over the lack of



potable water (Ex. 17:1-3), but fortunately, water was eventually able to be furnished to our ancestors (Ex. 17:6). Interestingly, none of these details are mentioned here, rather, just a note on location with this lack of potable water. Also, it’s worth noting that they had previously complained to Moses, “What shall we drink?” (Ex. 15:24), yet, at this point, they don’t ask him, rather demanding, “Give us water and we will drink” (Ex. 17:2). So, why are these details not included in this narrative retelling?

A fascinating response to this question is provided by Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (1194-1270) (popularly known as Ramban), who wrote (רמב"ן על במדבר ל"ג:יד, ד"ה ויחנו ברפידים ולא היה שם מים לעם לשתות):

It did not mention the miracle of the water at Marah, nor the matter of the manna in the Wilderness of Sin, however, because the incident at Rephidim was called Testing and Strife, and it was sanctified in their sight through the bringing forth of water from the rock, and the battle with Amalek came upon them there – therefore, it mentioned briefly, "and there was no water for the people to drink", for that is the place distinctly known and recognized for it.

לא הזכיר במרה נס המים ולא במדבר סין ענין המן אבל בעבור היות ענין רפידים דבר גדול שנסו את ה' ונקרא המקום מסה ומריבה ונקדש לעיניהם להוציא להם מים מסלע ובאה אליהם שם מלחמת עמלק על כן הזכיר בקצרה ולא היה שם מים לעם לשתות כי הוא המקום הניכר והנודע בו

Having a riot break out and being attacked by Amalek were not significant enough to be mentioned, but not having water to drink, however, is, according to Ramban. Clearly, for the Torah to mention this incident, it surely stuck out as a memorable moment. This was a compelling enough explanation for Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340) to quote it in his commentary, as well (רמב"ן על במדבר ל"ג:יד, ד"ה ויחנו ברפידים ולא היה מים), pointing out that the brevity of the phrase is purposeful. The phrase hints at a cascade of events, including divine testing, miraculous water, and war, making the location “recognized and known” by those events. The water crisis acts as a literary trigger for these larger theological themes.

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In a similar vein, we read of Rabbi Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437-1508)'s writing on this, who adds a little something further (אברבנאל במדבר (ל"ג:ד"ה):

And behold, it says "at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink" – not to recount the miracle that was done there with the water, for it does not mention the miracle of the manna nor the miracle of the waters of Marah. But because at Rephidim they tested God, saying: 'Is the Lord among us or not?' – and, for this reason, the place was called Trying and Strife – and, because of this, Amalek came upon them there, therefore, all of this is mentioned briefly through the reference to the lack of water, from which everything that followed was triggered, and the question "Is the Lord among us?" was posed.	והנה אמר ברפידים ולא היה שם מים לעם ולשתות לא להגיד הנס שנעשה להם שם מהמים כי הנה לא זכר נס המן ולא נס מי מרה אבל בעבור שברפידים נסו את השם לומר היש ה' בקרבנו אם אין ונקרא המקום מפני זה מסה ומריבה ובעבורו בא עליהם שם עמלק לכן זכר כל זה בדרך קצרה מחסרון המים שממנו נמשך מה שנמשך והותרה השאלה הה'
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In other words, Rabbi Abarbanel, points out that, as opposed to other places, Rephidim becomes memorable not for the water itself, but for the spiritual and military crises. Thus, he frames it as a compact reference to a pivotal theological and narrative episode, from which great consequences unfolded.

Water vs. No Water

A simpler explanation is provided by Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) (popularly known as Ralbag), who wrote (במדבר) (ל"ג:ד"ה):

Behold, [the mention of] this [incident] points [to the juxtaposition] that all of the locations to which they arrived from the moment that they arrived at Elim, they found water, but this incident was the first place that they did not find water.	הנה זה ממה שזורה כי בכל המקומות שבאו מעת בואם לאלים מצאו מים וזה היה המקום הראשון שלא מצאו בו מים
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For Ralbag, the verse serves a logistical and empirical function. It tells us something about the pattern of the Israelites' travel through the wilderness. Up until Rephidim, they had always encountered water sources. Rephidim is marked not for its theological drama, but because it represents a break in that pattern—the first time water was not available, which then precipitated the complaint and subsequent divine intervention. Ralbag does not delve into themes of divine testing, spiritual growth, or symbolic meaning, as we read above. His interest is in mapping the physical journey and noting how the absence of water stands out in contrast to the norm up to that point. The emphasis is observational: a notable travel disruption rather than a theological crisis.

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The Dread Sets In

An alternative description concerning water vs. no water is that of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who offers a symbolic-theological interpretation (רש"ר הירש על התורה, במדבר ל"ג:ד"ה, ולא היה שם מים וגו'):

From that point, the real dread of the waterless wilderness began, and, from Horeb, an unending spring of water was granted to them there that would henceforth accompany and sustain them on their journey through the desert.	Von da begann der eigentliche Schrecken der wasserlosen Wüste, und ward ihnen vom Horeb her der nie versiegende Wasserborn, der sie fortan durch die Wüste geleitete.
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Thus, Rabbi Hirsch treats the phrase as a profound moment of existential and spiritual awakening. In both Rabbi Gershon's and Rabbi Hirsch's perspectives, they had water until then, marking Rephidim as a notably waterless occasion. Both of them also describe that there were subsequent non-water places in which they found themselves. However, where Ralbag sees a geographic anomaly, Rabbi Hirsch sees a spiritual milestone; the lack of water marks the beginning of Israel's deep dependence on God's miraculous sustenance and the shift from natural to supernatural provision. His focus is emotional and theological - highlighting human vulnerability and divine reliability.

Conclusion

In the end, what may seem like a passing phrase – "and there was no water for the people to drink" – becomes a narrative pressure point from which theology, memory, and identity flow. Whether viewed through the theological lens of Ramban and Abarbanel, the empirical geography of Ralbag, or the spiritual symbolism of Rabbi Hirsch, Rephidim is far more than a desert encampment. It becomes a crucible of faith, a flashpoint of human need and divine response, and a moment that reverberates through the collective memory of the Israelites.

The Torah's brief retelling in Numbers 33:14 invites the reader to recall not only the physical thirst of the people, but also their existential questioning - "Is the Lord among us or not?" That single absence of water becomes emblematic of a deeper spiritual drought and longing. In that light, the scarcity at Rephidim is not merely about hydration; it is about trust, presence, and the human condition in the wilderness of uncertainty. And perhaps, in our own moments of spiritual thirst, the memory of Rephidim reminds us to look not only for water, but for meaning, growth, and the presence of something greater, even - and especially - in the dry places. Hopefully, none of us are without water to drink, for, if we were, like our ancestors, we would surely remember it. May we never lack water to drink (or anything else).

L'chaim