

This week's double parashah is Hukat-Balak, two portions joined near the end of the book of Numbers.

Both parshiyot contain stories that are often told as stand-alone, eclipsing the details surrounding them: in Chukat, there is one of many episodes wherein the people complain because they are without water. This particular time, at least as is told in the brief, moralizing versions, God commands Moshe to speak to a rock so it will produce water. Instead, Moshe hits the rock, twice, and water pours out, and God responds by telling Moshe he won't get into the promised land with the people. To which the majority of listeners to this tale have responded, "Huh?"

And Parashat Balak contains the story of the mercenary prophet Bilaam and his famous talking donkey, who blesses the Israelites when he's hired to curse them. Unfortunately, by the end of the parasha, the Israelites engage in idolatry and bring curses on themselves. Again, huh?

Those tuning into our service and celebration tomorrow will hear Maya share an in-depth discussion of one of Bilaam's blessings.

For tonight, I want to explore the context of what are often told as stand-alone stories. Let's go back to Parashat Chukat, to the moment when Moshe hits the rock. What is happening here?

If you are interested in checking it out, we are in chapter 20 of Numbers. The first verse says, "The Israelites arrived, the whole congregation, at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there."

First of all, many commentators note that this was the first new moon of the 40<sup>th</sup> year of wandering in the wilderness. Remember, two weeks ago, in parasha Shelach, there was the incident when the people panicked entering the promised land, so Hashem decreed that generation would not enter the land, but would wander and die in the wilderness, and the next generation would enter. Torah essentially glosses briefly over the ensuing 38 years, and now we are the

beginning of the 40<sup>th</sup> year. Rashi says, “[the verse says ‘the whole congregation,’ meaning] ‘the congregation in its entirety’, for those who were to die in the wilderness in consequence of their sin had already died, but these had been expressly mentioned for life.” – meaning, the subsequent generation.

So think about this. Moshe, Miriam and Aharon are 38 years older than they were when they encountered the rebellion we discussed last week. 38 years of leading the people, feeding the people, dispensing justice, soothing fears, fielding their complaints.

And now, Miriam dies. And Torah literally devotes less than a verse to describing this. Yesterday in Torah study, Rabbi Solomon, our new Rabbi-Educator, compared Torah’s silence about this to the explicit silence in Parshat Shemini after Aharon’s sons die. There it says, “Aharon was silent.” But here, Torah itself is silent in the face of Miriam’s death. We do not know if the people, or their remaining leaders, Miriam’s brothers, took time or space to mourn.

Perhaps they couldn’t because they had a more pressing concern. The next verse says, “There was no water for the community, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon.” This leads to the incident with the rock, a few verses later.

Many commentators make an explicit connection between Miriam’s death and the sudden drought. It is from here that we have the midrash of Miriam’s well. As Masechet Taanit 9a teaches, “When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is stated: “And Miriam died there” (Numbers 20:1), and it says thereafter in the next verse: “And there was no water for the congregation” (Numbers 20:2). But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.” And Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pakuda teaches, “The water which the people had enjoyed all these years was due to the merit of Miriam who had stood by watching what would happen to her infant brother when he was in a basket in the reeds at the edge of the river (Exodus 2,4). G’d had rewarded her for that act of kindness by making her the provider of water for Moses’ people. The people had not appreciated this until the well ceased with Miriam’s death.”

So imagine being Moshe and Aharon. The people complain about water, which is nothing new. But for the first time, their big sister, their protector, the ones who leads the dancing and always brings the miraculous water, is not here. She is dead, briefly buried and barely, if at all, mourned. Can you imagine the panic, the resentment, that they must feel?

And so, Moshe not only strikes the rock, but yells at the people, as we see in verse 10. He yells “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” I can imagine the exasperation: “What do you want from me? Can you really expect this of me?”

Now let us remember – at most points throughout Torah when the people threaten rebellion, God responds by threatening to wipe them out – and Moshe is the one to talk God down. This time, the roles have reversed. Hashem does not display any anger with the people, but Moshe loses his patience. Perhaps it’s the grief. Perhaps its because he expected this new generation to have more slack for him than the previous one that had died off. In any case, it’s unwarranted, for as Chizkuni teaches, “they were not punished now as they were in the other complaints, because now they have a case. There really is no water (after Miriam's death).”

And so perhaps, this is the reason that Hashem tells Moshe he will not lead the people into the land. Because once Moshe is unable to advocate on their behalf, he is no longer fulfilling a key function of leadership. And perhaps he and Aharon cannot lead with Miriam as their partner in leadership

But yesterday in Torah study, Bob Proctor noted that the disfunction that arises in the community after Miriam’s death is similar to the disfunction that arises in many families after the death of a matriarch who held things together, calmed fears and smoothed over conflicts.

And Casey Tiemann suggested that this is related to a larger issue of patriarchy – though Moshe and Aharon get most of the credit for leading the Israelite people, we see only after her death how essential Miriam was, because of how things fall apart in her absence.

It was huge “ah-ha” moment for me, when Bob and Casey said those things, because it made me wonder: – if Moshe, Aharon and the whole community had properly valued Miriam and the gifts that she had brought while she was living, might they have been able to mourn her in a more healthy way? And had they been able to do that, might things not have devolved in the way they did? – not only in this parashah, but at the end of Balak, when, despite receiving copious blessings, the Israelites nonetheless stray and bring a plague on themselves.

A close reading of this parashah leaves me with these question, “Who are those, like Miriam, who are fulfilling absolutely essential roles that we are failing to properly see, let alone to properly value– individually and a society? And what will be the consequences of that failure? And what do we want to do about it?”

Shabbat shalom.