**PARASHAT ḤUKKAT**

First Triennial Portion

Bemidbar (Numbers) 19:1-20.21

Eitz Hayim 880; Plaut 1144; Hertz 652

Our Parashah this morning is Ḥukkat, which starts very seriously with a Torah commandment given to Moses and Aaron about sacrificing a red cow. A lot has been said about this ritual, but I want to pass it by with one just this one sentence from *Eitz Hayim* (880): “It is the classic example of a law that defies rational explanation.”

Parashat Hukkat does not get any lighter. In Verse 20:1, the text says that “the Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin, . . . and the people stayed at Kadesh.” It then says simply, “Miriam died there and was buried there.” There is commentary in *Eitz Hayim* and in most other Chumashim, but not another word in Torah. However, once again I will bypass this tempting topic to get to what I want to talk about in my d’var this morning: Water, indeed water in or near Israel, which has been one of my main professional concerns for the past 30 years.

*SKIP THIS PARAGRAPH IN ORAL PRESENTATION*

The first thing I noticed when I read Parasht Ḥukkat was how deeply involved with the ritual of the red cow was purification of the people involved with the animal and their implements with water. The word “water” appears about 20 times in the remainder of Chapter 19, in some cases with “purification” or “lustration.” Purification is effected by washing—No mystery there!--but the “water of lustration” is sprinkled on a person who has come into contact with a dead person or other form of impurity, and it conveys purity, at least after the arrival of evening.[[1]](#footnote-1) Interesting material, but not very useful for people who want water to drink or to nourish their animals.

Let’s go back to the death of Miriam. She dies in verse 20:21, and the whole commu-nity is without water in verse 20:22. What a suspicious sequence of thoughts, as *Eitz Hayim* notes (884):

A legend tells of a marvelous well that sprung up whenever the Israelites camped as a tribute to Miriam’s piety. As she waited by the waters of the Nile to see the fate of her baby brother, as she celebrated God’s power at the Sea, so was she blessed with water, a substance more valuable in the desert than gold. When she died, the well vanished.

I expected that *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary[[2]](#footnote-2)* would have more to say about what is called Miriam’s well, but it prefers to link Miriam to water more broadly as their appeal for water follows immediately after her death (923).

Miriam is closely associated with water: . . . And now, immediately after Miriam’s death, the people desperately cry for water. Because the two episodes follow each other sequentially, the Rabbis explicitly connect Miriam’s death to the lack of water. The linkages suggest to the midrashic imagination that she was the source of the water now gone.

This is the third time that the Israelites are so short of water that Moses has to take action to get it for them. The first time is shortly after they have crossed the Reed Sea and are finally free of the Egyptians. However, they are not free of the desert, and very soon they start grumbling--first about water, then about food; first, about Moses, then about God. After three days without water they come to a spring at Marah, but the water turns out to be bitter, which is what the name seems to mean. However, Exodus Rabbah (50:3, as cited in *Eitz Hayim* 413) notes that literally the text reads that the “waters” were bitter, and suggests that it is the Israelites who were bitter. In any event Moses asks God what to do, and God tells him about a kind of wood that will sweeten the water (Shm 15:24-25). This story is at least partially realistic; at places in Asia, though not the Middle East, I drank water with a piece of wood in it to prove it was pure.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moses then seems to take advantage of the moment by declaring a “fixed rule” (15:26)—in Hebrew a *hok* and a *mishpat*---“If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments, and keeping all His Laws . . . “ And what comes next? Not water or even food, but freedom from the diseases with which God afflicted the Egyptians. Perhaps those words carried an implicit promise of water. The next stop for the Israelites was an oasis with “12 springs of water and 70 palm trees” (15:27).

*Digression: After my d’var, read the delightful midrash to* Exodus *15:25 in* Eitz Hayim (413).

The second time the Israelites were short of water was some time later, after they had again grumbled, this time about the lack of food and learned about the regular delivery of manna and the overwhelming importance of Shabbat. They are now close to Sinai, or Horeb as it was called at that time. According to *Eitz Hayim* (419; note to 17:1), it is an area that should have but did not have potable water. I will ignore the explanations, but simply say that once again the Israelites begin grumbling to Moses (17:2): “Give us water to drink. . . Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst? . . . Is the Lord with us or not?”[[4]](#footnote-4) I do not know whether Moses is upset with his people or if he wants them to direct their complaint to the one source for a true answer. He tells God (17:4), that his people are ready to stone him, but God tells him to calm down—that is how I interpret the command to gather some elders with him and pass before the people. Then, and only then, He tells Moses that He will be standing on “the rock before you.” He goes on to say that Moses should take the same rod that that he had used in Egypt and strike the rock, “and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” *A Women’s Commentary* notes the irony (398): “the rod that had magically made the Nile undrinkable (7:14-24) will now provide potable water.”

There are several things to be learned from this paragraph: Most importantly, “Moses acts only as the agent of God’s will, not on his own discretion” (*Eitz Hayim*, 17:6, 420). Further, God instructs Moses to use a divinely empowered rod, which presumably shows the people that he acts with God’s authority. Another point suggests that the rock was soft limestone, which commonly does have cracks that permit water to flow through it. Thus, as at the bitter water of Marah, this rescue combines natural and supernatural linkages between cause and effect.

For the third time of grumbling about water, we must jump forward to Miriam’s death, Aaron’s death, and Moses’ divinely ordained exile from the Promised Land. The two previous times were early in the 40 years of wandering, and it is no coincidence that the third time is near the end. However, the great bulk of commentaries, both ancient and modern, explore the wording to find a rationale for “God’s being so angry with Moses” that He forbids him from reaching the goal of his 40-plus years of his personal and communal quest. Most obviously at this point, I could simply say that Moses should have anticipated the statement in the Talmud (Pesachim 66b) that anger causes the wise person to lose wisdom.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, I think that the real issue is different and stems from God’s judgement, not His anger. As suggested at the end of *Eitz Hayim’*s comment (885), it reflects “a recognition that their time of leadership was over.”

Nowhere is this perspective put forward so strongly as in the Plaut chumash, which was published in 1981, 20 years before *Eitz Hayim.*  Plaut starts right off with succession in leadership, not punishment, as the main reason why God told both Moses and Aaron (20:12), “you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”

Time limitations preclude me from quoting at length from Rabbi Plaut, but here is an excerpt (1155 to 1156):

On previous occasions when members of the generation of the Exodus had murmured, Moses had known how to deal with them. Now, at Meriba, it was the new generation, born or raised in freedom, who longed for an Egypt it had never seen . . . . To Moses and Aaron this regression must have come as a monstrous shock. It was as if their whole life’s work, almost forty years of it, was wasted. . . . In former days the brothers would have staunchly stood their ground; now the disillusionment of old age rendered them mute and passive. . . .

 Miriam is dead; soon Aaron will join her; and so will Moses before the end of that year. A new set of younger leaders is about to take their place and to guide the new generation of the people into the Promised Land.

I will conclude this d’var with a few comments about what happened after the third time they quarreled with God about water. At first, things seem promising. The Israelites want to travel through the land of Edom, and Moses spoke as “a brother“ to the king of Edom: “If we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it.” This sounds as if the Israelites have come to a more rational attitude toward water. However, it was not good enough for the Edomites, so Moses chose a more roundabout route, and soon afterwards (21:4-6), “the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses,” using all of the old diatribes, which sounds as if they had not learned anything. But maybe they had, for when God sends down poisonous serpents, human reaction was almost instantaneous (21:7): “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you.”

And, very shortly afterwards, the Israelites come to a place called Be’er, which means well. This time, they were comfortable enough not only to sing a song about water (21:17-18), but to honour the “chieftans” who had dug the well, and the “nobles of the people” who seem to have determined where to dig. In the word of Torah scholar Ilana Kurshan at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerualem:[[6]](#footnote-6)

They then celebrate the well they have dug, indicating that this generation was ready and able to provide for itself—unlike their ancestors, former slaves who expected God and their leaders to cater to their every need. A generation that will dig its own wells is certainly more suited to conquer a new land and begin building a new society.

My conclusion: The Israelites are slow learners, but they do learn.

Shabbat shalom,

1. Further information about “water of lustration” is available in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water\_of\_lustration#References [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tamara Cohn Eshkenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, editors, (2008). New York: URJ Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also note to 15:25 in Plaut’s Chumash. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eshkenazi and Weiss raise this question to a higher level than may be its intention. “Because God’s presence is equated with the provision of food and water, . . . thirst and hunger seem to mean divine absence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See my d’var on anger found in the second part of Parashat Shemini, given at Adath Shalom on 10 April 2021, and available in the Congregation’s archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ilana Kurshan (19 June 2021). The Song that Wells up from Inside. *Torah Sparks*, Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center, Conservative Yeshiva. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)