

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



CHUKAT

A New Day

I still remember JFK's inaugural address (after all, it was only 66 years ago). It was very moving when he declared, 'Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans -- born in this century...' My generation, the Babyboomers, are definitely not ready to pass the 'torch', but that's another issue.

Our Torah reading, in a more subtle way, makes the same announcement: In the first month of the year, the whole community of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Tzin and camped at Kadesh (Bamidbar 20:1). That was the beginning of the last year in the Wilderness. The entire previous generation has passed (except Moshe, Miriam, Aharon, Kalev and Yehoshua). During this period the torch is, indeed, passed.

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch notes a major change in the mind set of the Jewish nation. Throughout the 39 years of the sojourn, whenever the nation stopped the verb which appears is VAYICHAN ('they encamped'), but here in the Wilder-

ness of Tzin, the verb suddenly is VAYEISHEV. This term translates as 'and they settled'. Finally, the Jews have a sense of belonging and stability. This is a major change in mind set.

The verse ends with the information that Miriam passes away SHAM ('there'). The K'dushat Levi explains that whenever the term SHAM appears connected to a death it implies that the person died by means of a kiss from God.

If there is something special about someone dying SHAM, then Miriam is doubly blessed. The verse ends with V'TIKAVEIR SHAM ('and she was buried there'). Rav Hirsch suggests that the second SHAM implies that: Her mission on earth had been completed. Her grave in Kadesh could tell future generations that she did not die until the new generation stood ready to enter the promised future.

This observation inspires Rav Hirsch to further note that 'During the long journey, so rich in painful experiences and repeated rebellions against God, it was the women who participated least in those acts of despair.'

Even though this position is very unorthodox, Rav Hirsch doubles down on the merit of the women and, based on a Midrash, explains: Thus entering the Promised Land went grandmothers and mothers who

carried with them the living memory of Egypt and the wilderness. They transmitted the spirit of those God-filled experiences to their children and grandchildren. Much of this earlier spiritual formation of the women must surely be attributed to Miriam, who went before them as a prophetess.

On the other hand, many commentaries explain the placement of the laws of the PARA ADUMA (red heifer) which immediately precedes this verse, as very significant. There are those authorities who look back on the years in the Wilderness, when so many died, and see the PARA ADUMA passages as closure for those difficult years and experiences.

Others see the PARA ADUMA passage as the introduction to the stories of the deaths of Miriam and, soon, Aharon. The Talmud declares: "Why is the death of Miriam placed next to the section of the Red Heifer? To teach you that just as the Red Heifer brings atonement, so too the death of the righteous brings atonement." (Mo'ed Katan 28a)

Then, Rav Hirsch adds: For truly, one must be blind if the death of a righteous one does not become the most powerful sermon on immortality... That chapter serves as an introduction to these deaths and proclaims: What made Miriam truly Miriam, and Aharon truly Aharon, did

not die with their deaths. Just as their influence lives on in future generations, so their essential being has returned to God, and entered eternity.

The very next verse records that the well, which had travelled miraculously with B'nei Yisrael throughout the journey, dried up. The Torah states, succinctly: The EIDA (community, congregation) had no water! This statement inspires the Midrash to relate: God dispatched Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam, as it is stated: I sent before you Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam (Micha 6:4), and it was due to their merit that they were sustained. The manna was due to the merit of Moshe... The clouds of glory were due to the merit of Aharon... The well was due to the merit of Miriam. When Miriam died there and was buried there - what is written thereafter? There was no water for the congregation (Bamidbar Rabba 1:2).

The death of Miriam brought the end of the Well and the beginning of the difficult episode which challenged the authority of Moshe and Aharon, called Mei Meriva ('The Waters of Strife'). Traditionally, our sources claim that their failure in this incident caused their banishment from Eretz Yisrael.

But Rav Sacks asks a more basic question: Why did Moshe fail this particular test?

In Rav Sacks's analysis of this story, we see a direct narrative line from the death of Miriam, the departure of the Well and the failure of Moshe. He explains that he is presenting the natural and psychological reading of the text. Miriam had been the guide and companion for Moshe from his birth and during his float on the Nile. Rav Sacks explains: It is only here that we get a full sense of her influence. For the first time Moshe faces a challenge without her, and for the first time Moshe loses control before the people.

Rav Sacks then explains: A leader needs 3 kinds of support:

1. Allies who will fight alongside him;
2. A team to whom to delegate; and
3. A soulmate to whom he can confide his doubts and fears, and listen without an agenda, other than being a supportive presence.

He then concludes: Even the greatest cannot lead alone. Even Moshe needed a human friend, and it seems that this was Miriam.

The more we think about the death of Miriam, the more we realize how truly significant that event was. A 'New Day' is often a necessary day, but not always a 'Happy Day'! 🙏