

Menachem Persoff

The Ways of Water

It is probably true that a primary source of conflict between nations revolves around resources, especially water. So, it is not surprising that water springs up in our Parsha several times as a weary troupe of Israelites slowly wind their way through the parched desert on their way to the Promised Land.

At first, we read of Miriam's demise and no mention of national mourning. Consequently, our commentators declare, the well of water (in Miriam's merit) that accompanied the people on their travels dried up.

Then, after the thirsty people clamor for water, Moshe slips up by hitting the rock instead of talking to it. Whatever the actual cause of his sin, Moshe is castigated for not sanctifying God's name sufficiently in the eyes of all the people.

The people should then have recognized that the Source of all their providence lay in the hands of Hashem. However, hitting the rock and proclaiming, "Can this rock produce water?" apparently undermined that perception.

After this unfortunate episode, the

people reached the border with Moav by the tributaries of the Arnon River.

Following the Midrash and various commentaries, several miracles occurred at this point.

(1) The local Amorites waiting in ambush on the sides of the gorge were crushed when the cliffs merged, allowing the people to progress.

(2) Miriam's well reappeared and was lifted to the heights where Bnei Yisrael stood.

And (3) its waters were colored red from the blood of the slain Amorites.

And why these miracles? - so that an unsuspecting people would know Hashem had delivered them from their enemies. Indeed, when the people saw the blood, they broke out into song (Bamidbar 21:17-20).

For Rashi, citing the Midrash and Talmud, this episode and the song were on par with the parting of the Red Sea and Shirat HaYam (as hinted in the Hebrew text). However, in deference to Moshe's previous trials with water, the details of these miracles were not recounted in the Torah.

We might learn from these events that Hashem's handiwork never fails. Sometimes, we are aware, but miracles pass us by at other times

like butterfly wings. How often have we looked back on events only to realize that something extraordinarily unexpected and profound suddenly occurred in our lives? Perhaps we need to look more carefully and then break out into song. **MP**