

Sources Torah Reading for Chukat-Balak

Miriam in Jewish Tradition

Exodus 15:20

²⁰Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing.

Micah 6:4

⁴I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.

Miriam's Well from the Talmud (*Ta'anit 9a*)

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.

Three great leaders provided three great gifts to Israel in the desert: the Manna (in the merit of Moses), the Clouds of Glory (Aaron), and the Well (Miriam).

Miriam's Cup at Passover

In many contemporary Jewish communities, a **Miriam's Cup**—a cup filled with water—is placed on the Passover Seder table alongside **Elijah's Cup**. It commemorates Miriam's Well and highlights the role of women in the Exodus story.

Rabbi Mimi Feigelson – “There” x 2

The repetition of the word "there" suggests that the Torah may be speaking not only of a physical "there," but also an emotional, mental, intellectual and spiritual "there." The verse hints that the state-of-mind version of "there" may be more about the question of "with whom?" than "where?" as not only "the children of Israel" are mentioned, but specifically "the whole congregation." Miriam was, it would seem, surrounded and accompanied by the entire people.

Rabbi Art Green - Miriam died and was buried there. There was no water for the assembly to drink, and they gathered around Moses and Aaron, and quarreled (20:1-3)."

The Midrash teaches that with Miriam's death, the miraculous well that had accompanied Israel through the wilderness, giving them water whenever they tapped into it, suddenly went dry.

The word *be'er*, "well," can also refer to a verb meaning "explanation." *Miriam ha-Nevi'ah*, "the prophet," was the first **commentator** on her brother's Torah. The *be'er* of explanation she provided was a wellspring of wisdom. His teaching came from on high, received at the mountaintop. Her wisdom came from the well, deep within the earth, undercutting the hierarchy by the very fact that it was taught by a woman. That gave a new voice, softer and more internal, to the words of Torah. The kabbalists identify the ongoing process called Oral Torah with *shekhinah*, the feminine voice that speaks from within, ever reinterpreting – and thus renewing – the eternal divine Word.

Perhaps Miriam's death represents the disappearance of *shekhinah* from Israel's midst. Without romanticizing the past too much, there was once a sense that all of Israel were "on the same team," not only members of the same tribe. All of us were at least theoretically committed to a way of holy living, to fashioning a spiritual and moral "place" where *shekhinah* might dwell on earth.

When we lost that shared sense about one another, when our Miriam, our shared sense of *shekhinah* in our midst, died, we turned to quarreling. Indeed.

MOSES AND THE ROCK

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs

From "Miriam, Moses' Friend in Lessons in Leadership • Chukat • 5774, 5781

It is only in this week's parsha that we begin to get a full sense of her influence, and this only by implication. For the first time Moses faces a challenge without her, and for the first time Moses loses emotional control in the presence of the people. This is one of the effects of bereavement, and those who have suffered it often say that the loss of a sibling is harder to bear than the loss of a parent. The loss of a parent is part

of the natural order of life. The loss of a sibling can be less expected and more profoundly disorienting. And Miriam was no ordinary sibling. Moses owed her his entire relationship with his natural family, as well as his identity as one of the children of Israel.

It is a cliché to say that leadership is a lonely undertaking. But at the same time no leader can truly survive on their own. Yitro told Moses this many years earlier. Seeing him leading the people alone he said, “You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone” ([Ex. 18:18](#)). A leader needs three kinds of support: (1) allies who will fight alongside him; (2) troops or a team to whom he can delegate; and (3) a soulmate or soulmates to whom he can confide his doubts and fears, who will listen without an agenda other than being a supportive presence, and who will give him the courage, confidence and sheer resilience to carry on.

The Question of Leadership

From HUKKAT: THE POWER OF WORDS - Rabbi Uziel Weingarten - 2002

Imagine for a moment that we were experiencing a time of great dissatisfaction, with complaints and dissention filling the air. Now imagine that the President gave a nationwide address and called us all a bunch of ungrateful whiners. He might be right or he might be wrong, but it would likely be impossible for him to lead any longer. People would not willingly agree to follow a leader who has spoken about them in such a manner. Whether he was right or wrong would be irrelevant; he would have to step down.

It seems to me that this is the issue here, as well. The problem was not that Moses showed no compassion for these people. As we have seen, a case could be made for Moses, in terms of both his own grief over his relative and also this being one unfair trashing too many by the people for whom he has done so much.

Instead, I think that once Moses publicly called them "rebels," he lost the ability to lead them. One earns the right to lead by acting with respect, compassion and grace. One cannot lead from a place of bitterness and condemnation. This is the great lesson that the Torah conveys in telling the story of the Waters of Strife.

Balak and Bilaam

Numbers 22:3

Moab became terrified of the people, for they were numerous. So Moab became sick due to the Israelites.

וַיִּגַר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מְאֹד כִּי רַב־הוּא
וַיִּקְוַץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Numbers 22:6

So now, please come and curse this people for me, for they are too powerful for me. Perhaps I will be able to strike them and drive them out of the land, for I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed.”

וְעַתָּה לְכֵה־נָא אָרְה־לִּי אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־עֲצוּם הוּא
מִמֶּנִּי אוּלַי אוּכַל־נִכְה־בּוֹ וְאֶגְרֹשֶׁנּוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ כִּי יִדְעֵתִי
אֵת אֲשֶׁר־תְּבַרֵךְ מִבְּרַךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תְּאָר יוֹאֵר:

Exodus 1:9

וַיֹּאמֶר, אֵל־עַמּוֹ: הִנֵּה, עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--רַב וְעֲצוּם, מִמֶּנּוּ.

And he said unto his people: 'Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us;

Interesting Hebrew Roots here

רב Rav – Too Many ריב Rive - To argue

עצום Atzoom - Powerful - בטוחים בעצמם Sure of themselves

עצמאי Independent

Numbers 24:5

הֵ מַה־טָבוּ אֹהֲלֶיךָ, יַעֲקֹב; מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ, יִשְׂרָאֵל. 5 How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwellings, O Israel!

Can we make connections?

***Summary of “What October 7 Unearthed: A Personal and Historical Reckoning”
by Peter Himmelman***

Peter Himmelman argues that the reaction to the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel revealed—not created—a preexisting anti-Israel worldview that had already become influential in parts of Western politics, academia, activism, and public discourse.

Main arguments

October 7 exposed an existing ideological framework.

Himmelman contends that many activists and institutions responded to the massacre by immediately interpreting it through a narrative of oppressor versus oppressed, rather than first treating it as a moral atrocity in its own right.

The attack was quickly contextualized rather than condemned.

He argues that rape, murder, kidnapping, and other abuses committed during the attack were rapidly absorbed into broader criticisms of Israel, often before Israel's military response began.

Identity-based moral frameworks distort ethical judgment.

According to the author, a worldview that divides people into categories such as colonizers and colonized can lead to unequal treatment of victims. In this framework, Israelis and Jews may be viewed primarily as representatives of power rather than as individuals deserving sympathy.

Israel has become a symbolic stand-in for broader Western sins.

Himmelman argues that Israel is frequently treated as a symbol of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and Western domination, regardless of the country's historical complexities. He believes this symbolic role helps explain the intensity of anti-Israel activism.

Anti-Israel politics provide moral and social rewards.

The essay suggests that opposition to Israel has become a way for some people—particularly within educated and progressive circles—to signal virtue, anti-colonial values, and solidarity with the marginalized.

Criticism of Israel often crosses into anti-Israel ideology.

Himmelman draws a distinction between criticizing Israeli policies and portraying Israel as uniquely evil or illegitimate. He argues that accusations such as genocide and colonialism are often used not merely to critique policy but to delegitimize the Jewish state itself.

The trend is increasingly visible in Democratic politics.

Using recent New York City politics as an example, he argues that anti-Israel positions have become more mainstream within parts of the progressive left and are influencing broader Democratic Party discourse.

Conclusion

The essay ultimately argues that the response to October 7 revealed a deeper moral and cultural problem in the West: a willingness, in the author's view, to excuse or minimize atrocities when they conflict with an established ideological narrative. Himmelman sees this as evidence not only of hostility toward Israel but also of a broader erosion of moral judgment and empathy.

Central thesis in one sentence

October 7 exposed a preexisting ideological tendency in parts of Western society to view Israel and Jews through a rigid anti-colonial framework, leading many people and institutions to minimize or rationalize violence against Israelis rather than confront it as a moral atrocity.

Mah Tovv on YouTube

Ma Tovv, by Danny Maseng <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYFthMWCGJQ>

Ma Tovv by Jeff Klepper - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCaRkdluIKU>

Mah Tovv - L. Lewandowski - HaZamir Chamber Choir -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGNR100S6Uk>

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