Recognizing Miriam

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Parashat Hukkat 5778

Parashat Hukkat is dark and difficult. Death and its impact set the tone, and the themes of loss and frustration continue throughout the reading. Among the most challenging moments in the parashah is the passing of two of our beloved leaders, Miriam and Aharon, her brother. When Aharon dies, the Torah recounts that the people mourned for him for thirty days:

במדבר כ:כט
וַיִּרְאוּ כָּל הָﬠֵדָה כִּי גָוַע אַהֲרֹן; וַיִּבְכּוּ אֶת אַהֲרֹן שְׁשִׁים יוֹם, כֹּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל.

BeMidbar 20:29
And the entire assembly saw that Aharon had passed away, and they cried for him for thirty days, the entire house of Israel.

However, when Miriam dies, it does not seem that her passing is marked in any way. The Torah simply tells us מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם, Miriam died there, and she was buried there.¹ Miriam is buried without any indication from the text that she was mourned, and there is no record of a eulogy. This apparent lack of recognition of Miriam and the significance of her life is very distressing. No one could find it in their heart to cry for Miriam?! No one noticed when she passed away?! Not only is Miriam’s death not marked by her people in the desert, but the major commentaries to the Torah do not comment on this. It looks like no one cares that Miriam has been ignored.

However, there is one interpretation of this state of affairs, found in the medieval midrashic collection Yalkut Shimoni, which points to the possibility that the lack of fanfare around Miriam’s death was a reflection of how important and essential she was. This midrash reflects the assumption of a passage in the Talmud that explains that Miriam’s presence among Israel was what guaranteed a steady supply of water for the people throughout their travels in the

¹ BeMidbar 20:1.
Talmud Bavli Ta’anit 9a
R. Yosi son of R. Yehudah said: There were three great providers who stood up for Israel: Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. And three great gifts were given on their account: the well, the clouds [of glory], and the manna. The well was in the merit of Miriam, as it says, Miriam died there, and immediately afterward it is written, and there was no water for the community...

The Talmud’s teaching here highlights that Miriam’s greatness was equal to the greatness of each of her two brothers. However, it also implies that this greatness wasn’t realized until it was too late. We only know that Miriam’s righteousness provided the water when we find out that, once she died, the water dried up.

The Yalkut Shimoni goes one step further and states that the water dried up when Miriam died in order to teach about her greatness, though the people did not appreciate this. Their lack of appreciation comes to the fore when they distract Moshe and Aharon from their own preparation for Miriam’s burial and their own mourning:

Yalkut Shimoni Torah 763
Why did the well remove with the death of Miriam? So that everyone would know how righteous she was and many people would be concerned about her and they would ensure a fine burial and funeral for her. So, when Miriam died, Moshe and Aharon were dealing with her needs while the people of Israel were searching for water and not finding it. So
they all gathered themselves around [Moshe and Aharon]. When they saw [the people] coming, Moshe said to Aharon, “Tell me, what is this gathering?” Aharon said to Moshe, “Are these not the children of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’akov? They are bestowers of kindness born of bestowers of kindness.” Moshe said to him, “Don’t you know how to distinguish between different types of gatherings?! This isn’t a constructive gathering, this is a destructive gathering, for if it were a constructive gathering, they would have had to appoint at their heads leaders of thousands and hundreds! Are you really saying that they are coming to bestow kindness?!” Immediately [upon their arrival, the people] lodged a complaint against him, as it says, the people fought with Moshe (BeMidbar 20:3). When Moshe and Aharon saw that the face [of the people] was angry, they ran away to the ohel mo’ed (tent of meeting)...God’s Glory appeared to them (BeMidbar 20:7)—The Holy Blessed One said to the public servants: Leave here quickly. My children are dying of thirst and you are sitting and mourning this old woman?!

This midrash argues that there was mourning for Miriam, that of course mourning for Miriam consumed her brothers! The reason why this mourning isn’t mentioned in the Torah, and the reason why the people do not appear to mourn Miriam, is that the drought which was the result of her death was so pressing and so important. Because the impact of her passing was so devastating, it overshadowed the mourning. It made that sadness seem superfluous, self-indulgent, and inappropriate.

In the end of the midrash, the voice of God criticizes the behavior of Aharon and Moshe who try to run away from the water crisis in order to have some time alone to mourn their lost sister. However, the midrash also articulates disappointment with the behavior of the people through the misimpression of Aharon. Aharon doesn’t understand why the people have come, and he clearly expects more from them as the descendants of exemplars of kindness. The midrash shows the reader what truly generous people would have done at this moment: they would have shown kindness to Miriam and care to her brothers by coming to support them during a difficult time. Sadly, God (and Moshe) know that the people do not care about Miriam. God took away their source of water, so that they would be forced to notice when Miriam died. However, God also doesn’t escape the censure of the midrash. God’s plan is not successful. God deprives the people of water so they’ll notice Miriam’s absence, but the loss of the well is so cataclysmic, so frightening, that it ends up having the opposite effect. Instead of highlighting Miriam’s death, the thirst which overcomes the people ends up overshadowing Miriam herself.

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3 That is, they must be coming to honor Miriam’s death and help with her funeral, as “to do kindness with” is the way that Rabbinic texts refer to burial.
4 If this were a funeral procession or an honor guard, the people would have been walking in an organized fashion, not amassing as a mob.
The Or HaHayyim’s interpretation of this moment magnifies this element of the midrash’s critique. He states explicitly that, were it not for the loss of their only water supply, the people certainly would have buried and mourned Miriam appropriately:

Or HaHayyim BeMidbar 19:14
And now there is reason to suspect Israel that they were not appropriate at that time, and the proof is that they did not bestow kindness on the prophetess [Miriam]. That is why the verse tells you that all of the people were righteous and they were all rightfully called Israel. And the reason why they did not bestow kindness is, as the verse states there, Miriam died there and she was buried there, and—as the Talmud (Mo’ed Kattan 28a) interprets it—she was buried immediately after she died. That is why it didn’t occur to them to come and bestow kindness; such a brief amount of time elapsed [between the two events] that before they knew [about Miriam’s death] they were already ravaged by thirst.

The Or HaHayyim’s reading justifies the lack of fanfare that Benei Yisrael produced; it was solely on account of poor timing. They barely had time to process the death of Miriam before the next set of sorrows beset them. Yet through this “mistake” in God’s strategy, the lesson becomes even more profound for us, the readers of the text and the midrash. Miriam’s presence was so fundamental, so critical to the survival of the people, that the only appropriate symbol for her absence is the drying up of all water. Miriam was so supportive that her loss did not trigger a memorial service; it triggered a panic. When Miriam passed away, the people did not just lose a loving guide and prophet, and Moshe and Aharon didn’t just lose a vigilant and caring sister. When Miriam passed away, the people almost lost their lives. When Miriam passed away, it became apparent that they could not live in the same way without her.

The midrash also demonstrates that there is a vast distinction between the way that Moshe and Aharon feel about their sister and the way that the people feel about her. The gap between the feelings of these two groups comes to the fore when the people ask the brothers

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5 R. Hayyim ibn Attar, 1696-1743, Morocco and Jerusalem.
6 He begins his interpretation by quoting the Rabbinic tradition that when the people are called an edah, an assembly, that hints to the fact that they are righteous. This prompts the Or HaHayyim to ask why it is at this moment that the text signals to us the righteousness of the people, and he answers that it is because we might have looked at their behavior towards Miriam and thought it unbecoming of such righteous people.
to produce water. While it is the loss of the water that provokes the people to approach Moshe and Aharon with hostility and anger, it is the loss of Miriam herself that provokes the brothers to respond in turn with their own frustration and resentment. The request of the people is justified—how can they survive without water?! Yet Moshe is as incensed, if not more so, with this request as he is with the people’s requests for luxuries in the wilderness!

Although asked to speak to the rock (BeMidbar 20:8), Moshe hit it instead. Understanding the larger context allows us to see that perhaps Moshe does so out of mourning and frustration. Moshe is aching for his dead sister while the people can only think about their own needs. The brother(s) call the people **morim**, rebellious, but if you look closely at the word and remove its vowels you see that **מֹרִים** (**MRYM**) is spelled in the same way as **Miriam** (**MRYM**).

Though the story is explicitly about water, it is implicitly and profoundly about the source of the water, Miriam, and the way that her loss affected the people, both those who were close to her and those who were not. Though we never see any record of traditional mourning for her, this story shows us how her passing triggered intense pain and loss. Perhaps there are tears springing forth from the rock along with the water.

The Yalkut Shimoni reads the Torah’s silence as a eulogy, as a testimony to Miriam’s greatness. Miriam’s death was not a private family affair; Miriam’s death was a national emergency. Though it may be true that there was no time for Moshe and Aharon or **Benei Yisrael** to properly mourn Miriam when she died, we have the luxury of distance. It is now our responsibility to remember Miriam and to mourn her loss. And it is our responsibility to notice the people in our lives who become invisible because they are foundational, whom we do not see because they support us. We may find that when these people disappear, our loss will be so profound that we will be too devastated to mourn, so it is critical that we honor them while they are still with us.

7 Most assume that the speaker here is Moshe, since speaking this way is in line with his general way of reprimanding the people, and he is also the one who hits the rock in the following verse. It is also possible, however, that the speaker is Aharon, or both brothers speaking in unison.
Wishing you a Shabbat of honoring the underappreciated.