

REVISITING MEI MERIVAH

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

I

The Text: Bamidar 20:1-13

1 And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2 And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before Hashem! 4 And why have you brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? 5 And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.' 6 And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces; and the glory of Hashem appeared unto them. 7 And Hashem spoke unto Moses, saying: 8 'Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink.' 9 And Moses took the rod from before Hashem, as He commanded him. 10 And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: 'Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?' 11 And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. 12 And Hashem said unto Moses and Aaron: 'Because ye believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' 13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with Hashem, and He was sanctified in them.

II

The Method

A: The panoramic view

Immediately when reading the text, besides the well-known question of the gravity of the punishment meted out to Moses and Aaron and identifying the particular sin of which they are held liable - we find another oddity. The mention of the death and burial of Miriam seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the story and doesn't seem to belong here. (The midrashic device of Miriam's well [Tosefta Sotah 11:1, Seder Olam Rabbah Ch. 10] seems to have been introduced to solve this problem. The gist of the Midrash is that perhaps her death occasioned an unexpected thirst that caused the crisis. A cursory look at the sources cited above will bear this out.)

Any student of Tanakh will have long realized that deaths and burials are never inherently significant (except, perhaps, in the royal chronicles of Melakhim as part of the royal-biography formula) - deaths and/or burials mentioned in the text are reported due to another consideration. Often as not, it is a demonstration of the fulfillment of a Divine promise (e.g. the funeral of Jacob was a direct fulfillment of God's last words to him in Gen. 46:4; the death of Sarah was occasion for Abraham to finally realize God's commitment of over 60 years that he will inherit the Land); as such, the mention of Miriam's death and burial seems to be unnecessary here.

Note that the complaint of the people isn't about thirst - they only mention "u-mayim ayin lish'tot" (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought - strangely enough, their main complaint is about the desert not being a land for seed, figs, grapes and pomegranates, which rests upon an odd premise. Why would the Israelites think that this way-station on their way to the "good, wide land" should have any of those resources?

In numerous essays, I've underscored that a successful reader of Tanakh must become "part of the story" - we, the omniscient reader, know how everything is going to turn out; we know that Pharaoh will refuse, we know that Esau will discover Jacob's masquerade, we know that Rachel will die on the road - and we know that Moses will never enter the Land. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do - either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are - just that they have been traveling for a long time with a beautiful land awaiting them at the end of that journey. They may have heard that the Land is "flowing with milk and honey," they may have even heard about the famed seven species (although only adumbrated in Deut. 8:8) - but all that they've seen is grapes, figs and pomegranates - which, surprisingly, lists exactly the same three types of fruit brought back by the scouts (above, 13:23), the absence of which they bemoaned here.

So...the Israelites must have thought they were in Israel - and that's why they are complaining about the lack of fig and pomegranate trees and grape vines. What might have given them the idea that they had already reached that Land?

The answer lies in again, using the frame of reference of the people themselves; in the middle of our

camp, held in trust by the Levites, is a box containing Joseph's bones. Why didn't we bury our ancestor in Egypt? Evidently, we bury important people in the Land - Joseph has a special location (cf. Gen. 48:22), but no one is buried "out there" (except for the entire generation that passed away in the desert and whose death was a fulfillment of a Divine decree). So...if Miriam died and was buried "there" ("sham"), we must have arrived at the Land!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis - the people believe that they've arrived - but the "beautiful land, flowing with milk and honey, boasting fantastic fruit" is nowhere to be seen. "And what of the grapes, figs and pomegranates which we've seen with our own eyes (or our parents saw and related to us)?"

B: Anticipatory reading

We would expect that Moses' response - or that directed by God that he take - would be to assure them that they are still on the road, not yet arrived and that, indeed, the Land to which they are coming is truly filled with luscious fruits and grains.

It takes a strong imagination to be able to see the text as it is not, to imagine what might have come next and then to "be surprised" at what actually ensues. This is nothing less than the traditional approach of Midrash (especially Midrash Halakhah) which is built on what should be written and then allowing what is written to teach additional lessons. We train ourselves to recognize a rhetorical pattern in Tanakh, whether it be nomenclature (see Rashi's comment at Gen. 1:1 noting that the "unexpected" use of Elokim followed, in ch. 2 [v. 4 ff.] by Hashem Elokim indicates a change in "Divine Policy" vis-à-vis creation), presentation of laws or any other genre of Biblical literature, we train ourselves to notice what is "off" about a particular passage and what that unusual twist may be signaling. This also makes reading the classical medieval commentators that much more empowering and impactful, as the students can already identify with "what's bothering Rashi/Ramban/ibn Ezra (etc.).?"

As such, we are surprised that God neither instructs Moses to march them into the Land or to inform them that they haven't yet arrived - which we can take in one of two ways. Either our hypothesis is wrong and the confrontation between Moses and the people isn't about the Land, but about thirst - or we may be right, but there may also be something bigger going on, beneath the superficial complaint, and that is what God is instructing Moses to address.

C: Back to the panoramic view

If we take a look at the passage, we can see that the people's complaint doesn't jibe with what we know about the narrative. We know that God took the people out of Egypt, that God is leading them through the desert and directing their travels - but we are so accustomed to hearing the people's plaint to Moses (and Aaron): "Why have YOU brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness...And why have YOU made us to come up out of Egypt..." that we don't necessarily pick up on the incongruity of their complaint. Why aren't they angry at - or disappointed with - God, who

has led them to this place?

There is a simple answer which, at once, illuminates and disappoints: The Israelites of this new generation believe, as did their parents, that it was Moses and Aaron who led them out of Egypt and who are leading them through the desert...in effect, nothing has changed since the complaints first registered just after we were miraculously brought through the Sea (Exodus chapters 15-17).

D: The Crisis: A Summary

We can identify three different issues going on in our passage - 1) An elemental and existential need for water - as confirmed by v. 2

2) A disenchantment with the "Land" that they believe they have come to (v. 5)

3) A gross theological error about who (or Who) is leading them

Furthermore, we can then identify a causal chain of malaise: The lack of water opens up the wounds about the place, which in turns reveals a festering problem of belief.

E: Testing the hypothesis

If we are right, then we should expect God's response to address the ultimate problem of belief; He does so (as we will discover forthwith) without sacrificing a solution to the most immediate problem of water. He directs Moses to act in such a way that belief in God's all-encompassing role in their deliverance, journeys and eventual destination would be confirmed.

The command to take the staff implies that Moses should use it to strike the rock (as ibn Ezra argues, and based on the parallel story in Exodus 17; see, however, R. Yoseph B'khor Shor's comments here); what are we to make of the directive "ve-dibbartem el ha-sela". Here again, the students' familiarity with the rest of Tanakh, their learning to focus only on the text (and suspend interpretive memories) and to read with anticipation will help.

Here is where our trusty tool, the Concordance, comes in handy. To be fair, a concordance proper wouldn't help here; but familiarity with Tanakh ("bekiut") is the larger meaning and intent here. As there is no other occasion in all of Tanakh when anyone is commanded to speak to (and command) an inanimate object, perhaps we should challenge the usual translation of the prepositional el and to read, rather al (here we can use a "real" concordance; there are dozens of examples in the canon where the two are interchanged) and read, rather, "speak about the boulder" and understand that Moses and Aaron were directed to speak to the people, in front of the rock, about that selfsame boulder. But what were they to say?

Once we recall the underlying crisis of faith that lies at the heart of our textual onion, we may come to the conclusion that Moses and Aaron were to use the rock as a way of showing the people that it was God, not they, who were directing the people's lives, feeding them, leading them and protecting them through the desert.

Our hypothesis, that the real cause of the crisis was the people's misconception about Moses and Aaron's role in their destiny, can now be substantiated and, at the very least, we can continue to use it as a tentative approach as we come to the denouement of the passage.

F: The "sin"

What do we expect Moses to say at this point? (more "anticipatory reading") "I will bring water from the rock, something no human can accomplish - therefore, you all see that it is God Almighty who is protecting and leading us"....or something to that effect.

Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point "ha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?" - but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen's mother declares "Do you call this a clean room" - her son understands that she is calling it a mess - but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing - he may think that she is impressed with his work or even asking him what he thinks about the room.

Evidently, the new generation of Israelites didn't properly understand Moses' intent and his opportunity to inspire belief was lost - they could have been moved by his words to renew their belief in God, but instead (evidently) understood his words as anger, or defiance; either way, as confirmation of their belief in Moses as the "wizard" who was leading them.

A careful read of God's punishment is not that Moses and Aaron were punished with being condemned to die in the desert; but were stripped of their leadership. Read not "lo tavo'u" - you shall not come - rather "lo tavi'u" - you shall not lead; the inability to lead this new generation, evidenced by a communication gap between the old leader and the new community, necessitated a removal of Moses from the helm of leadership.

III

AFTERWORD

In this brief essay, we've looked at the infamous "waters of strife", a scene that, in one sense or another, signals the end of Moses' leadership of the people. We've utilized various methodological tools to assay the narrative and to cut "between the lines" of the story to identify the underlying issues and how they interrelate. By using our familiarity with Tanakh in general, with the desert narratives in particular, we were able to identify several anomalies in the text and place them in (tentative) proper perspective. By utilizing the skill of "anticipatory reading", we allowed ourselves to be surprised by the text and to take a fresh look at this well-studied Parashah.

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