

MIRIAM'S DEATH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Chukas - Balak

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 245, Skin Grafts. Good Shabbos!

Chukas-Balak

Miriam's Death: The Paradigm of "the Death of Righteous Atones"

Parshas Chukas begins with the laws of the Parah Adumah [Red Heifer]. The Torah then tells us of the death of Miriam [Bamidbar 20:1], and then goes on to describe the incident where "There was no water for the Congregation, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon." [Bamidbar 20:2]

Our Rabbis explain the connection between the Parah Adumah and the death of Miriam, and between the death of Miriam and the loss of well water. The juxtaposition of the Parah Adumah and the death of Miriam teaches us that just as sacrifices atone, so too the death of the righteous atones. The juxtaposition of the death of Miriam and the lack of water teaches us that it was in the merit of Miriam that the nation of Israel merited to possess the miraculous rock-well that accompanied them during all the years of their wandering.

These two statements of Chazal dovetail with each other -- there is a connection between them. When does the death of the righteous atone? The death of the righteous only atones when people realize what they have lost.

When the Jews first received the water from the rock, it was a big event. But they were in the desert for forty years, almost two generations, living with that rock every day.

Imagine how the second generation viewed receiving water from the rock. A mother would tell her child, "Listen, I need some water -- go get me some water from the rock." Today when we need

water, we go to the tap and the tap gives us water. In those days, people went to the rock to get their water -- without giving it a second thought. People took life -- as they experienced it in the Wilderness -- for granted.

When Miriam died and the water stopped, people realized that nothing should be taken for granted. Our very existence in this world is based on "Your miracles which are with us everyday". G-d gives us miracles every single day and we need merit in order to receive those miracles. Righteous individuals provide that merit.

When Miriam died and the water stopped, people realized that a righteous person does a tremendous amount for his or her generation. They realized that they were hanging on in this world by a very tenuous string. We need tremendous mercy, tremendous support from Heaven (s'yata d'Shmaya) and tremendous miracles. It is the righteous of each generation that deserve all of the above.

When a Tzaddik dies and we lose what we had, we need to look up to Heaven again -- maybe we can have that merit once more. The death of the righteous only serves as an atonement when it impresses people with the fact that we are here only by the Grace of G-d. But if a Tzaddik / Tzadekes dies and life "goes on" without anyone realizing what has been lost, and with no one realizing the benefit and merit that this person provided, then his or her death will not atone. The paradigm of the "death of the righteous atoning" was the death of Miriam.

The Only Calculation That Makes Any Difference: How Many Mitzvos?

Towards the end of the parsha we read the story of how the Jewish people wanted to travel through the land of Sichon, King of the Emori. When Sichon refused to permit them to travel through his land, the Jewish people went to war against Emori, and defeated them [Bamidbar 21:21-24]. The Torah describes the land and the cities that they captured from Sichon. One of those cities was named "Cheshbon".

The Torah then tells us that Cheshbon had a history. Originally, Cheshbon was in the territory of Moab. Sichon conquered it from Moab and now the Jewish people conquered it from Sichon [21:26]. Then, in stylistically uncharacteristic prose, the Torah continues "therefore the poets (moshlim) say 'come to Cheshbon -- let it be built and established as the city of Sichon' [21:28]".

There is an allegory here. The Talmud explains [Bava Batra 78b] that the "Moshlim" refers to those who rule over themselves and say, "come let us make a calculation (Cheshbon)". Let us think about life and weigh the tradeoffs of the commandments and their rewards against the loss of not fulfilling these commandments. According to the Talmud, this is an ethical discourse (mussar shmooz).

Why does the Torah use this whole story of Sichon and his conquered city, Cheshbon, as the vehicle to give us a mussar shmooz? The Talmud explains that Cheshbon was originally in the territory of Moab. As such, it was off limits to the Jewish people. The Jewish people were warned not to start up

with Moab. Cheshbon would therefore have been untouchable. But what happened? Sichon attacked and conquered Cheshbon. Once Cheshbon was Sichon's territory, rather than Moab's, the Jewish people had a green light to attack and capture it. As the Talmud phrases it, "The land of Ammon and Moab became cleansed through Sichon" [Gittin 38a].

Rav Eliya Lopian offers a wonderful insight: When Sichon moved into Cheshbon and conquered it, he must have been imagining "I am a great general. I am a brilliant military strategist. I captured Cheshbon -- the premier city of Moab. Boy, am I great!" That is what Sichon was thinking.

But what was really occurring? As always, in truth, people are just puppets on the stage of the world. G-d pulls the strings. G-d wanted Klal Yisroel to have Cheshbon; but there was a problem -- it belonged to Moab. So, G-d moved the pawns on the chessboard: Sichon conquered Cheshbon, giving the green light to the Jewish people.

"A mensch tracht un Gut lacht." [A man has plans, and G-d laughs.] That is what all of history is about. There is great irony in history. Rabbi Berel Wein wrote a terrific article in the Summer 1991 issue of Jewish Action about some of the miracles and ironies of the Persian Gulf war. Isn't it ironic, Rabbi Wein wrote, that it was July of 1990 that the esteemed Secretary of State, James Baker III, appeared before the Senate foreign relations committee of Congress and told them about the intransigence of the Israelis -- that the Israelis were unwilling to make peace. And then in a most undiplomatic statement, he announced the phone number of the State Department and told the Israelis "when you're ready, you call me".

Then on January 17th, when Iraq fired the first Scud missile at Israel and the Israeli jets scrambled, the State Department panicked: "We've got to keep the Israelis out of the war, or the whole coalition will fall apart!" Who called whom? The man who announced his phone number and said, "you call me" is the one who had to come calling and begging.

Another irony of history: When the Israelis bombed the nuclear reactor of Iraq and the entire world condemned this 'barbarous act' of the Israelis which put Saddam Hussein out of the nuclear business, who was the person who offered the motion in the United Nations condemning Israel? It was the ambassador of Kuwait who called for the condemnation of Israel for an act of aggression against their brothers -- the Iraqis.

Sichon's plan "let's go and capture Cheshbon" represents the irony of history. That is why Chazal use this incident as the vehicle to tell us "Come make a reckoning of the soul (Cheshbon haNefesh)". Let us make the one and only calculation that makes any difference in the world -- the calculation of performing a mitzvah against its non-performance. No other calculation is worth an iota -- not the political calculations, not the military calculations, not the financial calculations, not all the other crazy calculations that we make. Because men calculate, and G-d laughs. As Solomon says, "All is vanity". "The bottom line after all is heard, is to fear G-d and to keep His Commandments, for this is all there is of man [Koheles 12:13].

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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