

THE DEATH OF MIRIAM – CLOSURE, BUT NO TEARS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Chukas

The Death of Miriam - Closure, But No Tears

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #643, Choshed Bekeshirim and Daan L'kaf Z'chus. Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha contains the deaths of two out of the three great shepherds of Israel. The trustworthy shepherds who had shepherded Klal Yisrael through the latter part of their time in Egypt and now through the Wilderness were the three children of Amram and Yocheved -- Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe. In this week's parsha, both Miriam [Bamidbar 20:1] and Aharon [Bamidbar 20:28] die.

In connection with Miriam's death, the Torah uses a peculiar language: "She died there and was buried there." What is the pasuk [verse] trying to tell us with this apparent redundancy?

The Torah is contrasting Miriam's death with that of her brothers. Later in the parsha, when Aharon died, Moshe, Aharon, and Elazar ascended the mountain but only Moshe and Elazar came down from the mountain. No one was aware of exactly when Aharon died or how he died. The people were merely informed that "Aharon is dead."

Everyone knew that Moshe Rabbeinu was about to die, but nevertheless -- as the Torah tells us at the end of Zos HaBracha -- no one was aware of where he died and in fact until today we do not know where he is buried.

However, Miriam died THERE and was buried THERE. People knew when she died, where she died and where she was buried.

What is the point of all this?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin makes a very interesting observation: When Aharon died the pasuk says, "The

entire House of Israel mourned him" [Bamidbar 20:29]. Chazal point out that when Aharon died, there seems to have been an even greater mourning than there was over the death of Moshe Rabbeinu. Nevertheless, the Torah does mention that when Moshe Rabbeinu died, the people mourned his loss as well [Devorim 34:8]. However concerning Miriam's death, the Torah only says that she died and was buried. There is no reference to any public mourning. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin asks: Why not?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin answers that all three of the "shepherds" lived very long lives. At this point in history, people usually did not live 120 years. The normal situation is that when older people die and they have lived a long and fruitful life, there is not such profound mourning. Whether this is appropriate or not, most people do not view the passing of an elderly person as a tragedy. Such funerals are usually not overly emotional or marked with a great deal of public crying, certainly not beyond the immediate family members.

This is what happened with Miriam. People were aware that she was going to die, they saw her die, and they saw where she was buried. There was emotional closure.

When Aharon died, that was a tremendous shock. One day he was here, the next day he was gone. There was no opportunity to share any last thoughts. He went up the mountain with his brother and son and the two of them came back and announced "Aharon is dead." There was no opportunity to close things off and say goodbye.

When someone -- even when he is old -- is taken away from us like that, it is a shock and therefore there is public mourning.

In the case of Moshe, people knew he was going to die. He came to them and gave them his final blessings and charge. The people said goodbye to him. But to not be able to go to his gravesite -- or even to know where he was buried -- that was hard to handle. People were traumatized by the fact that they had not been able to participate in the funeral of their great leader or would not ever visit his kever [grave]. This trauma led to tears and strong emotion, regardless of the advanced age of Moshe at the time of his death.

Miriam was an old woman who lived an illustrious life. People knew she died. They knew where she was buried. Spiritual people realize the great tragedy in the death of any righteous person, and from that perspective Miriam's death was certainly worthy of great mourning. But for the average person, there was closure and consequently there was no great out pouring of emotion from the masses upon the death of Miriam.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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