

Chukat: A Matter of Life and Death

- Basil Herring.

When Aron dies, the Torah tells us that the entire people mourned his death for 30 days. When Moshe dies we are told that the people mourned for 30 days. But when Miriam dies, there is not one word describing the people grieving or mourning. The only thing that upsets them is that with her death the water well that had supplied them with life-giving nourishment for 38 years in Miriam's merit, is no more. And it cannot be that they do not mourn her death because of a lack of attachment to this remarkable woman.

There Miriam died, and there she was buried. And there was no water for the people, and the people gathered unto Moshe and Aron, and argued with Moshe, saying, "if only we had died earlier with our brothers who died before God." Nu. 20:1-3

How strange this statement of the Torah, not so much for what it says, but for what it fails to say. The Israelites, after all, have three paramount leaders, the three siblings: Aron, Miriam, and Moshe. When Aron dies, the Torah tells us that the entire people mourned his death for 30 days. When Moshe dies we are told that the people mourned for 30 days. But when Miriam dies, there is not one word describing the people grieving or mourning. The only thing that upsets them is that with her death the water well that had supplied them with life-giving nourishment for 38 years in Miriam's merit, is no more. And it cannot be that they do not mourn her death because of a lack of attachment to this remarkable woman. After all, Miriam was the veritable mother and life-source for that entire generation! She it was who, in the familiar words of the midrash, had motivated her father to return to her mother and continue the family progeny that gave birth to Moshe himself; she it was who by that act inspired all the other Israelite women in Egypt to emulate her mother's example and shame their husbands into defying the decree of Pharaoh so as to bring another generation of Jews into this world. And Miriam it was who stood on the shores of the Red Sea and led the women in Israel with her drum and timbrels in a song of victory over despair. Why then, when this remarkable, indomitable, exemplary woman, leader in her own right of the men and women of Israel, died, why did they not mourn?

An answer to this question is provided by Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, author of the *Oznayim la-Torah*: we need, he says, to examine the circumstances surrounding the death and burial of these three personalities. When Aaron died on the mountain, at God's behest, none of the people were present. The people had no opportunity to bid him farewell, to receive his final blessing, to make their peace with his end. When Aron died, the only ones present were Moshe and Aaron's son Elazar. The people find out after the fact, when the two of them came down off the mountain and notified the people, subsequently showing them where their beloved Aaron was buried on the mountain. Essentially the people were unprepared for Aron's death; they could not attend his funeral, neither pay their final respects, nor assuage their consciences at his casket, prevented by circumstance from asking forgiveness for wrongs that they may have committed against him. Hence, the prolonged, and universal grief at the death of Aron.

On the other hand, when Moses died, the people were fully aware of his approaching demise. On the fated day Moshe gathered and blessed them at length, allowing them to make their peace

with this man who was larger than life. He then he took his leave of them and ascended his mountain of destiny for the final time. But for all that, the people could not be there to properly inter his earthly remains. Worse yet, they had no idea where he was buried, or for that matter his exact moment of death. Deprived of that last act of *hesed shel emet*, of unrequitable compassion, the people were at a loss, hence they grieved, to be sure, but not to the extent suffered at the demise of Aron.

But when it came to the death of Miriam, as we learn from our text, as she lived her life in their midst, so she died: surrounded by her family, her tribe, and her people. Not only that—her interment was carried out by her kith and kin, in the somber presence of a grateful nation, the community of Israel, gathered to pay their final respects, as they took their leave of her. Hence, says Rabbi Sorotzkin, there was no excessive grief, no abiding national trauma, but rather an acceptance of the inevitability of death coming at the end of a long and blessed, if tumultuous, life. Thus when the Torah says here that there was no water at her death, it also meant that there were no tears to speak of.

Of course you surely know why I speak of these things today. For I too have just returned from burying my own mother, in her ripe old age, after a protracted illness. And while I cannot say that for me there were no tears, or that it was not traumatic to shovel the dirt and stones on the casket of the woman who insisted on carrying me to term against the earnest advice of her doctors, yet I must admit that traveling half way round the world, reciting Psalms at the Chapel, being surrounded by the community in which she lived her life, and finally attending her funeral, all served a remarkably consoling and cathartic purpose: namely, to reach the point of acceptance of the physical death of one who had been an incomparable source of life, as yet another stage in the inevitable, if inscrutable, unfolding of the will of God.

Modernity has conditioned us into thinking that we are masters of our destiny, to assume that just as we can successfully manipulate our environment through the long arm of science and technology in increasingly effective ways, so too we commonly come to believe that our health and longevity are largely ours to win or lose. Now I am the first one to recognize and admire the achievements of science and medicine in our age, and in many ways I enthusiastically subscribe to the idea that we can and must take charge of, and responsibility for, our lives, as well as our successes, and our failures, such as they are. An indeed I would say that biblical values teach us precisely that when they record God's command to Adam and Eve to cultivate and subdue their environment, and they describe how our patriarchs and matriarchs biblical heroes constantly strove to change the world, transform society, go against the stream, and overcome the social and material obstacles that stood in their way. *Carpe Diem*, seize the day, take matters in hand, master your destiny, is a profoundly Jewish, and halakhic imperative.

But yet it is equally true that biblical man knew that some things were beyond him, that often he had to desist and withdraw before the will of God and the force of fate. Our halakhah teaches us also to cultivate a sense of humility and impotence in the face of God's will, to accept certain things as beyond our control, and indeed not our responsibility. In the felicitous phrase of Heschel, man is not alone, he is but a small cog in a larger wheel of life, which turns and turns with sometimes irresistible force. And it is at that point that we step down, with head bowed, and with a sense of our own utter helplessness, and we say: God, I am your faithful, trusting servant;

I accept your will.”

Allow me to confess that as a congregational rabbi there are times when I feel somewhat overwhelmed by what may be called my “death duties.” It is not easy to live with the constant awareness of having to be ready to deal with the consequences of the malakh ha-maves, or to have to repeatedly commiserate with congregants who might be friends, who seek answers for the unanswerable, and who need succor and support in their hour of deepest anguish, or for that matter anger at God. But what I have found is that what makes all the difference, what transforms the experience of death from a nightmare into a truly redemptive experience, is when the family members have over the course of the years cultivated a faith and outlook that enables them to grasp a larger perspective on life and death, in this world and the next. To be able, when standing beside the body of a parent, to make the brakhah that says “God I will never understand your ways, they make no sense to me, but I accept, without rhyme or reason, that they are ways of wisdom.” And such faith, such acceptance and trust, I dare say, is not something that you either have or don’t have; it is something that can be cultivated and grown into, no matter one’s age or disposition. Life experiences can indeed be growth experiences, and in this context, we do well to make every effort to deepen our awareness of our utter dependency on, and acceptance of, God’s will. Not for nothing does the Talmud consider all Jews to be ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim, men and women of faith, descended of mothers and fathers who lived, and where necessary, died, by their faith.

Allow me to conclude, on this very point, with a beautiful midrash in the Yalkut Shimoni, on the subject of the death of Miriam.

When Miriam died, Moshe and Aron busied themselves with the preparations for her funeral, even as the thirsty people went in search of water to drink. After the burial, Moshe and Aron were sitting shivah, when the congregation gathered at their door. To avoid their demands, the brothers fled into the tabernacle. Said God to Moshe and Aron: you are the servants of the community, get out of here right away! My children are dying of thirst, and you are mourning the death of an old woman?

What a midrash! And what a lesson! Two elderly brothers grieve for this woman of valor and virtue; one would think that God would leave them alone. Yet God is not satisfied: and so He tells them: Miriam was an old lady, she lived her life, and now she has died. Now that she is gone, it is for you accept My decree. But there are live people out there who need your help; on that score you cannot accept their fate passively, but must do whatever you can, to seize the moment, even if you have to literally squeeze water out of a stone. Carpe Diem indeed!

As for us, as we confront death and anguish in our own lives, as we inevitably do, may God grant us the strength to accept His will, as well as the courage to change the things we can. In so doing, may we find the inner peace and serenity of life in the fullness of the presence of God.