

A Muse: Chukat

“Then Israel sang this song: Come up. O Well! Call out to it! Well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated, through a lawgiver, with their staffs. A gift from the wilderness – the gift went to the valley to the heights, and from the heights to the valley in the field of Moab, at the top of the peak, overlooking the surface of the wilderness.” (Numbers 21: 17-20)

When reading this song one is struck by the obvious distinction between it and the Song of Moses. They both begin with “Oz Yashir” but while the first continues with “Moshe Uvnei Yisrael, this one reads “Oz Yashir Yisrael”, absencing Moses! Another observation is that while some commentaries believe that Moses wasn’t destined to lead the Israelites into Israel as a punishment because he hit the rock, there are other commentaries who believe that Moses didn’t lead the people into the Promised Land because the people were in need of a different kind of leader. Both of these two points while seemingly unrelated are in fact connected.

This song (Numbers 21:17-20) comes in a watershed Parsha. It is the Parsha when Miriam and Aaron die and Moses is informed that he wouldn’t be privileged to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Interestingly, it is the triumvirate, the leaders of the generation who left Egypt and knew slavery, that was dying off. The “Sfas Emes” in discussing this phenomenon points to a Tosefta that says Moshe, Aaron and Miriam were the custodians of the Israelites, and as a result of their good works, three gifts were given to the Israelites: water, the hovering cloud, and manna. The water was due to Miriam; the cloud to Aaron and the manna to Moses.

The leadership of Moses is contrasted to that of Miriam and points also to the reason why the song in this weeks portion is absent of any reference to Moses. Moses was a charismatic leader, one who led by dictate, through and by the virtue of God’s wishes. He was the designated one in communication with God and by virtue of this unique relationship could perform miracles. He didn’t understand the people as he so often complained because he was on another level. Midrash says he ruled ‘milamaale Imaateh’ from on high, out of touch with the people but enjoying their loyalty because they believed God was in communication with him. That’s why his gift was the manna,

because it came from God. Miriam on the other hand was a leader who understood the people and sustained them with water, relating to them from their vantage point, their level. Miriam works behind the scenes, to allow life to unfold naturally and to advance. This is obvious very early on when Miriam is looking from a distance over at Moses after being discovered by the Egyptian princess. She wasn't just looking from a distance as to the welfare of Moses but according to one midrashic interpretation, looking into the future and seeing the unfolding drama of the Israelites and their relationship with Moses.

Miriam was a leader whose time hadn't yet arrived. The people were still in need of a Moses. It was a leadership that thrived on rule by fiat and miracles. It took forty years in the dessert for them to mature to the point that they were indeed ready for a different style and kind of leadership. The song that they now sing is a song absent of Moses, a song that resonates with a strong will of the people to find their own voice, their own power sans miracles. It is by no accident that the text tells us of Moses difficulty with speech. His leadership skills served at a time when less speech was necessary and more action was needed. Now, however, times have changed, the nation has matured. It is a people that wish a leader to rule with the power of speech and not only react by the use of physical power.