

When Rabbi Block asked me if I'd do this tonight, I looked at this week's Torah portion and saw that it starts out with the ritual of the Red Heifer, which is said by the sages to be the most incomprehensible of all the mitzvot, so naturally I told him "absolutely, yes, I'll do it."

But then my confidence wavered when I read the midrash that King Solomon was unable to understand this mitzvah, so I decided to pass on by and go to the next chapter of our portion and I'm glad I did, as it gave me the chance to consider Miriam, whose not always clear influence and story I find pretty interesting.

Here we have the story of drought coming upon the Israelites and the people getting angry at Moses yet again. The text tells us, "The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron."

God then instructs Moses to take his staff - a symbol of divine authority - and order a rock to yield water in front of the community, but Moses disobeys God by striking the rock himself with the staff, twice, to produce the needed water. This action results in God telling Moses that he will not be allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land.

A part of this story that we can imagine playing a major role in it is actually a very short piece of the text: "Miriam died there and was buried there." That's all it says about Miriam, but it has been seen as suggestive that the very next sentence tells us about drought.

There's a well known connection made between these two events, Miriam's death and the lack of water, in the tradition of Miriam's Well. This suggests that during the previous forty years of wandering in the desert the people did have water, thanks to a miraculous well that followed them, as the Talmud tells us, thanks to the merit of Miriam. And when she died, it ceased to flow.

But we can also look for a more down to earth connection between Miriam's death, the drought, and Moses rebelliously striking the rock on the level of human psychology and human nature. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes in an essay called "Losing Miriam" about the grief that Moses must have felt at losing his older sister, who had been there assisting him from the time she followed him in his basket down the Nile until nearly forty years of wandering in the desert had passed.

Sacks writes, "So it was not simply the Israelites' demand for water that led Moses to lose control of his emotions, but rather his own deep grief. The Israelites may have lost their water, but Moses had lost his sister, who had watched over him as a child, guided his development, supported him throughout the years, and helped him carry the burden of leadership in her role as leader of the women."

This exploration of grief to explain Moses' action makes sense to me, although I wonder if maybe there's actually something more to it. Miriam is associated with

rebelliousness. Indeed, one possible etymology of her name relates to the letters 'mem', 'reish', and 'yud', which spells the word meaning rebellion. She has rebelled for the undoubted good - against Pharaoh's decree, and according to midrash against her father's order for Hebrew couples to separate and have no more children in response to that decree, convincing him to change his mind - and seemingly rebelled for ill, as we read a few weeks ago when God punished her.

Moses has up to now done what God tells him, but in this story he seems to adopt some of his sister's rebelliousness. Perhaps in grief, the memory of her inhabiting his consciousness, something of her rises up in him and he strikes the rock. Just before doing so, he ironically calls out to the dissatisfied people, "Listen, you rebels", which highlights the fact of his own sudden rebelliousness.

But is there not some rebelliousness in all of us at times? Is this not part of human nature? And is this not actually a good capability to possess, given the world we live in? Yes, sometimes our rebelliousness can be misdirected, and sometimes it gets us into trouble, as Miriam would have known all too well, and as her brother finds out now. But our rebelliousness also causes us to oppose acts of injustice and oppression by the powerful. If God wants us to partner with Him in repairing the world, it seems to me that God must acknowledge the necessity of our having this rebelliousness in us, misdirected as it may sometimes get. God won't be surprised. We are after all only human, and not even Moses is perfect.

I'd like to finish with an attempt at writing poetic midrash (don't worry, it's short). What I came up with is this:

After losing her  
Moses fell on his face before God  
Full of the peoples' lack, and his own.  
Miriam, water;  
He heard instructions to restore one  
And he struck the rock for the other.