

Wells of Wisdom
Sermon for the Installation of Shelly Baron
President, Congregation B'nai Israel
Shabbat Chukat-Balak 5786

June 26, 2026

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Poor Moses! In just one chapter of this week's Torah both of his siblings die—first, his sister Miriam; and later, his brother Aaron. The descriptions of their deaths could not be more different. God personally tells Moses and Aaron that Aaron will now die. Then, before dying, Aaron is privileged to see his son Eleazar dressed in the unique attire that Aaron has worn as High Priest, signaling continuity in his role and in his family. Then, all the Israelites grieve for thirty days.ⁱ By contrast, in the words of The Women's Torah Commentary, "In one brief verse—astonishing in its terseness—we learn of the death of Miriam.ⁱⁱ Nothing is recorded other than the date and location of her death and the fact that she was buried there.ⁱⁱⁱ Mourning isn't even mentioned.

We should not be surprised. While we are told about the deaths of countless male characters in the Torah, only four women's deaths are even mentioned.^{iv} Moreover, we seem to learn of Miriam's death only because of what happens next. Suddenly, the Israelites have no water.^v They're furious, of course. Complaining comes naturally to the Israelites in the wilderness, but this time they have a point. Can't live without water!

With unusual unanimity, our sages agree that Miriam's death and the loss of the Israelites' water supply are connected. The single verse about Miriam's death is followed by, "The community was without water."^{vi} When two adjacent verses seem unrelated, rabbinic commentators assume they are coupled in ways that are implied if not explicit. In this case, Rashi says: "From here [we learn that] all forty years they had a well on account of Miriam's merit."^{vii}

Rabbeinu Bachya elaborates and clarifies the connection between Miriam and the well. He reminds us of Miriam's participation in saving Moses's life as a baby. When his mother places him in the basket in the Nile—in the water, that is—Miriam follows him down the river. Then, when Pharaoh's daughter rescues him, Miriam is the one who suggests their own mother as the wet nurse.^{viii}

Torah refers to Miriam as a נביאה, a prophet,^{ix} but it doesn't detail the nature of her prophecy. Our sages do that. They note that the Torah says that Moses's parents marry and then Moses is born. That's confusing, though, because Miriam

and Aaron are older than Moses. They're born before Moses when their parents marry. The Talmud explains, though, that this marriage is their second. When Pharaoh decrees that all Hebrew baby boys die, Miriam's and Aaron's parents divorce. They do not want to risk bringing a child into the world only to be murdered forthwith. Miriam envisions a better future, and she insists that they remarry, bringing another Israelite child into the world. As a prophet, Miriam foresees that her parents' yet unborn third child may partner with God to free the Israelites from harsh servitude. The Talmud goes on to say that Miriam's parents weren't the only Israelites who divorced when Pharaoh issued his death warrant, and her parents' remarriage inspires other Israelites to do the same, continuing to bring Hebrew children into the world even at a terrible time for our people and populating the community that would leave bondage and journey toward the Promised Land.^x

“Prophet” is the Bible’s way of describing a particularly wise individual, possessing a measure of wisdom that the ancients imagined could only come as a direct revelation from God. Whether she receives messages from Above or thinks it through herself, Miriam possesses a deep well of wisdom. She understands that, even in terrible and terrifying circumstances, all may not be lost. She tenaciously holds onto the potential of redemption, pursues that possibility with purpose and direction, and assures that freedom is joyfully celebrated when it is achieved at the Red Sea. The missing water in the wake of her death is a metaphor: The Israelites are now without her deep well of wisdom, which had been marshalled to their benefit throughout her long and meaningful life.

Tonight, we at Congregation B’nai Israel celebrate the installation of our new Temple President, Shelly Baron. We shall all benefit from Shelly’s wisdom and her keen insights into Temple management, gleaned through decades of professional and volunteer leadership, including as President of the Jewish Federation of Arkansas.

Having served our congregation as LAFTY youth group advisor, trustee, secretary, treasurer, and vice president, Shelly understands how the Temple works. Even more, she possesses and regularly shares insight into how we can improve.

The most potent example is her early 2025 design of a new staff structure that would serve the congregation well, provide excellent operational efficiency and service to our members and guests, allow for professional development and growth, and save the congregation some money, all simultaneously. As treasurer, Shelly redesigned the budgeting process to demonstrate more clearly the cost of providing Temple programs and services while assuring the wellbeing of our magnificent sacred space. And those are only two examples of many.

Shelly’s well of wisdom is deep. A well, though, can only provide water if one draws from it. Similarly, the greatest wisdom is knowing when to offer it and the willingness to do so. Time and again, Shelly has said “yes” to serving Congregation B’nai Israel.

Shelly’s predecessor, Lewis Krain, has often said that he could convince members to volunteer to be involved in Temple activities. The challenge comes when somebody must take charge. Nobody is more “in charge” than the president, and it’s no secret that an unexpected mid-term change resulted in the job looking less attractive than ever and sparked uncertainty about who would follow Lewis. Though Lewis always managed it with good humor, the presidency is a tremendous amount of work, all of it subject to criticism. It may be more work for Shelly than most, as her commitment to getting it right is uncommonly strong.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan asks the meaning of the prophet Isaiah’s declaration: “Happy are those who sow [their seeds] beside waters.”^{xi} Plainly, this is agricultural advice, but Yochanan, being a rabbi rather than a farmer, teaches: “What is meant by ‘sowing’ must be doing acts of lovingkindness...and what is meant by ‘water’ is Torah. He concludes, therefore, that Isaiah means: “Happy is Israel when we occupy ourselves with Torah and acts of lovingkindness.”^{xii} The water from the well symbolizes the wisdom of Torah, inspiring the performance of good and noble deeds.

Infamously, I move too fast. Way back in December 2024, I urged Shelly to agree to serve as our president come 2026. She said she was not the right person. However, she continued to survey the situation and talk with trusted advisors, ultimately recognizing that it was a job she would do. Perhaps she even agreed with all who had been saying she was exactly the right person to lead us now. With wisdom like Miriam’s, she took up the timbrel, as it were, summoning wisdom from Torah and the world around us to lead us in service to God and community alike.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 20: 23-29.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Ph.D. and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph.D., *The Torah: A Women’s Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2008, p. 2295 (Kindle).

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 20:1.

^{iv} Eskenazi and Weiss.

^v Numbers 20:1.

^{vi} Numbers 20:2.

^{vii} Rashi on Numbers 20:2.

^{viii} Rabbbeinu Bahya, Bamidbar 20:2, Exodus 2:5-9.

^{ix} Exodus 15:20.

^x Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 9a.

^{xi} Isaiah 32:20.

^{xii} Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 5b.