

D'var Torah, July 3, 2020 Susan Cantor

This week we have a double Torah portion – Chukat and Balak (Numbers, 19:1 – 25:9). These portions include many events including the following:

1. The purification of a person who has had contact with the dead.
2. The deaths of Miriam and Aaron.
3. The refusal of the King of Edom to let the children of Israel pass through his lands. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, who was the twin brother of Jacob. So, there might have been some residual sibling rivalry going on.
4. This portion also references the victories in battle against the Amorites and the people of Bashan after the Israelites were punished for complaining about the lack of bread and water.
5. And then there is the story of the non-Israelite Prophet Balaam and his talking donkey. The donkey was questioning his mistreatment by Baalam who was hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse the Israelites. Instead, Balaam blesses the Israelites and prophesies about the defeat of the Israelites' enemies.
6. Lastly, the Balak parsha talks about the plague put upon the Israelites for consorting with Moabite women and their gods. Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, kills an Israelite man and his Midianite woman, thus, ending the plague.

That's a quick summary of Chukat and Balak. This evening I wish to focus on Parshat Chukat and mainly on the role of Miriam.

The Israelites were close to the end of their journey in a place called Zin. At this point in time, the Israelites found themselves in a tough spot. The way forward is blocked by hostile nations but they cannot go back through the desert.

Of the three sibling leaders, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, Miriam's role was that of the nurturer. This all began when she watched over baby Moses as he floated down the Nile in a basket towards his destiny. Miriam was a spiritual leader who led the Israelites through the sea of reeds with her timbrels and song. She gave them a sense of hope. Then as the Israelites wandered through the desert Miriam's well went with them, thereby providing them with the necessary water to survive. When Miriam dies she leaves the Israelites physically and spiritually thirsty and they are in a tough spot. Also, Aaron dies after transferring his priestly robes and his role of a priest to his son Eleazar.

Moses then disobeys God's instructions at Meriba by striking the rock instead of speaking to it. Water still flows out of the rock in spite of the defiance by Moses. God punishes Moses by denying him admittance into the promised land.

Without the three leaders, the new generation had to find their own connection to God. The older generation of leaders, who served as a middle link between God and the Israelites, was now gone. A new more direct relationship with God would have to be forged. The new generation of Israelites, unshackled by the burdens of slavery in Egypt, we're now prepared to fight their way forward into the promised land.

So, now we can ask: how does all of this relate to our lives today?

As parents, we play the same kind of role that Miriam, Moses and Aaron played. As mothers, we nurse our infants giving them life sustaining milk just as Miriam did through her mystical powers providing the Israelites with life sustaining water.

As parents both mothers and fathers we provide shelter and food and teach our children. As our children grow, we must take a step back and allow them to start making their own decisions. This doesn't mean that we allow them to do whatever they please. Teens still need guidance. However, we do learn to overlook the small errors in judgment and let our children learn necessary lessons.

Also, as parents we guide them in their religious life. We take them to Religious School, Hebrew lessons, and services. Along with our rabbi and teachers, we help them prepare for their bar and bat mitzvahs and then their confirmations. At home we set the example of lighting Sabbath candles and following other laws and customs. Most importantly, we endeavor to set a good example for leading an ethical and moral life, so that our children may develop their own relationship with God and prepare them for their life's journey.

During that long trek through the desert, children were born and grew to adulthood. The three leaders, Moses, Miriam and Aaron, grew old. Aaron passed on his priestly garments and role to his son Eleazar. Moses passed on his role as leader to Joshua. Miriam died and the water well dried up. The Israelites learn that they had to forge their own direct relationship with God in order to quench their physical and spiritual thirst. They would then be able to enter the promised land as a nation.

From this parsha, we see the importance of nurturing our families to prepare them for the future. To do this, we depend on being part of a vibrant congregational community. Therefore, we must also focus on nurturing our congregational family, so that it, too, will be prepared for the journey ahead.

Shabbat Shalom!