

## Parashat Chukkat sermon

Bard C. Cosman, July 16, 2016

*Al shloshah devarim ha-olam omed.* One of the most often-repeated Jewish credos is the line from Pirke Avot that “the world stands upon three things: Torah, service to G-d, and deeds of lovingkindness.” Commentaries have taken this from the abstract back to the concrete, noting that “*shloshah devarim*,” usually translated as three things, may also mean three leaders. In support of this claim, the numerical, gematria value of the words *shloshah devarim* equals the sum of the names Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. Are you convinced yet? But also the three things on which the world stands are identified with the leaders: Moses the lawgiver is of course Torah, Aharon the high priest is Avodah, and Miriam represents *gmilut chasadim*. Today’s Torah portion, Parashat Chukkat, tells of the deaths of both Miriam and Aaron in the land of Moav—of the loss of two of the *shloshah devarim*.

Now last month was June, the traditional month of graduations. For me it was the graduation of the surgical residents, who after between five and eight years with us at UCSD, leave as Board-eligible general surgeons, able to operate independently—on you and your families (yes, we take it very seriously!). For Ali, Omar, Michelle, Anna, Ava, Sean, and Jeff, it’s the commencement of their surgical career. And for the faculty, it’s an acknowledgement that they no longer need us, so our work is done.

Almost everyone here knows the feeling of having their child or their student go out into the world. Education or parenthood, it’s a bittersweet process, containing within it the seeds of its own destruction; we glory in their success, but we know that when they achieve mastery, our work is done. The teacher is no longer needed; the parent grows old. At some point we see those erstwhile children exercising their new abilities, no longer knowing or caring which parts they have had from us and which part they have figured out for themselves—it is all theirs now; they have ‘taken ownership.’ Now we stand outside their circle, perhaps hearing from their mouths the very words we gave them; or if like me you’re in a physical discipline, seeing our own moves performed by a younger body, and we realize, with a pang of mortality, that our work is done.

The story of 40 years in the wilderness is a *bildungsroman*, a story of development, in which the children of Israel start out like children, having most things done for them by the three parent/teacher figures—Miriam, Aaron, and Moses—but end up as the confident, assertive, mature people Israel, ready to cross over and take possession of the Land. One of places to see this is in Parashat Chukkat, where, on page 890 in the Chumash, the people sing a brief song of celebration called the Song of the Well. Now this is an obvious echo of the better known Song of the Sea, which we remember from the beginning of the 40-year journey. At that point, back

in Exodus, Moses leads the people (or maybe just the men) in the Song of the Sea, and then, on the other side of the desert *mechitzah*, Miriam leads the women in the same song. These two versions of the Song of the Sea respectively begin “*az yashir Moshe...*” and “*vata’an lahem Miriam...*”—in other words, these songs require a leader: they are what they call in camp “repeat after me songs.” In contrast, 40 years and a lot of growing-up later, in our Torah portion—page 890, verse 17—the people sing the Song of the Well unlead by anyone: it starts “*az yashir Yisrael.*” They have just lost two of their *shloshah devarim*, but they are celebrating—singing by and of themselves!

Now those leaders, those *shloshah devarim* really were special, and their loss was keenly felt. That’s because Hashem provided something miraculous because of the individual merit of each one. The manna, which fed the people and gave them complete nutrition without even the need to defecate, was given in honor of Moses. The protective clouds of glory had Aaron’s name on them. And the miraculous well which follows the Israelites through the desert, the same well that was separately created on the eve of the very first Shabbat, was given in honor of Miriam, continuing her lifelong association with water.

So when Miriam dies, right away the people are afflicted by thirst. They complain to Moses, who strikes the rock instead of speaking to it, getting them water at the expense of his permission to enter the Land. It’s water that slakes thirst, to be sure, but these are the waters of strife, the *mei merivah*, not the harmonious waters of Miriam’s well, which is truly gone because Miriam is gone. And then when Aaron dies, right away the people are bitten by snakes. To understand that one, we must review the function of ‘clouds of glory.’ According to legend there were seven clouds of glory: six arranged in a cube around the people as they traveled—one on each side, one above, and one below. The seventh cloud moved ahead of the people, leveling mountains—all except for Mount Sinai, Mount Hor and Mount Nevo—and filling in valleys to make the walk easier, and, importantly for this discussion, destroying poisonous snakes so the people wouldn’t encounter them. When this serpenticide cloud of glory disappears, the next thing that happens is, predictably, an epidemic of snakebite. Moses again provides a serviceable, if second-rate and somewhat dangerous, substitute: he fashions the *Nechushtan*, the copper snake-on-a-stick effigy that cures anyone who looks up at it. It’s the Jewish original for the staff of Asclepius, the symbol of medicine that the AMA thinks is from Ancient Greece. But again, it’s not quite the same as what Aaron provided: the *Nechushtan* is a potential target for idol-worship: years later, King Hezekiah will destroy it as part of his divinely approved anti-idolatry campaign, in what can only be considered a rebuke to the memory of Moses.

As the leaders and teachers fall away, the miracles disappear, and life gets harsher and more realistic. No longer cosseted by miraculous wells and clouds of glory, it’s as if the people have

emerged from a coddled childhood into a world where food and shelter have to be worked for. When you're a child, if there is food on the table and a roof over your head, you don't question how they got there; you take it for granted. And if Aunt Miriam and your two uncles take you on a camping trip, you figure they'll pack everything you'll need. The adults provide food, drink, shelter, and of course sunblock and insect repellent (those are the clouds of glory). But if the camping trip is long enough, you learn to set up your own tent, and you start planning and obtaining the meals instead of simply eating what's provided. The former child has taken ownership of the trip and, if the day's hike has gone well, also leads the singing around the campfire. The absence of aunts and uncles from the circle of firelight—the absence of camp counselors, teachers, and parents—is hardly noticed, because their work is done.

So much for the students as their graduation approaches—what about the teachers? Can we actually hear their voices? For Aaron, it's notoriously difficult. Rashi fills in the scene of Aaron's death step by heart-wrenching step, as Moses and Aaron's son Elazar lead Aaron up Mount Hor. Moses tells Aaron that this is the death he himself would like to die, formally passing along his crown to his son—but, Moses laments, he has no children. In a harrowing private ritual on top of the mountain, they enter a cave, light a lamp, strip off Aaron's priestly vestments and put them on Elazar. Then Moses instructs Aaron to lie down on a bed, tells him to close his eyes and close his mouth, and then watches as Aaron's life is taken by a divine kiss. And through the whole ordeal, Aaron remains silent, just as he was at the death of his sons Nadav and Avihu—“*vayidom Aharon.*” Commentators approve Aaron's silence as a kind of higher fatalism to which we might all aspire; but it's hard to dismiss the possibility that Aaron was dumbstruck with grief, with fear, or perhaps even with impotent rage.

But while it's hard to hear Aaron's voice or understand his experience, I think we can hear Miriam, and it's through the Song of the Well—that well to which Miriam, who was the first to die by a divine kiss, is still linked. The people sing about a well which has been with them in the wilderness. Now we are on page 890, verse 18. This well they are celebrating, they say, was *dug by their leaders* with their staffs or walking sticks, and with something that gives law: “*bimchokeik b'mishanotam.*” Rashi gives two interpretations of this jarring statement: the first is that the word ‘leaders’ (*sarim*) just refers to Moses and Aaron, and the walking sticks are their staffs, already known to be miraculous. This interpretation fails if you view the word “*m'chokeik*” as meaning lawgiver—it's translated in our *Etz Chayim* Chumash as mace, but in the Stone Chumash and many others as lawgiver—it means something or someone who gives *chukim*. Rashi is clearly uncomfortable with his initial reading: “leaders of the people” usually means the tribal chieftains—Nachshon ben Aminadav and the others—and if the ‘lawgiver,’ Moses, is mentioned separately, then “leaders of the people” can't mean Moses and Aaron.

So Rashi gives a second interpretation, closer to the plain sense of the words, which restores the customary meaning to “leaders of the people.” He describes how Miriam’s well would appear on the edge of the camp of the entire people Israel, and the leader of each tribe would use his staff to scratch an irrigation ditch between the well and the sub-camp of his own tribe. Aside from the beauty of this aerial image, a 12-branched watery candelabrum surrounding and enclosing the Israelites’ dusty Black Rock City, this interpretation has an obvious fault when compared to the plain text: Miriam isn’t mentioned in the Song of the Miriam’s Well.

So here’s another reading, even closer to the plain text of the Song of the Well, and one which forces a response from Miriam, and perhaps allows us to hear her voice. In this interpretation, the people Israel are straight-out claiming that *their tribal leaders* dug the well formerly known as Miriam’s. This is the clear, concrete meaning of the Song of the Well; of course it’s also a plagiarism or imposture, taking credit for something they didn’t actually do. But with this reading we get to invoke the midrashic tradition of asking a patriarchal or prophetic figure to comment on something that happens after their death. At first one imagines Miriam rebuking the people: “you didn’t build that!” But would that be in character for Miriam, who is anything but a mean-spirited politician? After all, this is Miriam the prophetess, the ‘mother in Israel,’ the paragon of *gmilut chasadim*, and one of the *shloshah devarim* upon whom the whole world for a long generation, rested. Her response to the news that the people are singing about her well is “*hineini*, but don’t bother about the well--you had me at ‘*az yashir Yisrael*.’” She hears her people singing *of themselves*, the way she always wanted them to: she hears that they have taken ownership. But wait, we say, they are taking credit for digging your well. She says: figuratively, if not literally, didn’t they? They built the lives they are living now with their walking staffs—they walked and walked: with those walking staffs they walked themselves from slavery to independence, from Egypt all the way to Moav, a long and sacred way. And they may go further still! So what if their memory of the journey is a bit self-serving. How much do we credit our teachers, our parents, our servant leaders? How much does anyone need to? And now we can hear the quiet, assured voice of Miriam, attentive to her people as ever, now watching from outside the circle of firelight: “Dug the well yourselves, did you? Fair enough...and I wish you well on your graduation--or should I say commencement. It seems my work here is done.”