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Parsha Chukat
by Julie Zhuk on 2023-07-01

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This week's Parsha is about Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. She was the reason why the Jews had water, to begin with. She was the source where the water coming from the well and the name of that was Be'erah shel Miriam. We learn from this Parsha that everyone has an expiration date, we will not be on Earth forever. From the start of this Parsha, we learned that Miriam passed away unexpectedly in a mere of five words. We know she was a prophetess. She was buried in Kadesh and there was an ambiguous narrative for her.

There was a simple one-sentence about how she was the sister for Aaron and Moses and all of a sudden, she was gone. After she was gone, the Jewish people begged for water. There was an underlying connection here; all of this time it was in honor of Miriam that the Jews had water throughout their time of wandering throughout the desert. Many years before, Miriam stood guard at the river, watching who put Moses in a basket and watching for his safety among the reeds. She was so concerned for his well-being. G-d was watching what she was doing; this act of kindness and devotion meant a lot. So He was the one who decided that it would be her to be the Divine conduit through which the nation would get their thirst for the many decades to come. The thing is, the Jewish people had no idea it was going to be this way. This didn't happen until Miriam's miraculous well stopped working, and she was no longer alive.

After Miriam died, the people became so angry they lost an opportunity. The Jewish people failed to console and empathize with each other after Miriam died. They were in such turmoil and couldn't turn over any more leaves The missed opportunity turned into contention. In this week's Parsha, we learn to respond with compassion when people are suffering. When people have lost someone or anyone has died around them, anger and divisiveness can overpower love and reason. When people feel vulnerable, we need to choose our every word with great care. We need to be extra sensitive with them; by doing this, strife can be avoided, and peace can prevail.

At the end of this week's Parsha, Aaron died. Miriam's greatness was recognized. It was after her death that people realized just how great of a person she was. After Aaron died, we learn that the pillar of the cloud was because of him. He was behind that; it helped protect and guide the Jews after they left Egypt. The Parsha mentions the Clouds of Glory. It was in the honor of Miriam and Aaron that the blessings of the well and the clouds were miraculously bestowed. This week's Parsha keeps going because it is a double Parsha; it goes on to talk about Balam. This week's Torah reading takes place three thousand years later. Balak was the son of Tzippor and saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab had become terrified of the people, for there were so many of them.

They outnumbered him, and he became disgusted, and he became disgusted because of the children of Israel. Having seen what happened to those who witnessed what happened and who

previously stood at what happened in the way of G-d's people, Balak frantically started to look for a way to get the Jews out of the way. He was aware that conventional methods like war would not work here. He figured that he would beat the Jews at their own game. The main character of the story comes into play here, Balaam. He is the heathen prophet named Balaam. He was the bible's most famous non-Jewish prophet. Balak knew that Balaam alone would be the biggest threat that the Jewish people would have. Balaam would be able to have the ability to curse the Jews using G-d's name. Balaam could cut the Jewish bloom at its spiritual source. If that would happen, everything could end just like that.

In the story of Balaam, as hard as he tried to curse the Jewish people it never happened. Balaam was failing miserably, and it was obvious that G-d was controlling him. It was against Balaam's wishes that he ended up blessing the Jews instead of cursing them. Balak felt exasperated, and Balaam felt frustrated and came home feeling like a complete failure. Reading this Parsha, we may not be aware of this, but it was Balaam who coined the phrase in Hebrew: "How good are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel." This is a line that has been made into our most well-known prayer books. The Parsha wants to focus on another set of words that are memorable coming from Balaam. This is because Israel has been a nation living alone for the longest time. Commentaries offer a lot of different interpretations of this expression about this.

Some say that it refers to this world and others say that it is talking about the world to come. What they say we can agree on is that Balaam's words were intended as a blessing and not a curse. The word alone coming from this parsha does not mean lonely. It's meant to be used or understood as distinctive, unique, or exceptional. The Jewish people throughout history have always been alone. This has not changed. It was true in Balaam's day and it is true today. There is nothing new under the sun.