

## Chukas 2022

### Waters of Life

4 minute read | Straightforward

Miriam was Moshe and Ahron's older sister and a great leader and prophetess of her own right. Michah describes her alongside Moshe and Ahron as delivering the Jews from exile in Egypt, and the Midrash says that Moshe led the men out of Egypt, but Miriam led the women.

When she died, the water stopped:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל-הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר-צֹן, בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן, וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם, בְּקִדְשׁ; וַתָּמָת שָׁם מֵרִים, וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם. וְלֹא-הָיָה מַיִם, לָעֵדָה; וַיִּקְהָלוּ, עַל-מִשֶּׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן – The Jewish People arrived at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. There was no water, and they gathered against Moshe and Ahron. (20:1,2)

Rashi cites a Gemara that notes the juxtaposition of Miriam's death with the lack of water, suggesting the association of Miriam's merit with water in the desert. So when she died, the water stopped.

You might wonder what the association of Miriam is with water in particular; the Gemara doesn't say why. But we might also be troubled by taking the association at face value; one of God's favorite people dies, so everyone has to go thirsty! If it was just a logistics problem, God could have told Moshe to speak to the rock to get the water going again; but that's not what happened! The water dried up, then the people went thirsty and got scared, and only then did God instruct Moshe how to produce water; which suggests that going thirsty is an essential element in this story.

Why did they have to go thirsty? What did they do wrong?

It's silly to conclude that God was lashing out at the people because Miriam died. Far more likely, it was a response to something else, or rather, something that was notable in its absence.

The Torah simply records that she died, and the narrative proceeds, like nothing happened, and that's the problem – וַתָּמָת שָׁם מֵרִים, וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם. וְלֹא-הָיָה מַיִם, לָעֵדָה –

Compare the response to her death to the response to her brother's deaths:

וַיִּבְכּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, כָּל-הָעֵדָה, כִּי גָוַע, אַהֲרֹן; וַיִּבְכּוּ אֶת-אַהֲרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם, כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל – The whole community knew that Ahron had breathed his last. The entire house of Israel wept over Ahron for thirty days. (20:29)

וַיִּבְכּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יְמֵי כָכִי אֲבֵל מֹשֶׁה – And the Jewish People wept over Moshe in the plains of Moab for thirty days, and the mourning period for Moshe came to an end. (34:8)



Sure, Moshe and Ahron were the two most prominent leaders; but Miriam was no slouch! She was indisputably one of the most significant people in the entire story, and the Torah doesn't record that anyone cried or mourned!

They did not cry to pay their respects to this legendary heroine, so they would cry about something else. If they just had a new water source with no interruption, it would have endorsed the fact that they hadn't appreciated her contributions and had failed to honor her correctly; so God stopped providing water so that they'd make the connection between Miriam's contributions and their survival. The water didn't stop so that we would make the association between water and Miriam's merit; it stopped so that they would make the association.

Water is a biological necessity and prerequisite for life due to its extensive and unequalled capability to dissolve molecules, helping cells transport and utilize substances like oxygen and nutrients. It is designated as the "universal solvent," and it is this ability that makes water such an invaluable life-sustaining force. On a simple biological level, water is life.

One of water's most defining features is that its fluid properties allow it to adapt perfectly to its surroundings; water always assumes the form of its container.

Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it.

Legend tells of R' Akiva noticing a steady trickle of water hitting a rock. It was only a droplet at a time, but it would not let up – drip after drip, but he realized that the water had carved a hole through the rock, pierced only by drops of water.

Miriam was born during one of the darkest chapters of Jewish history in Egypt. She was named Miriam, associated with the word מרה, bitter, for the bitterness of the Jewish condition.

When she was just a young girl, Pharaoh decreed that all male babies be thrown into the river. Husbands and wives separated to avoid having children who would not survive the edict, but Miriam boldly encouraged her parents to have faith and stay together. As a direct result, her brother, Moshe, the redeemer and lawgiver, was born. She then showed her own hope and faith at troubled waters, watching over the baby Moshe in the river, determined to watch over her brother in the darkest moment when their mother abandoned him at the river rather than face the pain of watching him be discovered and murdered – מר ים. She then became the famous midwife Puah, who soothed the infants when they were born; and led the women through the waters of the Red Sea to the other side, watching their tormentors drown in the waves – רם ים.

Like water, Miriam adapted, first to oppression and the suffering, remaining steadfast in faith and hope, staunchly encouraging the people around her, guiding them through their dire straits, and then leading them on to better times.



Miriam led the women in song, separate from the men who responded to Moshe and Ahron, in a display of private class and dignity. R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that perhaps in some similar way, the Jewish People thought it would only be fit to mourn in private.

So, in hindsight, the people realized that the miraculous water God had provided them in impossible circumstances had been in Miriam's merit. It isn't a surprise that Miriam is tightly associated with water. She was tough, resilient, and able to adapt her steadfast faith and hope under any circumstances, sharing life-sustaining force with everyone around her.

They should have mourned loudly and openly for Miriam – she had been their water all along.

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## The Bittersweet Symphony

7 minute read | Straightforward

We've spent the best part of a year reading the Torah's greatest story, about how Yakov's family grew until they were duped into working on public infrastructure that slowly slipped into full-blown slavery; and about how God remembered His promises to their ancestors, and He sends Moshe to save them. We have followed this journey through all the adventures and detours, through the highs and lows, and we're approaching the end.

But it doesn't quite go how we might expect.

Spoiler alert: Moshe dies.

Actually, his brother dies too, and so does his sister, and come to think of it, so does every single soul that walked out of Egypt.

We've probably read it too many times to notice, but the protagonists do not get a happy ending for all their troubles. It almost feels like the opposite, like they utterly failed. Moshe just can't get this stubborn bunch over the finish line, and none of them ever get to the Promised Land; they all die in the wilderness.

Moshe didn't want the job, arguing that they wouldn't listen. He was spot on and spent the rest of his days fighting their worst inclinations. But he still only ever wanted to save them! After agreeing to take on the mission, he felt like God was taking too long to save his troubled and weary brethren, and in a quite shocking turn, confronts God and tells Him off – לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה!

Maybe the people tried their best, and their best simply wasn't good enough. But even if we could accept that they were traumatized and, perhaps on some level, never truly left Egypt behind them, you



need a heart of stone not to think that perhaps Moshe might have deserved a little better after all that – עבדִי מֹשֶׁה בְּכֹל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא –

Right at the end of his life, he asks God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, quite possibly the only instance of a personal indulgence Moshe ever asks for, and God declines this request.

Of all people, doesn't Moshe, God's most faithful shepherd, supremely trusted above all others, deserve a happy ending?

And before you dismiss the question as childish – because, after all, life isn't a fairy tale – perhaps the question is better phrased as a personal question on the long journey our souls are on; how do we reconcile ourselves to the fact that not even the greatest of us gets a happy ending?

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that we need to remind ourselves that perfection is ever elusive and lies perpetually out of reach; failure to achieve perfection does not equal failure, so perhaps we need to reconfigure our expectations. Even if the Jewish People would never shake their demons and were doomed from the start, they didn't fail. Even if Moshe couldn't finish the job the way he'd have liked, he didn't fail.

There's no happy ending, but perhaps the expectation of a happy ending is our own baggage that we bring along and project as the outcome we'd prefer to see. We are making the error of imposing our expectations on the story, and the story confounds our expectations plain as day, that it's just not how it works.

There is a separate physical and spiritual reality, and it's the world of spirit that matters most, where we find the battlefield of human achievement and sanctification. God did not want Moshe to lead the Jewish People from Egypt to Israel for reasons that are not only ultimately inscrutable; but, perhaps in a certain sense, don't really matter to us at all. God does not ask us to cure cancer and secure world peace; those reach their conclusions in the physical world, and that is not given to us to control. Instead, God asks us to exercise our ethics and wisdom in the spiritual realm, where we can choose to act as best as we can under the circumstances – a moral victory.

God's hand is not directly perceptible to us; it's only apparent in hindsight as things unfold. It has to be that way, so God can influence the world without compromising the freedom of His creations. God's intervention does not remove the significance of our choices, but in many ways, it can redeem those choices. Or, to put it in another way, we are only responsible for our choices and not for the outcome of those choices; we are responsible for the means, while the ends are solely in God's hands.

And so, by necessity, we need to bifurcate moral victory from physical victory.

Physical victory is fantasy, and we all know it; when you get the job, pass the test, get married, buy the house, have the baby, win the deal, there is never a glorious moment of victory. Life will go on just the



same as yesterday and the day before, and you will still be you – and it's just as true if those things aren't going quite the way you'd like!

Moshe didn't struggle with this; he didn't have a savior complex. He did all he humanly could for his people, and no more, and he knew he had not let God or his people down. He did not live with our question about deserving a happier ending; he let go of the outcome he might have wanted – once it wasn't on the cards, getting there no longer mattered to him. He was not bitter, and died entirely at peace, with no qualms or regrets – מיתה נשיקה. He never thinks for even one moment that he deserves better; even if at certain points he thinks it's too hard and threatens to quit. He demonstrated the stoic quality of outcome independence, with complete trust in God that this was simply the way it was supposed to be.

Quite arguably, this is faith played straight; accepting that this is how it has to be right now, and not shying away from it in any way. He was wholly in touch with the now, figuring out how to move forward with no questions about how we got there or why.

That's not just a story; it's a fact of life, the human condition, and because Moshe knew it, he could leave this world happy and fulfilled.

Despite the apparent lack of any obvious physical victory, Moshe's entire life was a living symposium on moral victory. He wanted to save them from suffering in Egypt, and he did. He wanted to give them a future, and he did. He gave all he had for as long as he had breath in him to secure a future for all of us.

It is not within human capacity to see all ends and decide our fates. Moshe gets to the threshold of the Promised Land, a dream centuries in the making, but never quite gets there; it leaves us no room for pride or self-righteousness, the way many happy endings do, but there is no trace of failure or regret.

It's not a sad ending; it's bittersweet and true to life as we know it.

The conclusion of the Torah's greatest story is much more powerful than a patronizing and simple happy ending. It seems to emphasize that this is what even the greatest human successes and victories can look like, reinforcing a belief that ought to guide us through hard times; that, ultimately, no matter how bad things get, there is no darkness greater than the light, and there is always hope, and the future will shine bright.

This bittersweet ending reasserts the theme of moral victories being more important than physical victories by showing us what is within our power and what is not. Whatever the circumstances, and against all forms of adversity, it is within us to be great; to be brave, gentle, hopeful, kind, and strong, like our heroes Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, Yosef, Moshe, Ahron, and Miriam. We shouldn't expect a happily ever after ending because that's just not how it works.



Moshe deserves all honor because he led his people out of the fires of Egypt and spent every last reserve of body and will, which was just sufficient to bring them to a destined point and no further. Moshe could not lead their journey to completion the way he set out to, but that's not what defines his greatness or success, and it does not make his life or their story any less complete. It was his choice to give himself entirely to the cause that granted him his victory, his moral victory, and it's that choice that makes him worthy of the highest honors, with the unique title of Rabbeinu, Our Teacher, whose name we remember for eternity.

As R' Eytan Feiner sharply notes, who better than Moshe Rabbeinu to demonstrate this tremendous lesson? Moshe, the avatar of ultimate loyalty and service, did all he could, and although he didn't get what he might have wanted, what he got was enough for him.

As our Sages remind us, we must ground ourselves. The ends are not given to us, and we don't always get to finish what we set out to do, but that mustn't stop us – לא עליך המלאכה לגמר, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל – תמנה. Sometimes you'll get to save the day, and sometimes you'll only get to pass the baton on to the next generation. Other times, you'll collapse in sight of the finish line, and your work will remain unfinished; but the outcome does not determine the victory.

The Torah does not end with the patronizing and sickly sweetness of a great physical victory, with Moshe leading his people to a happily ever after. That's not how the world we live in works. But if there's no happily ever after, there is an ever after. His victory is bittersweet, but it lingers on in us sitting here three thousand years later learning about him and his battles; his moral victory stands forever.

The Torah doesn't end how we expect and instead ends with a transition; they're about to cross the border, and a new generation with new leaders will write new books for the challenges of a new era. Each story is incomplete, theirs and ours. But that does not detract from the achievements of Moshe and the Jewish People, and it does not dishonor the faith and trust our ancestors had in God.

Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov knew it, Moshe, Ahron, and Miriam knew it, and they lived in peace with it. Yet we struggle with it all the time, even though we are the living embodiment of things not going quite the way we'd expect, and even though it screams out of every single page of Jewish history.

So, perhaps rather than ask why the Torah doesn't give Moshe and the Jewish People the happy ending we expect, we should invert the question. With all we know, why do we still hold on so tightly to our expectations of how things ought to be?

We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.





## Quote of the Week

Lost is a lovely place to find yourself.

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## Thought of the Week

When every day seems the same, that is because people have stopped noticing the good things that appear in their lives every time the sun crosses the sky

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli

*PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!*

*PPS - I want to use my reach to help more people in more ways; this is me shooting my shot at another one. Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.