



Miriam of Words

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Parashat Hukat 5785

It is Miriam who was always the speaker of the three siblings.

Miriam who, according to the Talmud, was also called Puah because of the sounds she made to soothe women in childbirth as their babies emerged into the world.¹ Miriam who used her words to stand up to her father when he separated from his wife, insisting that a chance at life, however small, was better than no chance at all.² Miriam who quickly figured out what words would ensure that Pharaoh's daughter would adopt Moshe, creating the path to redemption.³

And Miriam who, in her most famous speech act, censures her brother and is punished by God:

במדבר יב:א

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח:

Bemidbar 12:1

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: "He married a Cushite woman!"

¹ Sotah 11b.

² Sotah 12a.

³ Shemot 2:7.



Even before Miriam's criticism, Moshe has never trusted words. From the moment God approaches him to go to Pharaoh, Moshe insists that he is not a man of speech.⁴ It is no wonder that after that moment, when his own sister speaks out against him, Moshe is more frightened of speech than ever.⁵ And it is no wonder that, in this week's *parashah*, shortly after Miriam's death, he uses the tool he is comfortable with—the staff—rather than her tool of words:

במדבר כ:ז-יא

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ⁸קַח אֶת הַמַּטֵּה וְהִקְהֵל אֶת הָעֵדָה וְאַהֲרֹן אֲחִיךָ וּדְבַרְתֶּם אֶל הַסֵּלַע לַעֲיִינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִיָּמִיו וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מִים מִן הַסֵּלַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הָעֵדָה וְאֶת בְּעִירָם: ⁹וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמַּטֵּה מִלִּפְנֵי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: ¹⁰וַיִּקְהֵלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת הָעֵדָה אֶל פְּנֵי הַסֵּלַע וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׁמָעוּ נָא הַמַּרְיָם הַמִּן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נּוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם: ¹¹וַיִּרָם מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת הַסֵּלַע בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעַמַּיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מִים רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתְּ הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם:

Bemidbar 20:7-11

⁷God spoke to Moshe, saying, ⁸“You and your brother Aharon take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.” ⁹Moshe took the rod from before God, as he had been commanded. ¹⁰Moshe and Aharon assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹And Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

According to the Ramban, the rock God commands Moshe to address is not just any rock—it is Miriam's rock, her ever-producing well which has gone dry with her death:

⁴ Shemot 4:10, 6:12.

⁵ Perhaps it is not coincidental that Aharon must urge Moshe to pray for Miriam when she is struck with *tzara'at* or that Moshe's prayer is only five words long. Moshe, who has just been injured by speech, finds it difficult to turn to it as a tool for healing.

רמב"ן במדבר כ"ח

הכוונה לרבותינו בבארה של מרים, שהיה מעולם באר נסי מקור מים חיים נובע בכל מקום שיהיה שם הרצון עליו... וכאשר מתה הצדקת, פסק המעיין. ועתה חזר על ידי משה להיות לו מקור נפתח מן הסלע הזה בעצמו, והוא מה שאמר: "אל הסלע" - הנודע.

Ramban on Bemidbar 20:8

For the intention of our Rabbis regarding Miriam's well was that it was always a miraculous well, a source of living water that would spring forth... and when the righteous one [Miriam] died, the spring ceased. And now it returned through Moshe to have a source opened from this very rock itself, and this is what he said: "to the rock"—the known one.

God's command to speak to the rock is not arbitrary: it is a deliberate command to use Miriam's tools to coax water from her well. It is a command to honor her memory, to make sure that the people see that, even though she is gone, her method of leadership—leading through words—endures.

Perhaps most of all, it is an invitation to Moshe to forgive his sister and her tools. "Yes," God might be saying, "Miriam used her words against you. She used her speech in ways she should not have, and you were injured. But remember that Miriam also spoke in ways that gave life." What God offers in this moment is a way for Moshe to learn to trust words again—and through that trust, to forgive his sister.

But Moshe cannot bring himself to use his sister's tools. When he cries out in anger against the people, the words he uses express his anger not just at them, but at Miriam as well:

במדבר כ"י

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת הָעָם אֶל פְּנֵי הַסֹּלֶעַ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׁמָעוּ נָא הַמְּרִים הַזֶּה הַסֹּלֶעַ הַזֶּה נֹצֵי־אֵל לָכֶם מִיָּמִים:

Bemidbar 20:10

Moshe and Aharon assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them,
“Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?”

The word Moshe uses to address the people right before he strikes the rock can be read not just as “*morim*,” rebels, but as his sister’s name: Miriam. It is her name that Moshe cries almost right before he rejects words and chooses the staff instead. And while the text does not tell us Moshe’s tone as he utters that word, so close to his sister’s name, we might imagine layers of grief, longing, hurt, and anger combine as Moshe rejects words and raises his staff instead.

In avoiding words, Moshe is unable to forgive his sister and, through that forgiveness, carry on her role in the people. And this, perhaps, is why Moshe is doomed to die before entering the Land: not because something has changed about him, but because he has not changed in the way that is necessary to heal and to fill Miriam’s void. He has learned about the danger of words, but not the ways in which they can create life. And by failing to learn, he forgets who his sister was.

In Devarim, though, Moshe’s stance changes:⁶

דברים א:א

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן

Devarim 1:1

These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan.

In the last weeks of his life, Moshe transforms. No longer the self-described “*arel sefatayim* (clumsy of speech),” Moshe spends the end of his life doing what Miriam had always done:

⁶ Thank you to R. Joe Wolfson for this insight.



speaking. And while the Torah never tells us explicitly, we might imagine that in the decades since his sister's death, Moshe has come to see her words differently and to understand that, after death, all we have left of those we loved are the words they shared with us in life. In his last words in Devarim, Moshe shares words that will shape how the people remember him, and in doing so, honors his sister one last time.

Miriam of words, Miriam of water.

Miriam whose speech creates worlds.

