



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

No Gratitude, No Freedom

Rabbi Elie Farkas

This past month, we began reading the story of the exodus from Egypt. This is perhaps one of the most discussed topics in Judaism, as we spend countless hours at our sedarim each year recounting the story of our redemption from slavery. It’s incredible, though, that Bnei Yisrael even became slaves in the first place. Weren’t they respected? Didn’t they do great things for Egypt? Even if not all of them did, certainly one did.

8 And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

Time out! Even if he didn’t know Yosef personally, Pharaoh must have heard about the previous Prime Minister, who single-handedly saved Egypt from perhaps the worst famine recorded in biblical history and helped make Egypt a global economic leader. No American leader could claim never to have heard of George Washington, FDR, or Martin Luther King Jr., even if he never met them. How could Pharaoh make this claim? How could his citizens have accepted it?

Pharaoh was able to formulate and carry out his evil plan only because of his and his nation’s lack of gratitude. They knew Yosef and they knew what he did for them, but as Rashi suggests in his comment to the above pasuk, Pharaoh (and presumably the people as well) pretended otherwise. Appreciation of a great leader had to be forgotten in order to carry out mass slavery of his extended family.

Contrast this with the Torah. The Torah says that Batya, daughter of Pharaoh named the baby Moshe because she drew him from the water. (See Megillah 13a for the identification of Pharaoh’s daughter as Batya.) If they had been an English-speaking land, his name probably would have been Drew, but in Egypt that translated to Moshe. The Gemara, however, says his name was actually Tov or Tuvia (Sotah 12a). How many times does the Torah mention the name Tov or Tuvia? ZERO! Why the preference for an Egyptian name over a Jewish one? One word: gratitude. Batya raised him. She gave him life when he was condemned to death. She enabled him to become the leader of the Jewish people, and for this Hashem

disregards his original name and only uses the name given by the person to whom Moshe owes his greatest thanks.

Another example of the Torah’s interest in gratitude is that when Hashem tells Moshe to return to Egypt, we’re told of a seemingly insignificant detail – one that might easily have been left out:

18 And Moshe went and returned to Yeter, his father-in-law, and said to him, “Please, may I go and return to my brothers that are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive.” And Yeter said to Moshe, “Go in peace.”

Moshe, G-d just told you to go to Egypt! Now! Why would you delay fulfilling G-d’s command? And why does the Torah tell us this trivial bit of information? It must be to teach us a lesson. The Torah endorses Moshe’s decision to seek permission from his father-in-law before leaving. This was a man who fed him when he was hungry, who gave him shelter, a wife, and a job. The right thing to do was to ask him permission to leave; even if Moshe didn’t really have much choice about leaving, he had to show gratitude. He had to take leave with respect, even if it would delay his mission. The Torah tells us about this conversation to teach us how we should act when faced with a similar situation. Always be grateful. Always show appreciation, *hakarot hatov*.

When Moshe, acting in his capacity as leader, was charged with the mission of bringing the plagues upon Egypt, he was unable to carry out the first three on his own; rather, his brother Aaron had to strike the water and ground to produce the blood, frogs and lice. This was because Moshe owed a debt of gratitude to the water for saving him as an infant when left in the basket, and to the ground for burying the Egyptian he had killed. (Rashi on Shemot 7:19 and 8:12)

When regarded in this light, it emerges that our slavery occurred due to a lack of gratitude, and our freedom, by contrast, is a lesson in *hakarot hatov*. From Moshe’s name to his modus operandi, gratitude is a central theme that culminates with our freedom.

Miriam’s Well

Penina Gross-Richmond

As we approach the parshiyot of Yetzias Mitzrayim, let us recall the three well-known miracles that sustained the Jewish people throughout their 40 years in the desert: the manna, the Clouds of Glory and the Well of Miriam. Rav Eliyahu Yedid, in *Sheva Haniviot* learns important lessons from Miriam’s well by considering its roots long before the nation’s time in the desert as well as its future destiny.

Mishnah Avot 5:6 states:

Ten things were created on the eve of the [first] Shabbat at twilight. And these are they: The mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach]; and the mouth of the well...and the manna...¹

¹ All translations except Shemot Rabbah are from www.sefaria.org.

Both the manna and the *be'er*, the well, were established for miraculous use in a special time frame at the very beginning of the world's existence, waiting to play their pivotal roles during the 40 years in the desert. Rashi (Taanit 9a) tells us the well was a rock that rolled along with the Jews throughout their journeys in the desert and from which flowed life-sustaining water, until Miriam's death.

However, its role did not end with the death of Miriam; rather, it was set aside for the future ultimate Redemption. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 51, describes the miraculous waters that will flow in the times of Mashiach:

In the future, the waters of the well will ascend from under the threshold of the Temple... Every field and vineyard which did not yield fruit, people water them with those waters and they yield fruit... Every man who is ill and bathes in those waters, will be healed...

Rav Yedid suggests this is a reference to the same well of Miriam that sustained the nation in the desert, hidden away to one day provide for them again.

What about in between Creation and the future Redemption? How did the well come into the picture in the desert?

While we call the well "Be'er Miriam," attributing it to Miriam's merit, it is worthwhile to note that there is another opinion. The Gemara in Taanit 9a provides the source that it was because of Miriam:

The Gemara raises an objection from a *baraita*: **Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Yehuda, says: Three good sustainers rose up for the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt, and they are: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And three good gifts were given from Heaven through their agency, and these are they: The well of water, the pillar of cloud, and the manna.** He elaborates: The well was given to the Jewish people in the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud was in the merit of Aaron; and the manna in the merit of Moses. When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is stated: "And Miriam died there" (Numbers 20:1), and it says thereafter in the next verse: "And there was no water for the congregation" (Numbers 20:2). **But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.** (Gemara translations are from Rav Adin Steinsaltz, and include commentary.)

Yet in Bava Metzia 86b we learn:

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: In reward for three acts of hospitality that Abraham performed for the angels, his descendants **merited three** rewards. The Gemara elaborates: **In reward for providing them with curd and milk, the Jewish people merited the manna; in reward for: "And he stood [omed] by them," the Jews merited the pillar [amud] of cloud; in reward for Abraham saying: "Let now a little water be fetched," they merited the well of Miriam.**

Thus, in whose merit did Hashem give the Jewish people this well: Avraham's or Miriam's?

The Maharsha on Bava Metzia reconciles this apparent contradiction by teaching that the seeds of the *zechut* were sown by Avraham's acts of *chesed*. However, it was in the personal merits of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam that the gifts were extended for the 40 years in the desert.

Let us now consider why Miriam's merit brought about the well in particular. What is the connection between Miriam and the well?

Miriam embodied the *middah* of *chesed* by waiting at the water's edge to see what would happen with her baby brother (Shemos 2:4). According to the midrashic tradition that Puah was Miriam, she also expressed *chesed* in her role as midwife to the Jewish women in Miztrayim. The Midrash in Shemos Rabbah 1:15 suggests Miriam's *chesed* towards these babies was inspired by the type of *chesed* exhibited by her forefather, Avraham:

"And the midwives **feared G-d**" - They adorned themselves with the actions of their grandfather, i.e. Avraham, as the Holy One, Blessed be He attests about him "because now I know **that you are G-d-fearing...**" [The midwives] said, Our father, Avraham, peace be upon him, opened an inn and provided for passers-by [of other nations]. And we, is it not [bad] enough that we don't have what to feed [the babies] - but to kill them?! We will keep them alive!"

The Midrash teaches us that the midwives drew strength from the *chesed* of Avraham, and found the courage to keep the baby boys alive. There is also a parallel drawn between the description of Avraham as G-d-fearing, and the phrase referring to the midwives, "and the midwives feared G-d." Avraham earns this description after completing the test of the Akeida. The midwives earn a similar title after defying Pharaoh's decree. What is the connection between these two very different actions? And where does *chesed* come into play in this quality of *יראת אלוקים*, fearing G-d?

The Alter of Slabodka, in *Ohr Hetzafun Chelek Aleph*, suggests that the Akeida, which on the surface seems to contradict Avraham's core *middah* of *chesed*, demonstrates Avraham's understanding that his human definition of *chesed* differs from Hashem's definition, which is bound up with truth. (See Micha 7:20.)

Miriam, in her role as a midwife, performed *chesed* that stemmed from *יראת אלוקים*, rather than acting out of fear of Pharaoh; she was therefore called G-d fearing, like Avraham. This *chesed* is one of the merits that caused the well to be brought to the Jewish people: it was inspired by Avraham, and actualized through Miriam.

May we be inspired to follow in the footsteps of Avraham and Miriam and engage in true *chesed*. May we then merit further *chesed* from Hashem in return.

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