

# Gratitude from the Torah

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## Parashat Chukat

A Tribute to Miriam – The Provider of the Eternal Well of Emunah

### Why do We Appreciate Something or Someone So Much More When They are Gone?

“You only appreciate something when you lose it” seems to be a universal principle. How many times has it happened that you held on to an item – be it a garment or a cooking utensil or whatnot – although you hadn’t needed it for years? Then after you finally gave or threw the item away, the very next day you urgently need it! Unfortunately, we also often truly appreciate people after they are gone. Many great authors like H.C. Andersen, only received their due credit posthumously. I realize how much I often appreciate the contribution of certain students especially after they have left. For example, we have a wonderful, modest student who went abroad to visit her family for an extended time. As soon as she was gone, the cleanliness of the midrasha kitchen and Beit Midrash fell apart. None of us had realized how hard this student worked to take out the compost and garbage, sweep, mop, clean up the stray mugs from the classroom, do the dishes, organize the books, and more. She did her work quietly without taking any personal credit. When our youngest son took a while to get married, it seemed a bit of a nuisance to keep providing him with room and board for so many years. Only after he got married and left us empty nesters, did we truly appreciate all his many contributions, and we still miss his daily presence dearly. I especially recall working at my desk and hearing my son’s singsong of his Torah learning from his adjacent room. Pesach preparations this year were also overwhelming without his help, and with no one to clean ‘his own room.’ At this moment, I’m praying for the return of the internet or to be able to complete my blog without the internet. I’m counting the hours that Netfiber has been down which so far amounts to 15, it seems that there is only one thing more vital for survival than the internet, which we may all take for granted until it runs out, as we have experienced in our neighborhood at the most inconvenient occasions. Yes, you guessed it, when the waterpipes have broken down we all cry out “Water, water!”

### Miriam Perpetually Answers the Cry for Water

This cry – although less severe – echoes the cry of our forefathers in the wilderness, after Miriam’s burial:

**במדבר פרק כ-א ב וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר צֵן בְּחַדְשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ. וַתָּמֹת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם: (ב) וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה. וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן: (ג) וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר וְלוֹ גִּוְעָנוּ בְּגֹעַ אַחֲיֵינוּ לִפְנֵי הָשָׁם: (ד) וְלִמָּה הִבְאֵתֶם אֶת קֵהֶל הַשָּׁם אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְמוֹת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ וּבְעִירָנוּ:**

“Then the children of Israel, with the whole congregation, to the desert of Tzin, on the first of the month: and the people dwelled in Kadesh.” Miriam died there and was buried there, and there was no water for the congregation. They then assembled against Moshe and Aharon. The people quarreled with Moshe saying, ‘If only we had perished when our brothers perished before Hashem.’ Why have you brought Hashem’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our animals to die there?” (*Bamidbar* 20:1-2).

The Talmud asks why the lack of water is mentioned immediately after Miriam’s death. Rabbi Yossi answers that of the three miraculous gifts in the wilderness, the well was in the merit of Miriam. When Miriam died, the well subsided, as it is written: “*Miriam died there.*” This is followed by, “*Then there was no water for the congregation*” (*Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit* 9a). This is to teach us, that during the

entire forty years, the Jewish people were blessed with the well of water in Miriam's merit (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 20:2). Only after Miriam's passing was it discovered that the well was in her merit. For more than 38 years, the Well of Miriam accompanied the Israelites' desert wandering, without Miriam ever receiving the slightest credit, or gratitude for it from any of the Israelites. The water that the people had enjoyed all these years was due to the merit of Miriam who had stood by watching what would happen to her infant brother when he was in a basket in the reeds at the edge of the river (*Shemot* 2:4). G-d rewarded her for that act of kindness by making her the water provider for Moshe's people. The people didn't appreciate this until the well ceased with Miriam's death (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Bamidbar* 20:2).

### The Concealed Well of Miriam

The first time we hear about Miriam's Well is in Refidim, when Hashem tells Moshe to hit a certain rock that would spring forth water. That was the well of Miriam (*Shemot* 17:1-7). "This rock at Refidim was the same rock we encountered almost 40 years later at Kadesh. This was also the source of the well of Miriam which traveled with the Israelites through the desert during all those years" (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Shemot* 17:6). On the surface it seemed that Moshe brought the well as he was the one who hit the rock that gushed forth water. No one had any idea that the well was in the merit of Miriam until she died. We also don't hear a word of Miriam taking credit for the well. She modestly concealed her greatness, allowing her brothers to stand in the limelight. With a soft motherly caress, she sweetened Israelites' bitterness and provided sweet waters.

### Sweetening the Bitterness of Doubt with Waters of Emunah

The thirst for water caused Israel to doubt Hashem: "Is Hashem among us or not?" (*Shemot* 17:7). The consequence of this heresy appears in the following Torah verse: "Amalek came and fought with Israel in Refidim" (*Shemot* 17:8). Amalek is the exterior reflection of the piercing doubt in their heart, as the gematria of עַמְלֵק/Amalek = סַפֵּק/safek - 'doubt.' The inner conquest over doubting Hashem happened when the people drank from Miriam's well: ...Before they drank from the well, what did they say? "Is Hashem among us or not?" (*Shemot* 17:7). After they drank, they said, "All that Hashem spoke we will do and we will hear" (*Shemot* 24:7); (*Midrash (Shochoer Tov), Tehillim* 5). מִרְיָם /Miriam strengthened the people against doubt and Amalek as the gematria of both the first part of her name and Amalek is מַר/mar - 'bitter.' Miriam's well not only satiated the Israelites' thirst but moreover, provided them with the spiritual nutrients of emunah, which sweetened their spiritual bitterness. After Egypt had imbittered their lives for so long, the Israelites needed Miriam to soothe their pain. Sweetening and soothing the pain is exactly the job of Puah to soothe the crying babies. Puah: This was Miriam, [called Puah] because she cried (פּוֹאֵה/poah), talked and cooed to the newborn infant in the manner of women who soothe a crying infant (Rashi, *Shemot* 1:15). Miriam was the spiritual midwife who appeased and soothed the people newborn from the womb of Egypt.

### Where is Miriam's Well Today?

*Parashat Chukat* teaches us that Miriam's well provides faithful nourishment even to this day.

סַפֵּר בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּרַק כַּאֲפִסּוּק יַח בְּאֵר הַפְּרוּהָ שְׂרִים כְּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בְּמַחֲלָק בְּמִשְׁעַנְתֶּם וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה: (יט) וּמִמְתְּנָה בְּחִלְיָאֵל וּמִנְחִלְיָאֵל בְּמוֹת: (כ) וּמִבְּמוֹת הַגִּיָּא אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׂדָּה מוֹאֵב רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וּנְשָׁקָפָה עַל פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן:

"A well dug by princes, carved out by nobles of the people, through the lawgiver with their staffs,

and from the desert, a gift. From the gift to the streams, and from the streams to the heights. From the heights to the valley in the field of Moav, at the top of the peak, that overlooks הַיְשִׁימוֹן/hayeshimon - ‘the wastelands’” (*Bamidbar* 21:18-20).

Although Miriam’s name is not mentioned, our sages explain that the well described here is the well of Miriam. Just as she didn’t receive credit for the well while being alive, so did the Israelites praise Hashem for the well, without mentioning her name. Rather they attributed the well to the princes referring to Moshe and Aharon (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 12:18 based on the Midrash). Describing the healing properties of Miriam’s well, the following midrash also confirms that the well dug by the princes indeed is the Well of Miriam. It happened that someone who suffered from boils went down to immerse himself in the waters of Tiberias. It was a favorable time, and he saw Miriam’s well, washed in it, and was healed. Where is the well of Miriam? Rabbi Chia bar Abba said, it states, “Look down on the face of Yeshimon” (*Bamidbar* 21:20). Whoever ascends the mountain of Yeshimon and sees something like a small sieve in the lake of Tiberias, this is the well of Miriam... (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 22:4). Even in our day and age, “some have a tradition to draw water Motzei Shabbat because Miriam’s well supplies all the wells each Saturday night, and one who does so and drinks will be cured of illness” (*Kol Bo, Orach Chaim*, 299:10). Miriam’s well is said to feed the waters of Israel’s most important water reserve nowadays, the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee), while hidden in its depths. Rabbi Chiya said, Miriam’s well is a type of sieve located in the Mediterranean Sea. Rav said, Miriam’s well is mobile and pure (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 35a).

### **Keeping the Spirit of Israel Alive Through Maintaining Miriam’s Well**

The fact that Miriam’s well is mobile and changes location teaches us that Miriam’s power enlightens everywhere. Miriam is herself the well that gives water. She strengthens “those who sow with tears,” in bitterness to “reap in ringing song.” Believing in the Master of the Universe and continuing to sow - is the power of Miriam (Rav Nir Minussi, *Mi Zot Olah*, p.217). The well of Miriam is implanted within the people of Israel through the righteous women of all generations. This is the basic inner power of the people, hidden within the daughters of Israel who are greatest in their emunah and greatest in their power to endure. They do not break but continue and build the coming generations and the chain of generations of the Jewish people. Just as Miriam embodied the character trait of kindness, when as a young midwife, she kept the babies alive and supplied them with food (*Shemot* 1:17; *Sotah* 11b), so did the well supply the Jewish people with all their needs. Thus, in the merit of Miriam, the well sustained the Jewish people with water in the wilderness. Water symbolizes life, since nothing can grow without water. The nurturing quality of water associated with Miriam is a feminine quality. Women keep the Jewish people alive. Without the perpetual kindness of women pouring out like a bottomless well, nothing would be able to be conceived, born, or kept alive (Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, *Women at the Crossroads, Parashat Chukat*, p. 145). Let us keep Miriam’s Well of emunah flowing!

### **Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Chukat - Some Tips for Cultivating Gratitude During Hardships**

Humans are unique creatures, who often only fully appreciate what we have once it’s gone. We take things for granted and only understand their value once we lose them. We start to value things only when we experience the pain of losing someone or something, and then we realize their worth. “People can get so self-absorbed chasing their desires that they take the special people in their life for granted. This reality hits hard when a person passes on because the opportunity to love and

appreciate is over then. Nothing can be done anymore. The guilty feelings and thoughts of 'could've and should've' take hold. In losing someone all the trivial barriers held against the person dissolve and become meaningless. We are reminded of death as the great equalizer. The illusion of conflict is over, and the ego is left with nothing to fight against. Truth is finally allowed to flow. You see the person as they really are.... far bigger than the petty issues your ego led you to fixate on" (Mandy Wessen).

- **Work on Valuing Yourself** – To genuinely respect and appreciate others, you must first value yourself enough to respect and appreciate who you are. This is because your outer world is a reflection of your inner world. To change your experiences, you must start by changing your personal beliefs and attitudes to align with what you wish to experience.
- **Remind Yourself to be Grateful** – take just a little bit of time to remind yourself to appreciate all the people and things we may take for granted without valuing them properly. Send them thoughts of appreciation regularly, preferably daily, for example, your health. You definitely appreciate being in good health while you have it. The more you value it the more you will be able to keep it.
- **Take an Object (Anything You Choose)** – associate it with being grateful for being healthy and place it somewhere you see it every morning.
- **Write in Your Gratitude Notebook "I am grateful to be happy"** – I recommend at least ten times. In addition, if you have ten things in mind that you are grateful for, perhaps you can write about one of these things each day.
- **Make an 'I am grateful to be happy' Poster** – Post it somewhere you see it every morning like your mirror, put it on your cellphone or next to it the night before, and put it on a door you open at the time you want to exercise your gratitude.
- **Set an Alarm on Your Cellphone** – with a push-through message – to the time you want to be reminded to pay attention to the people you are grateful for in your life.