

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXXIX: Chukat (Num. 19:1–22:1)

Essay 6. The well gave water in the merit of Miriam

"וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לַעֲדָה" פִּירַשׁ רַשִׁ"י מִכָּאן שֶׁכָּל אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה הָיָה לָהֶם הַבְּאֵר בְּזָכוֹת מִרְיָם. קִשָּׁה אֲמַאי הוֹצִיָהוּ רַשִׁ"י לומר שֶׁכָּל אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה, וְכִי תִיִּסַק אֲדַעְתִּין שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה לָהֶם הַבְּאֵר בְּזָכוֹת מִרְיָם אֲלֵא מִקְצַת מֵהֶם, וְהָיָה לוֹ לומר בְּקִיצוֹר מִכָּאן שֶׁעַד כָּאן הָיָה לָהֶם הַבְּאֵר בְּזָכוֹת מִרְיָם.

“The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh; Miriam died there and was buried there. **The community was without water**, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.” (Num. 19:22-20:1).

Rashi explained from this that the entire 40 years that Israel was in the wilderness, they had the well giving them water in the merit of Miriam. It is difficult why Rashi needed to say “the entire 40 years,” for did it enter our minds that the well was in Miriam’s merit only a few of [those years]? He could have stated more succinctly from this verse, that until now, they had the well in the merit of Miriam.

וְגַם לומר דְּבִפְרָק הַפּוֹעֲלִים אֲמַרְיָנוּ בְּשִׁכְרָה שֶׁלֹּא זָכוּ לְשִׁלְשָׁה וְכוּ'. וְהַקִּשָּׁה מִהַרְשִׁ"א דְּבִפְרָק מָמָא דְּתַעֲנִית אִיתָא שֶׁהָיָה בְּזָכוֹת מִשֶּׁהָיָה וְהַבְּאֵר בְּזָכוֹת מִרְיָם וְכָאן אומר שֶׁהָיָה בְּזָכוֹת אַבְרָהָם. וְתִירָץ ז"ל דְּבִזְכוֹת אַבְרָהָם לֹא הָיוּ זֹכִינֵן בְּהֵם אֲלֵא לְפִי שֶׁעַד אֲבָל בְּזָכוֹת מִשֶּׁהָיָה אֲהָרֹן וּמִרְיָם גְּמַשְׁכּוּ כֹּה זָמַן רַב כֹּל אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה עַכ"ל וְעִי"ש.

It can be said that in the seventh chapter of Bava Metzia, “One who hires the workers,” it says:

As Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina says, and likewise the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: **In reward for three** [acts of hospitality that Abraham performed for the angels, his descendants] **merited three** [rewards]. 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.

-Bava Metzia 86b

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The Maharsha¹ questioned this, for in the first chapter of tractate Ta'anit (9a), it is brought that the manna was in the merit of Moses and the well was in the merit of Miriam,² while here it says that the manna and the well were in the merit of Abraham. The Maharsha of blessed memory solved the question, that in the merit of Abraham his descendants merited these things only for an hour, but in the merit of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, they continued to merit thus a long time, the entire 40 years, and see there.

ובאמת שהיינו יכולים לתרץ ולומר נמי להפך שבזכות משה אהרן ומרים היו זוכים בהם לפי שעה אבל בהצטרף זכות אברהם זכו בהם כל ארבעים שנה. ומשום הכי כתב הכתוב שמיתת מרים דוקא גרמה שלא היה מים לעדה, ונהו שרמז רש"י שלא תאמר שהיו להם הבאר בזכות אברהם, אלא כל הארבעים שנה היה בזכות מרים, שהרי מפוסם אברהם היה די שעה אחת.

In truth, we could have erroneously solved this by also saying the opposite from the Maharsha, that in the merit of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, [the Israelites] merited [the manna and the well] only an hour, but with the joining of the merit of Abraham, they merited them the entire 40 years. Because of this potential misunderstanding, Scripture says that the death of Miriam resulted in there not being water for the community, and this is what Rashi hinted: that you shouldn't say that they had the well in the merit of Abraham, rather the entire 40 years was in the merit of Miriam, and with regard to the Israelites receiving water in the merit of the hospitality shown to the angels by our ancestor, Abraham, one hour was sufficient.

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¹ Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels (1555–1631), Polish rabbi famous for his Talmud commentaries, Chiddushei Halachot and Chiddushei Agadot.

² Taanit 9a: A Baraita states: “Rabbi Yossi, 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. The well was 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” (Num. 20:1), and it says thereafter in the next verse: “And there was no water for the community” (Num. 20:2). But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.”