

Parshat Chukat: Miriam's Life in Five Words

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The six-word memoir is a succinct and trendy way to summarize one's life. At workshops and conferences around the world, participants are asked to write a six-word memoir as a way of introducing themselves and summarizing who they are with extreme brevity.

In Parshat Chukat, Miriam isn't even afforded the generosity of six words, as her death is recorded in the Torah in only five: "Va'tamat sham miriam, va'tikbeir sham—And Miriam died there and she was buried there" (Numbers 20:1). The five words she is granted are entirely devoid of emotion. They do not seem to honor the life of a leader of the Jewish people, a prophetess, a nurturer, a savior's savior. Instead, these five words convey just the facts.

Equally perplexing, Miriam's death is not followed by verses describing a nation bereft, weeping, eulogizing, and mourning their loss. The absence is more startling when compared to the description of her brother Aaron's death as recorded in the very same chapter: "The entire community saw that Aaron had expired. The entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for 30 days" (Numbers 20:29). This substantial sendoff leaves little to the imagination, unlike the paltry few words describing Miriam's death.

Economy of language, however, seems to be a feature of texts about Miriam. The five-word phrase describing her death contrasts with another five-word phrase, a prayer that once extended her life. When Miriam is struck with tzara'at, Moshe cries out: "El nah r'fah nah lah"—Please God heal her, please!" (Numbers 12:13). The Midrash deems this brevity to be praiseworthy: "Why did Moses not prolong his prayer? So that Israel would not say 'His sister is in distress and he engages in elongated prayer!'" (Sifrei 105:1). Moshe's five-word supplication conveys love, concern, and alarm. These sentiments are entirely lacking in the five-word passage describing Miriam's death.

To better understand this, it may be helpful to look back at Miriam's early life. Her first appearance in Torah is, "And [Moshe's] sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him" (Exodus 2:4). In this early defining moment of Miriam's life (and baby Moshe's), she is nameless! This could be interpreted negatively, but it may also be a textual means of portraying Miriam as an agent of God, the ultimate background force, quietly guiding Moshe's life through the straits of Egypt.

Even before Miriam's heroism at the Nile, the Talmud sees her as critical to Moshe's very conception. Sota 12a explains that Pharaoh's infanticidal decree caused Jewish husbands to separate from their wives, lest they risk having baby boys. Miriam, a young child, experienced a prophecy that a Jewish savior would yet be born. She told her parents that their separation was more devastating than Pharaoh's decree, as it prevented the birth of girls as well as boys. Miriam's precocious counsel convinced her parents to reunite, resulting in Moshe's birth.

Miriam's behind-the-scenes guidance would continue throughout her life and Moshe's. The commentators suggest that Miriam possessed not only prophetic insight but also keen emotional intelligence. Cassuto (20th C. Italy) notes that Miriam carefully observed Bat Pharaoh before making contact, doing so only when she "recognized signs of compassion in the princess..." Chizkuni (13th C. France) comments that Miriam is specifically called HaNeviyah (the Prophetess) prior to her leading the women in joyful song. This is because she had an "extraordinary ability to use words to express her feelings." These, and other descriptions of Miriam, describe a woman who is insightful, intuitive, and articulate. She quietly protects and guides her brother and charismatically leads her people.

However, in Numbers chapter 12, Miriam makes a grave error engaging in lashon hara about Moshe. This seems contrary to her record of kindness towards Moshe, as well as her signature qualities of judiciousness and wisdom. Seeking to clarify matters, Chizkuni references a midrash that Miriam's lashon hara emerged from a place of concern for the welfare of Moshe's wife, Tziporah. Miriam and Aaron had noticed that Tziporah was no longer wearing jewelry. They inquired and Tziporah replied that Moshe was no longer interested in such things. Miriam perceived this to mean that Moshe had separated from his wife, reminiscent of her father's actions which she had opposed decades prior. This was the root of her deliberations with Aaron which ultimately verged on lashon hara. Miriam's speech may have gone too far, but it was rooted in compassion and her innate drive to guide her brother in the right direction.

Moshe, however, appears to no longer require Miriam's guidance. His prophetic ability has surpassed hers and it is now Miriam's turn to be the recipient of Moshe's care. Nonetheless, though her actions were mistaken, her heart was in the right place. Perhaps because of her statement Moshe reconsidered his treatment of Tziporah, and though he may not have reconnected with her as his parents did upon Miriam's advice, perhaps he was kinder and more giving to her in another fashion. After all, Miriam's intuition was always wise.

The question remains: What happened at the moment of Miriam's death? Why the dearth of description and lack of emotional content? Why are Moshe, Aaron, and the people completely absent from the text?

Perhaps these gaping absences suggest the enormity of the loss. It is as if the people simply don't know what to do as they wait for someone compassionate, wise, and matriarchal to guide their response; to help them emote and mourn and experience the moment. But she is gone. Without Miriam, the people and the very language of Torah is emotionally stunted. Without Miriam, the people fall to pieces with their complaints and mistreatment of Moshe and Aaron, devoid of empathy and compassion. Moshe in turn makes the greatest mistake of his life, striking the rock in an apparent display of unbridled, misguided (though understandable) emotions with disastrous consequences.



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Absent Miriam, the people thirsted not only for water, but for spiritual *and* emotional nourishment. Had she been present to guide them through that terrible moment, they might have eulogized her with the words she sang at the Splitting of the Sea, “Shiru la’hashem ki ga’oh ga’ah–Sing to G-d for He has triumphed glory” (Exodus 15:21). A five-word phrase that is filled with emotional expression, beauty, and one that honors the life of Miriam.

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