



Chukas: Appreciation and Actualization

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The congregation had no water; so, they assembled against Moses and Aaron.” (Bamidbar 20:1-2)

The death of Miriam, a tragic loss for the Jewish people, was compounded by the lack of water in the desert after her passing. Rashi explains that the juxtaposition of these two details is extremely important: “From here [we learn that] all forty years they had the well in Miriam’s merit (20:2).” The miraculous well which sustained the Jewish people over the last forty years had dried up. It was the merit of Miriam which sustained the people for the last four decades.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) makes an insightful and truly beautiful observation. Miriam didn’t know that the well was provided in her merit. The Jewish people didn’t know that the well was in the merit of Miriam. It was only after her passing that the Nation of Israel appreciated who this Matriarch was and what she meant to the people. It was only after her passing that Miriam herself realized what she had accomplished and contributed to the Jewish people.

This episode, with the Rebbe’s explanation, provides us with two dramatic life lessons. Too often we don’t appreciate the special people in our lives until they are gone. There are things that our leaders and loved ones contribute to the foundation of our lives which we take for granted. We assume that these details and benefits are just part of our life package. We forget that very often the things we have are a result of someone else’s hard work. Tragically, it is not until that special person is gone that we realize how much he/she meant to us. This special person can be a parent, a spouse, a friend or a teacher. They are the people who work so hard to make us happy and successful and whom too often we just take for granted. Our ancestors knew that Miriam was a righteous woman, they just didn’t appreciate what she provided them with each and every day. They never got to say thank you to a special woman who had given them so much.

The second lesson is a bit more nuanced. Miriam had no idea that her merit generated the well. She didn’t realize that it was her good deeds and personal piety which had such a dramatic impact. Many times, we grow frustrated because we feel we are not making a difference. Does my life really matter? Am I really contributing in some substantive way? Am I making my mark in this world? Miriam may have thought she didn’t matter all that much. There could be nothing further from truth. Miriam kept the people alive in the desert. It was her merit and spiritual accomplishment which sustained our nation. Just because you can’t see the impact of your actions doesn’t mean they aren’t occurring. In life you must try your best to do your best. You must put in the effort in the service of God and your fellow man. You must make the right choices and figure out how to become the very best version of yourself. If you do all of this, know that you are positively impacting your world and effecting change. You are making a difference. Miriam did what she had to do in this world and as a result we were sustained and nourished. Everything we do makes a difference even if we can’t see it.

The death of Miriam was indeed a tragic loss. Tragic because we never got to say thank you to a woman who changed our lives. Tragic because maybe she herself never realized how truly important she was. May Miriam’s memory inspire us to appreciate the special people in our lives and provide us with the courage to keep doing good, living meaningful lives filled with optimistic belief that we are making a difference.