

**Parshat Chukat:  
On Self Reliance  
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In Parshat Chukat, we encounter the death of not one, but two towering figures in the history of Israel: Miriam and Aaron. First, the Torah says:

And the children of Israel and the whole assembly arrived in Midbar Tzin...and Miriam died there (Bamidbar 20:1).

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל-הָעֵדָה  
מִדְבַּר-צִן...וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם  
(במדבר כ:א)

And then, at the end of the chapter, using similar language, the pasuk says:

And Aaron died there...and when the entire assembly saw that Aaron had died, they wept for him 30 days, even the whole house of Israel (20:28-29).

וַיָּמָת אֶהָרֹן שָׁם...וַיִּרְאוּ, כָּל-הָעֵדָה, כִּי  
גָּעַ, אֶהָרֹן; וַיִּבְכוּ אֶת-אֶהָרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם,  
לֹל בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל. (כ:כח-כט)

The death of Miriam and Aaron were a devastating loss to the community. When Miriam died the wells that supplied water to *B'nei Yisrael* throughout their travels in the desert dried up; when Aaron died the *ananei hakavod* (clouds of glory) that guided and guarded the Jews through the desert evaporated.

This is quite striking: the death of these individuals was a stunning blow to the security of *B'nei Yisrael* – no water and no direction, no nourishment and no protection. The Jews became vulnerable and helpless.

The death of someone beloved is not just a biological event – it is a loss with far reaching and tangible consequences, both in a real, physical sense, but also in a psychological and emotional sense.

When experiencing a death of a parent, many mourners, no matter what age, feels a loss of protection, a loss of guidance, a loss of the parent's aura and secure presence. Something is lost, something is different, something is empty. Pesach is not the same, the charoset tastes different. Shabbat is not the same, there are less candles on the sideboard. There are no more phone calls and comforting words to guide the child in the normal and abnormal tribulations we all face in our mundane lives. In short, there is no well for water and no cloud of guidance.

For some, that deep visceral sense of loss does slowly begin to ebb after time. After shloshim or after a year of *kaddish*, children who have lost a parent have been forced to mature and forge their own emotional path. They now become the parent they have lost – not completely, but they gain a greater and more tangible sense of self reliance.

This self-reliance is what begins to emerge in Parashat Chukat—the end of the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the Jewish people's wandering in the wilderness presents the start of a new era in



biblical history. The Netziv in his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar distinguishes between Divine guidance in the desert and in Eretz Yisrael. In the desert, God's presence was felt through daily miracles that were visible to all—the miraculous well and the clouds of glory. In Eretz Yisrael, on the other hand, divine providence takes on a more natural guise. Though it includes miracles, many of them appear as natural occurrences, only occasionally being of a more obvious nature. This process of change, from relying on supernatural events, to becoming self-sufficient begins with the death of Miriam and Aaron.

As long as Miriam lived, the well would not be taken from Am Yisrael. Now that Miriam is no longer with them, *B'nei Yisrael* are expected to adapt to a more natural way of life, seeking water by themselves. And with the loss of the miraculous, supernatural protection of the *ananei ha-kavod*, *B'nei Yisrael* must go into battle with the Caanites without the miraculous clouds to protect them. (See Bamidbar 21:1-3). They do not merely rely on God's miracles and mercy. They turn to God and pray for help.

In their death, Aaron and Miriam left us, their decedents, an unlikely gift: to learn not to rely on miracles alone. To become self-sufficient, asking God to intercede on our behalf through prayer, not relying on miracles.



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