Parashat Chukat

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The Deaths of Miriam, Aaron and Moses

- When did Miriam, Aaron and Moses die?
- Are their deaths related?
- What is the connection between Miriam's death and the nation's complaints at *Mei Meriva*?
- How is Aaron's death related to the snakes that attack the nation?
- What was Moses and Aaron's sin, and why were they barred from entering the Land of Israel?

A. The Deaths of Moses and Aaron

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה מִדְבַּר צִן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקָדֵשׁ.
(במדבר כ', א)

And the children of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the nation settled in Kadesh. (Num. 20:1)

When did this take place? The verse states that the nation reached the wilderness of Zin in the "first month," but the year is not mentioned.

The Fortieth Year

The commentators attempt to provide the information omitted by the verses. **Rashbam** explains:

…"In the first month" – **At the end of the forty years.** For Aaron died after this, in the fifth month of the fortieth year since the nation left Egypt, as it is written in *Parashat Mas'ei*. (Rashbam on Num. 20:1)

…"בחדש הראשון" – **שלסוף ארבעים שנה.** שהרי מת אהרן אחריה בחדש החמישי בשנת ארבעים ליצאת בני ישראל, כדכת' בפרשת אלה מסעי.

Rashbam explains[1] that this takes place in the fortieth year since the continuation of the *parasha* recounts Aaron's death and in *Parashat Mas'ei*[2] the Torah states that Aaron died in the fifth month of the fortieth year.

Ibn Ezra interprets the verse in the same way and adds an interesting point:

"In the first month" – of the fortieth year. And behold, there is nothing in the Torah – no act or prophecy – apart from [those that occurred] in the first year and the fortieth year. (Ibn Ezra on Num. 20:1)

"בחדש הראשון" – בשנת הארבעים, והנה אין בתורה כלל שום מעשה או נבואה רק בשנה הראשונה ובשנת הארבעים.

According to Ibn Ezra, the Torah does not describe any event that occurred during the years that the nation wandered in the desert as punishment for the sin of the spies. It recounts only what happened in the first (and the beginning of the second) year and the fortieth year.

1 See also *Seder Olam Rabba* 9.

2 "And Aaron the priest went up to Mount Hor at God's command, and he died there, in the fortieth year after the Children of Israel had left Egypt, in the fifth month, on the first of the month" (Num. 33:38).

According to this view, *Parashat Chukat* begins the account of the fortieth year – the year in which the nation prepares to enter the Land of Israel.

Miriam's Death in Kadesh

How does this year begin? First, the nation arrives in Kadesh, near the border of the Land of Israel. This is the starting point of their journey into the Land.[3] What is the first thing that happens there?

…And the nation settled in Kadesh; and Miriam died there and was buried there. (Num. 20:1)

…וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקָדֵשׁ, וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם. (שם)

The fortieth year begins with Miriam's death, just as the nation is preparing to enter the Land of Israel.

The Sin at *Mei Meriva*

Immediately following Miriam's death, the incident at *Mei Meriva* [lit. "the waters of strife"] occurs. As a result, God decrees that Moses and Aaron will not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. Instead, they will die in the desert:

3 It should be noted that in the second year, when the nation prepared to enter the Land of Israel, they arrived at Kadesh-Barnea. Kadesh and Kadesh-Barnea are not the same place (Rashi on Num. 32:8; Ramban on Gen. 14:7 and Num. 20:1; see also Abarbanel's commentary and Chaim bar Droma, ***VeZeh Gevul HaAretz***, Jerusalem (5718) p. 149-168); however, both are located on the border of the Land of Israel and the Israelites passed through both places before they entered the Land. Presumably, it is no coincidence that both are named "Kadesh".

וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה
וַיִּקָּהֲלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל
אַהֲרֹן... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל
מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן יַעַן לֹא
הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי
לְעֵינֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, לָכֵן לֹא
תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם...
(שם, ב-יב)

And there was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and against Aaron... And God said to Moses and to Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them..." (Num. 20:2-12)

Aaron's Death

Immediately afterwards the verses recount Aaron's death, which occurs at the next stop on the nation's route:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִקָּדֵשׁ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה הֹר
הָהָר: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה
וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן בְּהֹר הָהָר עַל
גְּבוּל אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם לֵאמֹר:
יֵאָסֵף אַהֲרֹן אֶל עַמָּיו כִּי
לֹא יָבֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
נָתַתִּי לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל
אֲשֶׁר מְרִיתֶם אֶת פִּי לְמֵי
מְרִיבָה: קַח אֶת אַהֲרֹן
וְאֶת אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וְהַעַל
אֹתָם הֹר הָהָר: וְהַפְשֵׁט
אֶת אַהֲרֹן אֶת בְּגָדָיו
וְהַלְבַּשְׁתָּם אֶת אֶלְעָזָר

And they traveled from Kadesh, and the Children of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. And God said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, saying, "Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter into the land which I have given to the Children of Israel, because you rebelled against My word at *Mei Meriva*. Take Aaron and his son Elazar, and bring them up to Mount Hor.

בְּנוֹ וְאַהֲרֹן יֵאָסֵף וּמֵת שָׁם:
וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה
ה' וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶל הֹר הָהָר
לְעֵינֵי כָּל הָעֵדָה: וַיַּפְשֵׁט
מֹשֶׁה אֶת אַהֲרֹן אֶת בְּגָדָיו
וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ אֹתָם אֶת אֶלְעָזָר
בְּנוֹ וַיָּמָת אַהֲרֹן שָׁם
בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה
וְאֶלְעָזָר מִן הָהָר: וַיִּרְאוּ כָּל
הָעֵדָה כִּי גָוַע אַהֲרֹן וַיִּבְכּוּ
אֶת אַהֲרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם כֹּל
בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And strip Aaron of his garments, and dress his son Elazar in them; and Aaron will be gathered to his people and shall die there." And Moses did as God commanded; and they went up to Mount Hor before the entire congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and dressed his son Elazar in them; and Aaron died there, at the top of the mountain; and Moses and Elazar descended from the mountain. And the entire congregation saw that Aaron was dead; and they wept for Aaron thirty days, the entire House of Israel. (Num. 20:22-29)

The Death of the Leaders in the Fortieth Year

The Torah begins its description of the fortieth year by recounting the deaths of the nation's leaders – Miriam dies; Moses and Aaron are destined to die in the desert, and Aaron dies shortly afterward. The year ends with the description of Moses' death[4] at the

4 According to tradition, Moses died on the 7th of *Adar*. The *Tosefta* (Lieberman ed.) on tractate *Sotah* 11:7 cites the chronological calculation upon which this tradition is based: at the end of Deuteronomy, the nation mourns for Moses for 30 days after his death, and the book of Joshua states that the nation waited three days to sanctify themselves and then crossed the river on the 10th of *Nisan* (Josh. 4:19). The 7th of *Adar* is 33 days before the 10th of *Nisan*.

end of Deuteronomy. These events characterize **the fortieth year as a period of leadership transitions.**

Abarbanel writes:

ובא הכתוב הזה ללמדנו, שבימים מועטים מתו אהרון ומרים וגם משה... (פירוש אברבנאל לבמדבר כ', עמ' ק)

And this text comes to teach us that Aaron and Miriam, and Moses as well, died within a short time... (Abarbanel on Num. 20, p. 100)

B. Crisis

The deaths of the nation's leaders within a short time of one another, just before the nation entered the Land of Israel, were certainly a cause for distress among the people.

Miriam, Aaron, and Moses – The Water, the Clouds of Glory, and the Manna

The following *midrash* describes what happened after the deaths of the nation's three leaders:

המן בזכות משה. תדע לך שהוא בזכות משה כיון שנסתלק משה (יהושע ה', יב): "וישבת המן ממחרת".

The manna was in Moses' merit. Know that it is in Moses' merit, as when Moses passed away, "And the manna ceased the next day" (Josh. 5:12).

וענני כבוד בזכותו של אהרן, כיון שנסתלק אהרן מה כתיב (במדבר כ"א, ד): "ותקצר נפש העם בדרך", שהיתה השמש קופחת עליהם.

And the Clouds of Glory were in Aaron's merit, as when Aaron passed away, what does it say? "And the soul of the nation became impatient on the way" (Num. 21:4), for the sun beat down upon them.

והבאר בזכות מרים, מה כתיב (שם כ', א): "ותמת שם מרים ותקבר שם", ומה כתיב אחר כך: "ולא היה מים לעדה"... (במדבר רבה (וילנא) פרשה א ד"ה ב ד"א וידבר)

And the well was in Miriam's merit, for what does it say? "And Miriam died there and was buried there" (Num. 20:1), and what does it say afterwards? "And there was no water for the congregation" (Num. 20:2) (*Bamidbar Rabba* [Vilna ed.] 1)

The manna (food), the well (water) and the Clouds of Glory (protection) were the three vital elements that enabled the nation to survive in the desert. According to the *midrash*, the existence of these three elements depended on the merit of the nation's leaders. This *midrash* suggests that just as the nation could not survive physically without these three basic elements, they could not have survived spiritually without their leaders – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

These three leaders pass away within the same year and can no longer guide the nation. The disappearance of the water, manna, and Clouds of Glory reflect the bleak circumstances faced by the nation when their leaders died. The loss of these three figures left a void, and their absence is deeply felt.

Thus the Israelites are plunged into an existential crisis, as they lose their leaders on the brink of a momentous journey.

C. Miriam's Death and the Nation's Complaints

Miriam's Death – the Loss of the Water

The incident at *Mei Meriva* follows the account of Miriam's death. Here the Torah does not indicate the beginning of a new section (e.g., by leaving a white space between the verses). In fact, they are even linked by the word "and": "**And** the nation settled in Kadesh, **and** Miriam died there, **and** there was no water." Clearly, it is no coincidence that these two events occurred at the same place and time.

The *midrash* quoted above links Miriam's death with the nation's complaints regarding the lack of water at *Mei Meriva*: as long as Miriam was alive, her well accompanied the nation throughout their travels. When she died, the well disappeared and the people lacked water and began complaining, which led to Moses and Aaron committing a sin.[5]

Insensitivity to the Leaders' Mourning

Moses and Aaron's reaction to the nation's complaints is puzzling. After all, this is not the first time the nation has complained. In Exodus 17 the nation raises a similar complaint at Rephidim, which results in a similar outcome – Moses strikes a rock, which gives water – but without Moses and Aaron having to disobey God's command. Why did they ultimately sin here?

In the previous section we discussed the nation's

5 As stated more clearly in the *midrash* in *Yalkut Shimoni* quoted below.

emotional upheaval following Miriam's death, which signaled the beginning of the end of the current leadership.

Inspired by the Sages, **Abarbanel** adds a complementary perspective: the emotional turmoil experienced by the leaders, Moses and Aaron, in the wake of their sister's death:

ודבר הכתוב בגנותם של ישראל, שבמקום שהיה להם לנוד למשה ולאהרון ולנחמם במיתת אחותם הנביאה, נקהלו עליהם לריב עמם ולא לנחמם.

And the text condemned Israel, for instead of expressing sympathy for Moses and Aaron and comforting them for the death of their sister the prophetess, they gathered upon them to quarrel with them and not to comfort them.

The nation, unaware that its leaders are in mourning, approaches them with demands instead of comforting them. Abarbanel considers this as a sin of the Israelites since they were insensitive to the personal mourning of their leaders. However, a closer examination of the *midrash* reveals that its criticism is actually directed at Moses and Aaron:

Personal Mourning vs. Community Leadership

הבאר היה עולה בזכות מרים שנאמר "ותמת שם מרים" ומיד "ולא היה מים לעדה", וכיון שנסתלק הבאר התחילו מתכנסין על

The well had accompanied them in Miriam's merit, as it says: "And Miriam died there," and immediately: "And there was no water for the congregation." And since the well was gone,

משה ועל אהרן שנאמר "ויקהלו על משה ועל אהרן" **והיו משה ואהרן יושבין ומתאבלין על מרים**. אמר להם הקב"ה: בשביל שאתם אבלים ימותו בצמא?? עמוד וקח מטך והשקית את העדה ואת בעירם. ילקוט שמעוני תורה רמז תשסג

they began to converge upon Moses and Aaron, as it says: "And they assembled themselves against Moses and against Aaron," **and Moses and Aaron were sitting and mourning for Miriam.** The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: Shall they die of thirst because you are mourning? Get up and take your staff and give the nation and their animals to drink. (*Yalkut Shimoni* on the Torah, *remez* 763)

This *midrash* explains the juxtaposition of the incident at *Mei Meriva* and Miriam's death in a way that judges the nation favorably in a situation where they suddenly find themselves lacking water, and criticizes Moses and Aaron for being preoccupied with their private mourning at a time when the nation greatly needed guidance.

Later, the *midrash* suggests that not only should the nation be judged favorably for demanding water, but that their demand was divinely ordained to cause Moses and Aaron to recognize Miriam's righteousness and learn from her ways. In this way, their grief for Miriam transforms from personal mourning to a national experience:

דבר אחר: למה נסתלק הבאר במיתת מרים? כדי שידעו הכל כמה היתה צדקת ויצטערו עליה רבים וגמלו אתה חסד, כך כיון שמתה מרים, ומשה ואהרן עסוקין בה, וישראל מבקשים מים ואין מוצאין, מיד נתכנסו עליהם.

Another thing: Why did the well disappear when Miriam died? So that all would know how righteous she was and would mourn for her and do a kindness with her. For when Miriam died, and Moses and Aaron were preoccupied with her, and the Israelites searched for water and could not find, they immediately gathered upon them.

From Personal Mourning to Public Mourning

The well's disappearance was not only a result of Miriam's death, as her merit could have sustained the nation even after her death. Rather, it was preordained so that the nation would recognize and emulate Miriam's righteous behavior.

In practice, this event resulted in the opposite:

כיון שראו אותם באין, אמר משה לאהרן: תאמר מהו כינוס זה, אמר לו אהרן: לא בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב הן גומלי חסדים בני גומלי חסדים? אמר לו משה: אי אתה יודע להפריש בין כינוס לכינוס, אין זה כינוס של תקנה אלא

When they saw them coming, Moses said to Aaron: Say to them, What is this gathering? Aaron said to him: Are not the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob bringers of kindness? Moses said to him: Can you not distinguish between [different types of] gatherings?This is not a gathering of reparation but of destruction, for if it were

של קלקלה, שאילו היה כינוס של תקנה היו צריכים להיות בראשם שרי אלפים ושרי מאות וגו', ואתה אומר לגמול חסד הן באין? מיד הטיחו דברים כנגדו שנאמר: "וירב העם עם משה".

a gathering of reparation they would be led by the rulers of the thousands and the rulers of the hundreds, etc. – and you say they are coming to bring kindness?
Immediately they spoke against him, as it says: "And the nation quarreled with Moses" (Num. 20:3).

Harsh Truth and Forgiving Kindness

This *midrash* portrays Moses and Aaron's differing opinions regarding the nation's intentions. Perhaps the difference between Moses and Aaron lies in their perception. Aaron, with his tendency to view things in a positive light, cannot perceive the negative elements of the situation; instead, he focuses upon the essence of the nation as "bringers of kindness". Moses, on the other hand, recognizes the harsh reality, the true nature of the nation's intentions: "a gathering of destruction". According to this interpretation, the *midrash* is covertly criticizing Aaron's forgiving nature.

A Forgiving View Affects Reality

However, the *midrash* may be interpreted differently. It is possible that its criticism is actually directed towards Moses' harsh view of reality. Perhaps an overly exacting **perception** of reality prevented Moses from **affecting** reality. If Moses had also viewed the nation in a positive light as Aaron did, the conflict with the nation could have been avoided: the nation would have approached, Moses and Aaron would

have thanked them for coming to share in their grief and appreciate Miriam's righteousness, and thus the "gathering of destruction" would have been transformed into a "gathering of reparation." Therefore, the *midrash* emphasizes that immediately after Moses spoke, "**immediately** they spoke against him."

The *midrash* concludes its criticism of Moses and Aaron quite harshly:

כיון שראה משה ואהרן פניהם זעומות ברחו להם לאהל מועד, משל למה הדבר דומה לגדול המדינה שנזדעזעו בני המדינה וברח לפלטין של מלך.

When Moses and Aaron saw that their faces were angry, they fled to the Tent of Meeting. To what may this be compared? To a great statesman at whom the nation became angered, who flees to the king's palace.

"ויראַ כבוד ה'", אמר להן הקב"ה למשרתי צבור: צאו מכאן במהרה, **בני מתים בצמא ואתם יושבין ומתאבלין על הזקנה**??

"And the glory of God appeared" – the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the public servants: Leave here quickly; **My sons are dying of thirst and you are sitting and mourning for the old woman?**

God's position on the matter is clear: Moses and Aaron acted wrongly. They must lead the nation confidently, even when they are mourning their sister.

If we accept both sides of the story – Abarbanel's interpretation, which accuses the nation of

insensitivity towards its leaders' feelings, and the view of the *midrash,* which blames the leaders for being unwilling or unable to share their grief with the nation and being preoccupied with their own personal mourning – then Miriam's death is the chief cause of the incident at *Mei Meriva* since it led to both the nation's complaints and Moses and Aaron's improper response.

Miriam's Death – Loss of Leadership

Ralbag suggests a number of other explanations regarding the connection between Miriam's death and the incident at *Mei Meriva*:

"ולא היה מים לעדה" – הנה סמך זה למיתת מרים, להעיר שמיתת הצדיקים עושה רושם.

"And there was no water for the congregation" – behold, this was juxtaposed to Miriam's death in order to note that the death of the righteous leaves its mark.

ואחשוב שגם מרים הייתה מושכת לב ישראל בחכמתה לעבוד ה' יתעלה. וכאילו אמר שאם הייתה מרים בחיים לא הרסו ישראל בזה האופן לשאול המים ממשה בדברי קנטורין כאלה.

And I think that Miriam, too, in her wisdom, had influenced the hearts of the nation to serve God, may He be exalted. And it is as though it said that if Miriam had been alive, the nation would not have behaved destructively in this way, asking Moses for water with such belligerent words.

או יהיה הרצון בזה להעיר שאילו הייתה מרים בחיים היו נמלכים בה משה ואהרון במה שציווה ה' יתעלה אותם "ודברתם אל הסלע". והייתה היא סיבה לשמרם מהכשל בואת המצווה. כי היא הייתה נביאה גם כן, וגדולת השנים מהם וידמה שהיו חולקים כבוד לה לקחת עצה ממנה. (ביאור הרלב"ג, במדבר פרק כ')

Or, the intention of this might be to note that if Miriam had been alive, Moses and Aaron would have consulted with her regarding what God, may He be exalted, commanded them: "And you shall speak to the rock." And she would have been able to caution them from the failure to obey God's commandment. For she, too, was a prophetess, and older than both of them, and it seems that they would have honored her and taken her advice. (Ralbag on Num. 20)

According to Ralbag, it was not only the absence of water that caused a crisis among the nation, but Miriam's death itself ("the death of righteous leaves its mark"). Ralbag also attributes Moses and Aaron's inappropriate reaction to Miriam's death: Miriam would have been able to influence both the nation and its leaders to behave differently, avoid conflict, and reach a constructive solution.

Ralbag's interpretation emphasizes that Miriam's death left a void in the national leadership, perhaps reflected by the nation's lack of water.

D. From Miriam's Death to Moses and Aaron's Deaths

The interpretations cited above assume that Miriam's death resulted in the decree that Moses and Aaron would die in the desert, but only indirectly: since the nation lacked water they complained, and since Moses and Aaron could not respond appropriately due to their mourning, or due to the lack of Miriam's influence, they sinned and were subsequently punished.

However, there may be a deeper connection between Miriam's death and the decree regarding Moses and Aaron's deaths.

A Fundamental Connection between Miriam's Death and the Deaths of Moses and Aaron

Ralbag writes:

או יהיה הסמיכות הזה להעיר שיחד נגזרה מיתתם על שלושתם, כי בעת מותה בא זה המקרה אשר נמשך ממנו גזרת המוות על משה ועל אהרון ובמעט זמן מתו כולם...

Or this juxtaposition might indicate that their three deaths were decreed together, for at the time of her death this incident occurred which brought about the decrees of Moses and Aaron's deaths, and in this short time they all died...

According to this interpretation, the incident at *Mei Meriva* occurred immediately after Miriam's death not because this led to a national crisis, but because her death is closely related to Moses and Aaron's ultimate fate, which was decided at *Mei Meriva*.

Death at Kadesh – On the Border of the Land of Israel

Abarbanel also suggests a close connection between the deaths of the three leaders at this point:

...וגם להודיע שבקדש ברנע הייתה תלונה וגזירת מיתה לדור המרגלים שלא יבואו אל הארץ, וכן בקדש הזה שהיה במדבר צין היתה גם כן גזירה אחרת ותלונת מיתה שלא יכנסו לארץ משה ואהרון כאילו תמיד בקדש קצף הקב"ה בעמו וחסידיו.

...And also to indicate that the complaint and the decree that the generation of the spies would die [before they reached the Land of Israel] took place in Kadesh Barnea, and so too in this Kadesh, which was in the wilderness of Zin, there was another decree and a complaint of death that Moses and Aaron would not enter the Land of Israel; as though God was always angered against His nation and His righteous ones at Kadesh.

Abarbanel notes that the Israelites camped twice in a place called Kadesh on the border of the Land of Israel. Both times, a fateful sin was committed, which resulted in a decree prohibiting the sinners from entering the Land.[6]

According to this interpretation, the nation is tested on the border of the Land to find out who is worthy of entering; those who are not allowed to enter are fated to die before the nation crosses the border.[7]

6 See our lesson on *Parashat Masei*.

7 Deuteronomy 1 states:
וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קוֹל דִּבְרֵיכֶם וַיִּקְצֹף וַיִּשָּׁבַע לֵאמֹר: אִם יִרְאֶה אִישׁ בָּאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה הַדּוֹר הָרָע

Were Moses, Aaron, and Miriam unworthy of entering the Land of Israel?

E. Why were Moses and Aaron Barred from Entering the Land?

Until this point we have discussed the factors that contributed to Moses and Aaron's sin. We have yet to examine the sin itself which resulted in Moses and Aaron being forbidden to enter the Land of Israel. The Torah does not explicitly state the nature of the sin. As a result, numerous commentators suggest possible explanations. Samuel David Luzzatto expresses a sense of confusion in his commentary:

הַזֶּה אֵת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לָתֵת לַאֲבֹתֵיכֶם: זוּלָתִי כָּלֵב בֶּן יְפֻנֶּה הוּא יִרְאֶנָּה וְלוֹ אֶתֵּן אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר דָּרַךְ בָּהּ וּלְבָנָיו יַעַן אֲשֶׁר מִלֵּא אַחֲרֵי ה׳: **גַּם** בִּי הִתְאַנַּף ה׳ בִּגְלַלְלֶכֶם לֵאמֹר **גַּם** אַתָּה לֹא תָבֹא שָׁם.

And God heard the voice of your words and was angered, and He swore, saying, "Surely not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your forefathers, except Caleb, son of Jephuneh, he shall see it; and to him I will give the land that he has set foot upon, and to his children, because he has wholly followed God." **Also** God was angry with me for your sakes, saying, "You **also** shall not go there." (Deut. 1:34-37)

The word "also" appears twice. While the second time highlights the identical nature of Moses and the nation's punishments, the first instance emphasizes the identical nature of God's anger over Moses' sin at *Mei Meriva* and the national transgression committed by the spies, mentioned earlier in the chapter.

משה רבינו חָטא חֵטא אחד,והמפרשיםהעמיסו עליו שלשה עשר חטאים ויותר, כי כל אחד בדה מליבו עוון חדש... אשר על כן כל ימי נמנעתי מהעמיק החקירה בדבר זה, מיראה שמא מתוך חקירותי יצא לי פירוש חדש ונמצאתי גם אני מוסיף עוון חדש על משה רבינו.
ביאור שד"ל לבמדבר כ', יב

Our teacher Moses sinned once, and the commentators have heaped upon him thirteen sins and more, for each one invented a new sin... Thus, all of my days I have abstained from investigating this point deeply, for fear that my investigations would result in a new explanations and I too would add a new sin upon Moses. (S. D. Luzzatto [*Shadal*] on Num. 20:12)

Following Luzzatto, we shall not attempt to understand the exact nature of Moses and Aaron's sin either.

Similarly, **Abarbanel** criticizes the tendency to heap sins on Moses and Aaron:

למה נגזר על משה ועל אהרון שלא יבואו אל הארץ? ...אין ראוי שעונש כזה יענשו שני שרי צבאות ישראל אלא לסיבה גדולה ולא לעניין קל כמו שהיה עניין מי מריבה כפי כל אחת מהדעות שנאמרו בו...

Why was it decreed that Moses and Aaron would not come to the Land? ...It is not fitting that this punishment be given to two generals of Israel for anything but a great reason, and not for a small matter, as was the matter at *Mei Meriva*, as all of the opinions regarding it have stated...

השאלה הב', הנה ממדותיו של הקב"ה לתת עונש מידה כנגד מידה... ובעניין מי מריבה אין העונש מתייחס, כי מה היחס שיש אל הכאת הסלע או דיבורו עם ההעברה אל הארץ?

The second question: behold, one of the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is to mete out punishment measure for measure... And regarding the matter of *Mei Meriva* the punishment is not proportionate, for how is striking a rock or speaking to it proportional to not entering the Land?

Abarbanel lists ten opinions regarding the nature of Moses and Aaron's sin at *Mei Meriva*, and rejects them all. In the end, he returns to his original position that their sin was not at *Mei Meriva* at all:

ודעתי בזה שמשה ואהרון שניהם נענשו בעבור עוונות שעשו: אם אהרון בעוון העגל, ואם משה אדונינו עניין המרגלים.

And my opinion on this is that Moses and Aaron both were punished for sins they committed: Aaron for the sin of the Golden Calf, and Moses our master for the spies.

Abarbanel explains that even though Aaron did not actively participate in worshiping the Golden Calf and his intentions were good – he intended to delay the nation until Moses returned –in practice, he lost control of the situation and **the Israelites sinned because of him.**

Similarly, Moses did not actually sin during the

episode of the spies – he continued to believe in God's ability to bring the Israelites into the Land despite the spies' negative reports. Moses' mistake lay in the fact that he commanded the spies to check the strength of the nations and the cities in Canaan, which caused the spies to sin and cause panic among the nation with their reports. Although Moses had good intentions, he was still punished since his leadership **caused the nation to sin.**

Moses and Aaron's sins at *Mei Meriva* was fundamentally similar. **The absence of proper leadership on Moses and Aaron's part caused the nation to commit a grave sin**, which led to the divine decree that that entire generation would die in the desert.[8] Therefore, it is only fair that Moses and Aaron, too, die in the desert. However, they were not included in the nation's punishment due to their honor and status, and the fact that they were acting with good intentions. Their sin was not the result of rebellion, but of a lack of leadership.

The incident at *Mei Meriva* was not Moses and Aaron's actual sin, but a **means** of publicly revealing their absence of leadership and thus allowing them to be punished for their lack of leadership in the past, which had disastrous results. Abarbanel writes: "And

8 See also Rabbi Menachem Leibtag's article, "*Chet Mei Meriva*," on the Virtual Beit Midrash: http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/6-parsha/38chukath.php . Rabbi Leibtag argues that the punishment was the result of a long process, not a single act. During this process, it became clear that Moses and Aaron were not the appropriate leaders to bring the nation into the Land of Israel.

therefore, the incident of *Mei Meriva* at Kadesh was a means in this case and not itself a reason."

F. Leaders – Part of the Community

The Leaders' Responsibility for the Nation's Sins

We might expand Abarbanel's interpretation and suggest that the divine decree that Moses and Aaron would die in the desert is not a punishment per se, nor is it a direct – or even an indirect – result of their actions. As the leaders of the nation, they must take responsibility for the people and ensure that they do not sin. When the nation commits grave transgressions such as the sins of the spies and the Golden Calf, and the leaders are unable to curb this trend and prevent the nation from deteriorating further – this insufficient assumption of responsibility is considered a sin on the leaders' part.

Moses and Aaron's "punishment" is not simply a punishment. If the entire nation is prohibited from entering the Land of Israel as a result of their sins, the leaders cannot be completely exempted and enter the Land alone, without their people. They cannot cast off all responsibility for the actions of the nation they led. While they did not personally sin and so did not receive a decree of death at the same time as the nation, it was at that point that their fate was decided: they would not enter the Land of Israel. God ensured that their absence of leadership would be revealed publicly, which would lead to their being

banned from entering the Land of Israel.

At Kadesh, on the threshold of the Land of Israel, it becomes apparent that Moses and Aaron, the leaders of the nation who helped the nation survive their years in the wilderness and led them through many fateful encounters, cannot enter the Land of Israel. They must remain in the wilderness.

Their personal greatness notwithstanding, these leaders are still members of the nation. If the entire nation must remain in the wilderness, their leaders cannot enter the Land of Israel without them. We noted above that this is because they are responsible for the transgressions committed at the national level.[9]

G. The End of Miraculous Leadership

Yet there may be another reason that the nation's leaders died outside of the Land of Israel.

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – Miraculous Leadership

The *midrash* quoted above describes items the nation received in their leaders' merit: the well, the Clouds of Glory and the manna. In our discussion above, we related to these elements as expressions of leadership

9 Miriam's death – which took place before the nation entered the land, even though she had not been involved in a specific sin – proves that the leaders' deaths in the wilderness were not the result of any particular sin. Rather, it resulted from their being an inseparable part of the nation: if the nation is barred from entering the Land of Israel, its leaders will suffer the same fate.

and the nation's dependence on their leaders. There may be an additional implication of this *midrash*. The leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam in the desert had a miraculous nature: there were no natural sources of water in the wilderness; therefore, the nation needed the miraculous appearance of Miriam's well – a limitless supply of water in the wilderness. The oppressive heat, obstacles and wild animals made traveling difficult; Aaron's merit brought the nation the Clouds of Glory, miraculously easing the nation's journey. Finding palatable food in the wilderness would have been impossible – were it not for Moses' miraculous leadership, which enabled the nation to have manna to eat.

In The Land of Israel – Natural Leadership

As the journey through the wilderness approaches its conclusion, the nation camps in Kadesh which is on the border of the Land of Israel. In the Promised Land, they will no longer need such miracles. Life is guided by natural principles: rain falls from the heavens and flows from springs and rivers; food grows from the earth; the nation will settle into permanent homes, no longer wandering through wilderness under difficult conditions. They will still be dependent on God's assistance and the lessons they learned in the wilderness regarding their dependence on God will remain with them forever. However, from this point on, God's assistance is granted via nature, not through overt miracles. This signifies a transition to a state of natural leadership, as opposed to miraculous leadership.

The Death of the Leaders and the Transition of Leadership

This transition is apparent in the deaths of the nation's three leaders, whose leadership was characterized by miraculous events. The following generations of leaders will guide the nation with God's assistance, but through natural means.

In the fortieth year of wandering in the desert, as the nation prepares to enter the Land of Israel, the role of the miraculous leadership comes to an end. The nation stands on the brink of a new era.

The deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam cause a national crisis in this sense as well: God's method of leading the nation is about to change drastically. The nation already begins to sense this when Miriam dies. As described in the *midrash*, upon Miriam's death the miraculous well disappears. Aaron's death causes the disappearance of the Clouds of Glory, which protected the nation's every step. Upon Moses' death the nation stops receiving manna, the miraculous food that the sustained them in the wilderness.

The nation faces this monumental change without knowing how they will support themselves from this point on. They have no experience with natural leadership; what are they to do now? It is no wonder that Miriam's death leads to bitter complaints from the nation.

H. A Gradual Change of Leadership

The Miracle – Speaking to the Rock

Following Miriam's death, the nation fears the difficulties that will arise without her miraculous intervention. God knows that the nation is not yet ready to handle a natural mode of leadership – certainly not while they are still in the wilderness. Therefore, God commanded Moses and Aaron to speak to the rock and extract water from it in a miraculous manner, so that the people would continue feeling secure and confident in their leadership. The nation cannot adapt to a natural form of leadership overnight; they must gradually adjust to this new reality.

Perhaps Moses' speaking to the rock to extract water from it was an intermediary stage between Miriam's well – a constant, miraculous source of water – and the springs of the Land of Israel, where spring water can only be reached by digging wells. Here Moses is commanded to speak to the rock[10] (and is perhaps even commanded to strike it, according to some commentators) to teach the nation that in the Land of Israel water is not simply available. One must put in effort and dig in order to bring forth water

10 Moses and Aaron's error regarding this point is perhaps more understandable: they may have wished to demonstrate to the nation that water may be obtained in a more natural (or less miraculous) way. However, their decision to strike the rock rather than speak to it did not fulfill the nation's need to experience an overt miracle following Miriam's death, which had stopped their miraculous source of water.

from the earth – all while remaining dependent upon God, Who controls the rain.

The War Against the Canaanites – With Divine Assistance

Afterwards, Aaron dies and the Clouds of Glory leave the people. They stand defenseless before the hostile Canaanites. Here they do not complain. Instead, they turn to God and ask for His help. God grants them assistance that is not quite miraculous: they wage war against the Canaanites and with God's help they win.

Rescue from the Snakes – Through Prayer

The following narrative recounts further complaints from the nation, which result in the nation being attacked by snakes (Num. 21:4-9). Until now, the Clouds of Glory prevented snakes and other creatures from harming the nation. With the disappearance of the Clouds after Aaron's death, the snakes are able to attack.[11]

Here too God ultimately demonstrates to the nation that although Aaron is dead, the miraculous leadership of the nation has not disappeared entirely. Turning to God in prayer can still help. Even though this protection is neither constant nor automatic, as the Clouds of Glory were, genuine prayer and efforts

11 Hizkuni explains: ... ר' יודן אומר: הם הנחשים שהיה הענן שורף, שהיו בוכותו של אהרן, עכשיו שנסתלקו במיתתו היו מזיקים.

R. Yodan says: They are the snakes that the Cloud would burn, which was in Aaron's merit; now that it had gone away upon his death, they struck [the nation]. (*Hizkuni* on Num. 21:6)

See also Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary on this verse.

towards God can bring about miraculous protection.[12]

Finally, when the nation enters the Land of Israel after Moses' death, the manna stops falling:

> וישבות המן ממחרת, באכלם מעבור הארץ
> יהושע ה', יב
>
> And the manna ceased the next day, when they had eaten of the produce of the land… (Josh. 5:12)

A Gradual Transition from Miraculous to Natural Existence

The nation undergoes a process of transition from their miraculous existence to a new stage of natural existence.[13] This process continues through their last year in the wilderness, as their leaders pass away and they must slowly adjust to a new independent way of life, without great leaders or overt miracles.

This process continues even after the nation enters the Land of Israel. At first, the manna continues to fall. The Israelites' first victory at Jericho is entirely

12 Num. 21:7 states:

וַיָּבֹא הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חָטָאנוּ כִּי דִבַּרְנוּ בַה' וָבָךְ הִתְפַּלֵּל אֶל יה' וְיָסֵר מֵעָלֵינוּ אֶת הַנָּחָשׁ וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה בְּעַד הָעָם.

And the nation came to Moses, and they said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against God and against you; pray to God that He shall remove the snake from us." And Moses prayed on behalf of the nation. (Num. 21:7)

The copper snake is not a magical object; rather, as the *mishna* states:

וכי נחש ממית או נחש מחיה? אלא בזמן שישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהן שבשמים היו מתרפאים, ואם לאו – היו נימוקים…

And can a snake bring death or life? Rather, when the nation looked upward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven they were cured; and if not – they would rot… (*Rosh Hashana* 3:8)

13 See also Dr. Hezi Cohen, "*Ma Bein HaPesach BeShemot LaPesach SheBeDevarim?*" ***Akdamot*** 26 (5771), p. 41-56.

miraculous. The war at Ai is fought in a natural way, but with divine assistance. Thus the nation becomes accustomed to life with fewer open miracles.[14]

I. Summary

The juxtaposition of Miriam's death to the sin at *Mei Meriva* is not coincidental. Miriam's death is closely linked to the deaths of Moses and Aaron. Her death begins the transition away from the leaders of the generation of Israelites that wandered through the wilderness. These three leaders pass away before the nation enters the Land of Israel not only because they sinned, but as part of the transition to a new form of leadership more suited to the generation entering the Land. Through their deaths, the miraculous leadership that guided the nation through the wilderness is brought to a gradual end, and the generation entering the Land of Israel begins a new era of natural leadership.

14 See also Eliyahu Assis, "*HaMivneh HaSafruti shel Sipur Kibush HaAretz BeSefer Yehoshua (Perakim 1-11) UMashma'uto*," Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan (5759), p. 239-240, 285-287, 291-295). The author notes that the central element of the capture of Jericho was an overt miracle, and that miracles become gradually less central until the war against the kings of the north is fought in an entirely ordinary way.