



## **Torah for Turbulent Times** **"Water is Life"**

"Thousands have lived without love; not one without water." (W.H. Auden) With few female heroes in the Torah, Miriam stands out, especially in her connection to water. In this past week's portion we learned that after so many years of wandering in the desert with the Israelites, "Miriam died and was buried there, and the community was without water." (Numbers 20:1-2)

The Traditional commentator, [Rashi](#) (11th-century France), noticed the strange juxtaposition of Miriam's death and the shortage of water, and assumed that there must be a connection between the two. From this we learn that in their wandering and uncertain years, the Israelites had a well because of the merit of Miriam. [Miriam's Well](#), represented with a glass of water alongside Elijah's cup of Manischewitz at the seder, was a testament to the greatness of this unique leader. How did Miriam's well work? According to the Midrash, the "well" was actually a rock (yes, the very same rock that Moses later hits with his staff) shaped like a sieve. It would roll with our ancestors throughout their travels, and when they stopped, the rock would dig deep into the sand. The leaders of the tribes would come and stand by it, saying: "Rise up, O well," and it would gush. Some commentators explain that the rock itself didn't actually roll with them; rather, the stream of water that originated from the rock would spring up in their new location.

While there are at least a few opinions on how the water actually flowed, we can all agree that water is the essential ingredient for life. We need it for hydration. It aids in passing along oxygen to our body (blood is more than 90 percent water, and it carries oxygen throughout the body). Along with so much more, it is important for our well being. The Israelites wandered through the wilderness, and thanks to Miriam their thirst was quenched and their physical survival secured.

Our tradition also suggests that water, allegorically refers to the Torah, which is essential for our spiritual well being. From another scene of their wanderings, we learn that the Israelites traveled for three days before they thirsted for water. (Exodus 15:22) The Rabbis assert later that the Israelites were also studying Torah (of course) along the way to support their spiritual well being. This gave rise to the ritual of Torah reading throughout the week. That is, having gone for three days without water/Torah, it was decided that the Torah should be read on the second and fifth days of the week (Monday and Thursday), as well as on Shabbat so that three days wouldn't pass without Torah." (Talmud *BavaKama* 82a).

I know that we're all staying safe, keeping our social distance, wearing masks, and drinking plenty of water. One of the things we learn from Miriam and our tradition is that physical sustenance goes hand in hand with spiritual nourishment. Both are intertwined and essential for hydration to oxygenation to our well being. May our water bottles be filled to the brim with what we need to survive and thrive, and, to be well.

-Rabbi Mark