



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Chukkat 5771

By Dani Passow

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We read in *Parshat Chukkat* about the death of Miriam: “Miriam died and she was buried there. There was no water for the assembly, and [the Children of Israel] gathered against Moshe and Aharon.”¹ This odd and disjointed sequence of verses is puzzling, and leads the Talmud to connect Miriam’s death with the disappearance of water: “From here we learn that all forty years [in the desert, the Children of Israel] had a well because of Miriam’s merit.”²

The trauma of losing Miriam and the water is clear: the people become angry, and Moshe needs to act. But in his haste to try to help the community regain this essential resource, he fails to listen to the higher wisdom offered by God to *speak* to the rock and instead he *hits* it. Though he does manage to meet the people’s need, the waters that he supplies are called *Mei Meriva*—waters of strife.

But if Moshe is able to bring water from the rock, why should the method he uses matter? Contemporary humanitarian aid practices teach us that the method of providing assistance is just as important—if not more so—than the content of the aid itself. Like Moshe, our own government provides resources in response to crises like disasters and chronic hunger, and similarly, our method is frequently heavy-handed, causing an impact that could be aptly described as “*meriva*.” Though well-intentioned, our food aid often causes more harm than good.

In Bolivia, for example, misguided U.S. food aid in the 1950s destroyed what was left of the local agricultural economy by flooding local markets with cheap American wheat grown using food subsidies. The “aid” pushed struggling traditional Bolivian farmers out of business and created a country almost entirely dependent on imports. Though the U.S. did provide a needed resource to address the scarcity of the time, the method was detrimental. By metaphorically “hitting” rather than speaking to the Bolivian people to determine what they needed, our aid caused a deep rift in the economy that lasted for decades.³

Moshe’s punishment for his flawed water procurement tactic foreshadows the consequences of our misguided aid efforts today. For hitting the rock, Moshe lost his chance to accompany the people into the Land of Israel. He was their leader and benefactor during their period of crisis in the desert, but would never be their partner in their prosperous future.

Similarly today, destructive food aid policies drive a wedge between the U.S. and the countries we seek to help. Dumping surplus wheat might help alleviate hunger in the short term, but ultimately, the practice sends the message that we aren’t a true partner in these countries’ development.

¹ Bamidbar 20:1,2.

² Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 9a.

³ Kerssen, Tanya. “Bolivia Reclaiming Food Sovereignty, Part I: The resurgence of native foods.” *Food First*, 24 August 2010.

<http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/3066>

To become a responsive, effective partner, our government, like Moshe, could look to Miriam's example. In telling Moshe to speak to the rock, and juxtaposing this episode with the loss of Miriam, perhaps the Torah is subtly conveying the secret quality that Miriam possessed that merited water for so many years: her ability to listen to the people's needs and respond thoughtfully and productively to meet them.

In Bolivia's case—true in other countries as well—this kind of responsive leadership requires nurturing local capacity rather than providing foreign-grown resources. In a speech given in 2008, former President Bill Clinton offered an alternative to past global aid efforts that simply threw food at starving countries:

We ought to make sure that we are there to keep every child in the world alive with food grown where they live. We ought to be out there teaching people how to save water by growing food more efficiently and how to use maximum solar power and other clean sources of energy.⁴

Our biblical story ends on a positive note: "They are the waters of strife, where the Children of Israel contended with God, and *God was sanctified through them*."⁵ God is sanctified because even through Moshe's mistake, an important lesson about leadership and partnership is learned. May we have the strength to learn from our failures rather than be deterred by them, and to turn failed attempts at global aid into opportunities for reform.



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⁴ Clinton, Bill. "Speech: United Nations World Food Day." *Clinton Foundation*, 13 October 2008. <http://www.clintonfoundation.org/news/news-media/speech- united-nations-world-food-day>

⁵ Bamidbar 20:13.

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