



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

חוקת תשע"ט  
Chukat 5779

**Losing  
Miriam**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



### PARSHAT CHUKAT IN A NUTSHELL

Chukat begins with the law of the red heifer, (the *parah adamah*) judged by the Sages to be the most incomprehensible mitzvah in the Torah. It is a classic example of a Chok, a "statute," often understood as a law that has no reason, or at least none we can understand. The text then shifts from law to narrative. After the death of Miriam the people find themselves without water. They complain to Moses and Aaron, who turn to God. They are told to speak to the rock, and bring forth water, but instead Moses hits the rock twice, responding in a way that seems to suggest anger.

The brothers are judged to have acted wrongly, and both are told they will not enter the land. Aaron later dies. The people are attacked. They ask God for help and are victorious. The people complain again about food and water and are bitten by venomous snakes. They do teshuva and then Moses, at God's command, places a brass serpent on a pole, so that all who look up to it will be healed. The people sing a song about a miraculous well that gives them water. Moses leads the people into successful battles against Sichon and Og.



### THE CORE IDEA

It is a shocking scene. The people complain that there is no water. It is a predictable complaint. This is what happens in a desert. Moses should have been able to handle it. He has been through far tougher challenges in his time. Yet suddenly he explodes in anger: "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock?" Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff" (Bamidbar 20:10–11). What made this trial different? Why did Moses lose control?

The Torah has told of two previous episodes where Moses has faced this same challenge. One took place at Mara, almost immediately after the splitting of the Red Sea. The people found water but it was bitter. Moses prayed to God, God told him how to sweeten the water, and the episode passed.

The second episode occurred at Rephidim (Shemot 17:1–7). This time there was no water at all. Moses scolded the people, then turned to God and said, "What am I to do with this people?" God told him to go to a rock at Chorev, take

his staff, and hit the rock. Moses did so, and water came out. There was drama, tension, and resolution, with nothing like the emotional distress evident in parshat Chukat. Surely Moses, by now almost forty years older, with a generation of experience behind him, should have coped with this challenge without drama. He has already learned how to handle these complaints.

The text gives us a clue, but it is easy to miss. The chapter begins: "In the first month, the whole Israelite community arrived at the desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. And there was no water for the community..." (Bamidbar 20:1–2). Tradition tells of a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites during Miriam's lifetime in her merit. Many commentators said this explained why this crisis was now happening. When Miriam died, the water ceased.

There is, though, another way of reading the connection. Moses lost control because his sister Miriam had just died.

He was in mourning for his eldest sibling. It is hard to lose a parent, but in some ways it is even harder to lose a brother or sister. They are our generation.

So it was not simply the Israelites' demand for water that led Moses to lose control of his emotions, but rather dealing with this in the midst of his own deep grief. The Israelites may have lost their water, but Moses had lost his sister, who had watched over him as a child, guided his development, supported him throughout the years, and helped him carry the burden of leadership, in her own role as leader of the women.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the difference in Moses' reaction this time compared to the previous times the Israelites complained there was no water to drink?
2. Do you think how Moses reacted in this case was understandable? Was it fair?
3. What do you think was underlying the grief Moses was experiencing?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Hannah Senesh was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1921. She grew up in a Zionist home that was passionate about the Jewish national movement and the Land of Israel. She fulfilled her lifelong dream of Aliya in 1939 at the age of 18. She joined Kibbutz Sdot Yam near Caesarea and also enrolled in the Haganah, the pre-state Jewish army to fight for the future Jewish state.

In 1943, the British Army were looking for volunteers to join their fight against the Nazis in Europe, and without hesitation, Hannah signed up to be a paratrooper. On 7 June 1944, at the height of the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, she was one of 37 Jewish parachutists from Palestine to be parachuted by the British Army into Yugoslavia. Their mission was to assist in the rescue of Hungarian Jews about to be deported. She was captured by

the Hungarian police, and endured months of cruel torture, but she showed tremendous courage and refused to divulge any information.

Throughout her ordeal she remained unwavering in her bravery, and when she was executed by a firing squad on 7 November 1944, she refused the blindfold, staring squarely at her executors and her fate. She was only 23 years old. After the establishment of the State of Israel, her body was reinterred on Har Herzl along with the other heroes and leaders of the nation.

1. What do you think Hannah Senesh has in common with Miriam?
2. Would you also describe Miriam as courageous?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Miriam was more than a sister to Moses.

In a truly remarkable passage, the Sages wrote that Miriam persuaded her father Amram, the leading scholar of his generation, to annul his decree that Hebrew husbands should divorce their wives and have no more children because there was a 50 per cent chance that any child born would be killed. "Your decree," said Miriam, "is worse than Pharaoh's. He only decreed against the males, yours applies to females also. He intends to rob children of life in this world; you would deny them even life in the World to Come." Amram admitted her superior logic. Husbands and wives were reunited. Yocheved became pregnant and Moses was born. Note that this Midrash, told by the Sages, unambiguously implies that a six-year-old girl had more faith and wisdom than the leading Rabbi of the generation!

She was still a young child when she followed the course of the wicker basket holding her baby brother as it drifted down the

Nile. She then had the courage and ingenuity to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that she employ a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus ensuring that Moses would grow up knowing his family, his people, and his identity.

Moses surely knew what he owed his elder sister. According to the Midrash, without her he would not have been born. According to the plain sense of the text, he would not have grown up knowing who his true parents were and to which people he belonged. Though they were separated during his years of exile in Midian, Miriam accompanied him throughout his mission once Moses returned to lead the people. She was the one to lead the women in song after they crossed the Sea.

Moses mourned the loss of Miriam, and furthermore felt the loss of her leadership. It is a moment that reminds us of words from the book of Judges said by Israel's chief of staff, Barak, to its judge-and-leader Deborah: "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I cannot go" (Shoftim 4:8). The

relationship between Barak and Deborah was not as close as the one between Moses and Miriam, yet Barak acknowledged his dependence on a wise and courageous woman. Can Moses have felt less?

Bereavement leaves us deeply vulnerable. In the midst of loss we can find it hard to control our emotions. We make mistakes. We act rashly. We suffer from a momentary lack of judgement. These are common symptoms even for ordinary humans like us. In Moses' case, however, there was an additional factor. He was a prophet, and grief can block or eclipse the prophetic spirit. Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, remained in touch with God. It was God, after all, who told him to "speak to the rock." But somehow the message did not penetrate his consciousness fully. That was the effect of grief.

So the details are, in truth, secondary to the human drama played out that day. Yes, Moses did things he might not have done, should not have done. He struck the rock, said "we"

instead of "God," and lost his temper with the people. The real story, though, is about Moses the human being in an onslaught of grief, vulnerable, exposed, caught in a whirl of emotions, suddenly without the sisterly presence that had been the most important bass note of his life. Miriam had been the precociously wise and plucky child who had taken control of the situation when the life of her three-month-old brother lay in the balance, undaunted by either an Egyptian princess or a rabbi-father. She had led the Israelite women in song. The Midrash speaks of her as the woman in whose merit the people had water in a parched land. In Moses' anguish at the rock, we sense the loss of the elder sister without whom he felt bereft and alone.

The story of the moment Moses lost his confidence and calm is ultimately less about leadership and crisis, or about a staff and a rock, than about a great Jewish woman, Miriam, appreciated fully only when she was no longer there.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

It was a devastating tragedy. A young man, brilliant, gifted, with a devoted wife and two beautiful young children, was diagnosed with leukaemia. For two and a half years, helped by advanced medical technology and lifted by the prayers of friends, he fought with all his strength against the civil war taking place within his body. In the end it was all too much, and two weeks ago he died.

If any of us had been so minded, here was a supreme trial of faith. This was no ordinary young man. He was a person of the most profound religious belief and practice, who spent every spare moment of his crowded, short life helping others and bringing out the best in them, who by the sheer force of his example became a leader who transformed lives, whether as a youth leader, a student, a teacher or as a builder of communities. He taught people the power of possibility and helped them become better than they thought they were.

"Is this the religious life, and this its reward?" asked the rabbis. "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?" asked Abraham. There are moments that can shake your faith to its foundations. Yet, as I stood at his funeral, this was not the

feeling that swept over me. Instead I felt a strange, quite unexpected access of faith...

We wept that day. I believe God wept too. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel prize winning writer, once speculated that Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, speaks not about human death but about Divine life, as if it were our way of offering comfort to God for the loss of one of His children. Mortality is written into the human condition, but so too is the possibility of immortality, in the good we do that continues, long after we are here, to beget further good. There are lives that defeat death and redeem existence from tragedy. We knew, that day, that we had known one of them.

*Credo, in the Times, 17th July 2010*

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What are the different approaches to grief found in this quote?
2. What does "there are lives that defeat death and redeem existence from tragedy" mean?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the difference in Moses' reaction this time compared to the previous times the Israelites complained there was no water to drink?
2. Do you think how Moses reacted in this case was understandable? Was it fair?
3. Why did the grief experienced by Moses at the death of Miriam affect him so deeply?
4. Do you think the people were also grieving Miriam's death?
5. Do you think this human side to Moses makes him a more powerful leader and role model, or a weaker one?



## QUESTION TIME

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## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### THE CORE IDEA

1. In this instance, Moses directs his frustration at the people directly, while previously he turned to God in prayer (and in frustration), and God calmed him with a practical plan to solve the issue. He seems to have less patience and understanding in this case.
2. It may be understandable. He was under immense stress and was low on emotional reserves due to the personal grief that he was experiencing because of the loss of his sister. However, this does not mean it was a fair or appropriate reaction for a great leader. We make high demands on our leaders, that they put their own personal feelings aside as they dedicate themselves to their people.
3. There is grief experienced when a loved one is lost. There is also an added emotional impact and challenge when the departed is a sibling (and from the same generation), where we are forced to come to terms with our own mortality. In this case, there was the added dimension that Miriam had played such an important role in his life, both when Moses was a child and once he was the leader of the Jewish people.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Both took on courageous leadership roles in, starting at a young age. Both used their lives to help the Jewish people And both of course were women.
2. There were many examples of Miriam's bravery. For example, she put herself at personal risk to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest her mother as a nurse for baby Moses. Even her role as a leader among the women after the splitting of the Reed Sea, leading them in a song of praise, was an act of initiative and courage.

### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Grief, especially when caused by tragedy, can lead to a crisis of faith, a "supreme trial of faith". But it can equally connect one to God, strengthening faith, described here as a "quite unexpected access of faith." Rabbi Sacks (in the name of S.Y. Agnon) here refers to a third approach, whereby we find ourselves comforting God in His moment of grief at a lost child, and we do this by saying Kaddish.
2. Sometimes death can remind us of the "possibility of immortality, in the good we do that continues, long after we are here". The good we do lives on, and when we live life as a role model, others will follow in our path long after we are gone.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
3. Apart from the normal grief experienced when a loved one is lost, there is an added dimension to this when the departed is a sibling (and from the same generation), forcing the bereaved to face the emotional challenge of coming to terms with our own mortality. In this case, there was also the third dimension that Miriam had played such an important role in his life, both when Moses was a child and when he was the leader of the Jewish people. In fact, Moses owed his very existence and identity to her as it was Miriam who convinced their parents to continue having children, and she also made sure Moses knew who he really was by arranging for their mother to be his nurse in the court of Pharaoh's daughter.
4. Perhaps the people's unreasonable reaction to the loss of water after Miriam's death was also due to their own grief. She was after all a leader of the nation, providing a constant source of leadership and inspiration.
5. Role models and leaders that show their human side demonstrate to the people that they understand their own reality, what it means to be a human, and what their emotional experience is at any point. To know that Moses felt the same emotions as the people must have been comforting and inspiring to them.