

Shabbat 07 12 19 Sermon

Chapter 19 of the Book of Numbers begins with death. And it doesn't end there. Death is ever-present throughout tomorrow morning's reading. Chapter 19 begins with the Red Heifer mystery. The mystery of how our ancient Israelite ancestors imagined they could be purified from contact with death. That somehow, being in close proximity to death made a shift so profound that some ritual was required to change your status. You would come into contact with death and so that was something that adhered to you. And in the ancient Israelite mind, some profoundly mysterious, odd, paradoxical ritual was required in order to purify you from death. And so tomorrow morning's reading, which will have in it the death of the two siblings of Moses, the death of Miriam and Aaron, the two older siblings of the great teacher of Israel.

Tomorrow morning's reading will begin with a purification rite. As if telling the readers, as we begin to read the story of the death of these two great individuals, we ourselves need to pass through the same gate that our ancestors passed through. The gate of the Red Heifer. That odd, mysterious ritual in which the Torah tells us we are to find a pure red animal, the kind of red that is earthy red. The word in Hebrew for red and the word in Hebrew for earth are the same. A red, earthy animal, brown, red. You know, that thing that represents perfection. Human perfection, that is. Find that perfect animal and then burn it. And then mix it together with crimson and hyssop, making it even redder and redder and redder until it's the very red of blood. And then add water. And you have the ashes of purification.

Mechatat, these ashes of purification, are essentially perfection burned completely, mixed together with living, flowing waters that are taken from the source. If ever there was a Jewish example of one of the Buddha's deepest truths, the impermanence of life, that no matter how we'd like to grab it and hold it, life is defined as that which moves, that which changes, that which is dynamic, that is flowing, that is living things change. And one of those changes, of course, is death.

And so the Torah begins tomorrow morning with chapter 19. And then at the end of chapter 19, at the very beginning of chapter 20, the Torah will tell us, after this brief interruption, to give you insight into what it is that is necessary to move on, as if you can move on, but to be purified from contact with death. The children of Israel arrive. Out of nowhere, without any warning, without any build-up, without any notice, Moses isn't called on the phone to let him, you know, to be known that your sister is sick, come quickly. No. Miriam dies. Miriam dies. And usually in the Torah, at this moment, we would expect someone to cry. Usually at this moment in the Torah, we'd expect somebody to eulogize. We would expect the people of Israel, they've already cried for Jacob when he died, they cried, right, they cried when Joseph dies. But the Torah tells us very cryptically, and Miriam died. And she was buried there.

And now without missing a beat, now there's no water for the people of the community. And they gather around Moses and Aaron, and everybody here knows what happens next, right? Where's the water? Threatening. And you can imagine Moses, whose name means the one who was pulled from the water, the one who had a sister who watched for him when he was in danger, and stood vigil.

לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ. ותתעצב אחותו מרחוק לדעה מה יעשה לו. Miriam, who stands at a distance to make sure her little brother is okay, making sure that the waters of the Nile, that usually meant death, were not death waters for her brother, they were living waters for him. Moses doesn't have a moment to grieve. Maybe Moses doesn't want to grieve. Maybe Moses, like his sister before him, as she watched him, making sure not to let go, not to allow Moses to leave her sight. Maybe Miriam, who held on to Moses, now Moses returns the favor and says, Miriam, I won't let you go. But no tears. No water is shed from Moses' eyes.

We move on into the next story with the Israelites. Parched for thirst, they complain and say, וְלוֹ גִּוּוֹנוּ בְּגוֹה אֲחִינוּ לִפְנֵי אֲדֹנִי. Would that we had died with our brothers! That word can only hit the ears of Moses with pain. You want to die with your brothers? My sister just died. You sure? Can you imagine what Moses is feeling? The disconnect between his own inner experience and the experience of those outside of him. He's in the world of, I just lost my sister, and they're in the world of, show up. Your job is to be Moses. We're thirsty. It's really sad that Miriam died. Sorry, but life goes on. Moses arrives. He throws himself at the Tent of Meeting. Throws himself down.

And now the most odd moment in this story of the death of Miriam and its aftermath. God says to Moses, Okay, the people complained for water. Here's what you need to do. Take your staff. קַח אֶת הַמַּטֶּה. Gather the people around. You and Aaron. The text will tell us, of course, your brother, your sibling, meaning the one you still have left. וְדִבַּרְתָּם אֵלָה סֶלֶע. Speak to the rock. And then the rock will give you its waters. And you will bring forth water from the rock. And give drink for all of those in the Kila, in the community. And verse 9, a full verse now is dedicated to telling us that Moses took the very rod the staff that God has told him to take. But why is Moses taking the staff? And why has God asked Moses to take the staff? After all, is Moses going to use the staff? Is God seducing Moses at this moment saying, take the staff the one that you've used before but even though you're taking the staff I want you now to speak to the rock.

Moses has now been living for a long time knowing that he could provide many things to the people but he could not provide water without using a borrowed staff. He borrowed his brother's power. He lived off of his sister's power. And in this moment in Moses' life God is asking him to use the place of deepest vulnerability, his own spoken voice to bring forth water. God says to him speak softly when you carry your big stick. You have power, it's borrowed.

But the only power you need is the power to speak to the obstacle, to the hard place to the rock and that will be what is needed for water to flow. And one can feel at this moment as if really what God is telling Moses is didn't you wish that people had spoken to you and helped you cry? Helped you release your waters? Didn't you, Moses, weren't you wishing that someone had the code, someone had the way to give you space to cry your tears, to grieve your loss for your waters to flow for that Miriam, for that amazing sister who released you into the world and saved your life that nourished you and supported you and sustained you. Didn't you need the very thing that I am now telling you to do to that hard rock? Not with a staff and not with the kind of power that is not real power but with the power of use your words find your way in speak from your vulnerability, from your weak point from your thing that you think you cannot do, Moses your vulnerability will be your release of course Moses doesn't do it and one Freudian moment of the Torah here and if you've been sleeping now

we're coming in for a landing so just hear this the grief that Moses doesn't still comes out when Moses decides not to speak to the rock but rather to use the very thing that got him here knowing the thing that got you here won't get you there the power that you borrowed from Aaron's staff or from Miriam's well. If you don't know about that there's a Midrash that says Miriam was the one who was the source of the water that which got you here. Moses will not get you there and Moses shuts down and he hits the rock and right before he hits the rock in a Torah that has no vowels he calls the Israelites Hamorim, the rebels. The only time in the Torah that they're called Morim, and the same consonants as the word Miriam he calls them Miriam.

The vowels change so he says to them Shimuna Morim. Listen you rebels. But really what he says is listen it's about Miriam. It's about my ungrieved loss it's about every time we say goodbye it hurts. We sit on reservoirs of grief. We sit on reservoirs of sadness. Individually, communally, nationally we sit in that space between the flowing waters of life as they move and change and shift. And we too hold on for good reasons sometimes often but the Torah tells us here how might you speak kindly to the one that says my sister, my brother, my father, my mother, my loved one, my lost youth, my parents, a world that I no longer see a pain that I have not yet addressed from this rock. You Moses can bring forth flowing waters that might heal you.

This blessing is a blessing that I offer tonight to this community and to others a community that has seen much sadness in the last couple of weeks and the individuals in this community and beyond it who have known unspeakable loss still speak softly to the rock don't hit it use words of kindness use words of vulnerability of a place that is soft and tender don't rush past Miryam, past the one who provided sustenance and nourishment. May the source of healing give us healing tonight. In the name of our mother Miryam amen amen.

Please rise.