

Chukat Dvar
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When Rabbi Perkins asked if I would give a dvar about today's parshah, his enticement was, "There are lots of unusual laws and stories in it." Which he knew I would interpret as, 'Oh good, there's lots of weird stuff to talk about.'

You have the purity of the red heifer and how to handle yourself after you have handled death. And then, what a coincidence, Miriam dies. Who by the way, unlike Aaron or Moses, is the only one who doesn't have anyone with them when they die.

And without Miriam and her well, you have so much kvetching by B'nai Yisrael that Moses loses his patience and hits a rock, not just once but twice rather than treat it divinely.

They ask the king of Edom if they can pass through his land to which he says, 'No way.'

Then Aaron dies and the people start kvetching again after a victory and God lets loose some deadly snakes which got the people to apologize so Moses gets rid of the snakes and then mounts a bronze serpent on a pole.

They wandered around some more and when they camped out without Miriam and her well, they sang a song

Spring up, O well - sing to it -
The well which the chieftains dug
Which the nobles of the people started
With Maces and their own staffs.



Catchy, don't you think?

Israel gets denied entry again (gee, this happens to us a lot, don't you think?) And then they battle the giant King Og of Bashan and with God on their side, they win.

Blemish free cows, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, kvetching, hitting rocks for water, being denied entry at neighboring borders, snakes and snake charms, kvetching, a couple more battles, and fini!

Even Rabbi Perkins thinks that's quite a menu of unusual stuff to talk about. Of all these things, what do I want to talk about?

The Song

As most of you know, music is huge part of my life.

Regretfully, talent is not.

I've been listening to music as far as I can remember. One of my earliest memories was in first grade when I would go to sleep with this cool red and white battery powered, RCA plastic transistor AM radio with a design clearly inspired by the coolest car of the day, a Chevy Stingray.

Music has been an integral part of my identity ever since. The other day, Debi asked me what type of fantasy jobs I had as a kid...did I ever dream about being an athlete or astronaut, and I didn't remember having any really. Then, writing this, I remembered, there was one thing I wanted to be...I wanted to be David Ruffin, the lead singer of the Temptations.

But back to Chukat.

According to the research I've done, there are three songs that are referred to in the Torah. There is the Song of the Sea, a spontaneous hymn to celebrate the Lord's freeing of the people, which Miriam continues singing with her timbrel.

There is the song in today's parsha. And, in a few weeks, there is a song request that God called to Moses to write and sing before he dies.

Ten Commandments, 12 tribes, 42 different stations of the Exodus, 613 Mitzvot, yet only 3 songs.

Despite getting such little radio play in our Chumash, despite our propensity to study and debate even the most esoteric Biblical minutiae, we often forget that music is essential to Jewishness.

We don't read Torah, we chant it. We don't say prayers, we daven them with a little melody that helps them make their way to heaven. Not only that, the same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on the day, time, and whether it's a holiday. There are different cantillations for the bible and whether the text comes from Torah, the prophets, or the *Ketuvim*, 'the writings'.

Yes, we are the people of the book. Yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to rise to the spiritual it breaks into song. Music speaks to something deeper than the mind. Music reaches our hearts and our souls.

Our sages recognized this. Or at least they came up with some cool stories.

There is the midrash that angels sang along as God created the earth, putting music in the world even before there was life. Just imagine... a spontaneous angelic soundtrack to the creation of the world.

There's a story that Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, used to tell about two great and learned rabbinic sages. One sage lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, while the other was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this: when it came to Shabbat, one sage spoke great words of Torah while the other sang songs.

Here's another story, a little more current: Some years ago one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the "missing Jewish children" of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christian

families and brought up as Catholics. And if they were really Jews, he figured, a free meal will surely bring them out. He organized a large banquet and placed advertisements inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing *Rozhinkes mit mandlen* (‘Raisins and almonds’) the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus.

We should cherish the fact that sometimes all that is left of our identity is a song.

Without music, Judaism loses its soul. And Jews lose an incomparable and incomprehensible connection to each other, to our traditions, and to the spark that has been kindled since Abraham left home to find himself.

But back to the Parsha.

Picture this. Israel is camped out in a place called The Well. Miriam is no longer with them. Aaron is no longer with them. And there doesn’t seem to be any water with them either. And what do they do?

They sing. But there’s something different about this song. Here it is written “*Az yashir Yisrael et hashirah ha’zot*” – “Then Israel sang this song” But at the Sea of Reeds, what’s written is: “*Az yashir **Moshe uv’nei** Yisrael et hashirah ha’zot*” – “Then **Moses and the Children of** Israel sang this song” (Ex. 15:1). Nearly forty years later, the Children of Israel are no longer children. They are Israel, and they are singing without Moses!

Today’s song is a turning point, reminding them that building a well need not be a miracle, it can be the result of hard work digging.

In other words, after 40 years of wandering, Israel has finally found its voice.

Besides a collection of some unusual rules and legends, Chukat is also a mysterious exploration about life and death. It starts with the red heifer, ritualized way to deal with death. And when Miriam and Aaron die, our waters run dry. The people who have taught us how to sing are gone.

Today's parsha, in all its intricate topics and tangents, that the people who teach us our life songs aren't always going to be with us. It's sad and scary and painful. What can we do?

It does us no good to go around striking stones. Rather, we must rise and keep singing the songs within us that our loved ones once sang. It is our turn to become singers who keep the waters of Jewish life flowing for the next generation. We can change the song. We can update the melody. And do it our way. But we must continue to sing together.

It is often said that Torah is a well, a stream, a river, a source of life and wisdom. While we may explore the endless depths of the Torah's lessons and linguistics and intricacies, sometimes the most powerful way to drink from its waters, is to just sing.

Shabbat Shalom.