

Parshat Chukat
Anxiety and Faith
Susan Hornstein

In the old silent movies, when a significant period of time had passed, a card would be displayed (which is known, incidentally, as an “intertitle”) saying something like “Five years later...” Today, a movie might indicate the passage of time by graying the hair of the characters a little. And novels routinely display a date at the beginning of a chapter, when the passage of time is relevant.

No such indicator is presented by the Torah, when suddenly at the beginning of Chapter 20, we skip from the second year after the Exodus to the fortieth year. The pasuk reads:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צֶן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן...

The Israelites, the entire assembly, arrived at the wilderness of Zin in the first month...
(Bamidbar 20:1)

Ibn Ezra comments that this first month was in the fortieth year, noting that nothing significant had occurred in the intervening thirty-eight years. Rashi comments on the phrase “כָּל־הָעֵדָה”, the entire assembly, saying that those who were destined to die in the wilderness during those years had already died, and now the entire assembly was poised to enter the Promised Land.

Nothing significant had occurred, except a great deal of birth and death. The Israelites who had left Egypt, who had seen the miracles at the Red Sea, who had received the Torah on Sinai, and who, nevertheless, continued to lament the fact that Moshe had taken them out of their security in Egypt, were all dead. After the sin of the spies, which we read about in Parashat Shelach, God delivers the harsh news:

וּפְגָרֵיכֶם אַתֶּם יִפְּלוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה: וּבְנֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ רָעִים בַּמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וְנָשְׂאוּ אֶת־זְנוּתֵיכֶם עִדְתֶּם פְּגָרֵיכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness. (Bamidbar 14:32-33)

We understand that the generation of Israelites who left Egypt were incapable of living the life that God has planned for them. But now, a new generation of Israelites has been born. Surely after forty years in the wilderness, this new generation would be capable of serving and trusting in God. But it seems that nothing has changed. The old refrains are new again, as this generation complains about both water and food, and imagines that they too would have been better off in Egypt:

וְלָמָּה הֵעֲלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהַבְיֵא אֵתֵנוּ אֶל־הַמִּקְוֹם הַרְעָה הַזֶּה לֹא מְקוֹם זֵרַע וְתַאֲנָה וְגִפְן וְרִמּוֹן וְיַמִּים אֵין לְשָׂתוֹת:



Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" (Bamidbar 20:5)

וַיְדַבֵּר הָעָם בְּאַלְקִים וּבַמֹּשֶׁה לֵמָּה הֶעֱלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי אֵין לָחֶם וְאֵין מַיִם וְנִפְשָׁנוּ קָצָה בְּלֶחֶם הַקֶּלֶקֶל:

And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." (Bamidbar 21:5)

These complaints occur at very specific times: the first, about water, occurs immediately after the death of Miriam, whose death is the first occurrence recorded in the fortieth year:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל-הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר-צֹן בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם: וְלֹא-הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן:

The Israelites, the entire assembly, arrived at the wilderness of Zin in the first month; Miriam died there and was buried there. And the community was without water, and they assembled against Moses and Aaron. (Bamidbar 20:1-2)

Miriam's death is followed directly by a lack of water. The Talmud in Ta'anit 9a explains that the people had an ever-ready well of water because of Miriam's merit, and that this gift disappeared upon her death. Miriam has been their source of sustenance. She was there from the very beginning, ensuring that the infant Moshe would be saved from the Nile, and she led them in song after they crossed the Sea of Reeds. Her death deprives them of both physical and emotional stability.

Of course, the people do need water. Their complaint is addressed by God, who instructs Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock. That same Gemara explains that this rock was actually Miriam's well, which had oozed with water before her death. Rashi says that the rock was reluctant to shed its water, because of the death of Miriam, leading to the tragic continuation of the story, in which Moshe hits the rock and is denied entrance into the Promised Land. The rock is disoriented by Miriam's death, and it seems that Moshe may be disoriented as well. Everyone is mourning.

The second complaint, about food, occurs immediately after the death of Aharon, later in the same chapter, on Mount Hor. Aharon has been their religious leader, presiding over their relationship with God. As the Israelites leave Mount Hor, they are again uncomfortable and disoriented. This time, they complain about the lack of food, saying that they are sick of the manna that they've had to eat since they left the "paradise" of Egypt.

This generation never lived in Egypt. They have never lacked for anything. Why are they complaining?

We are at the denouement of our story. For forty years, one family has led the Children of Israel through the wilderness. This family has given everything to the people. Moshe sacrifices his marriage and home life to his leadership role. Aaron's marriage to Elisheva bat

Amminadav is recorded in Shemot (6:23) as is the birth of their four sons, but Elisheva is never mentioned again. Their sons, too, are entirely dedicated to serving the people, and two of them perish in that service. The one time that Miriam and Aharon are criticized is when they speak about Moshe's marriage. It seems that there is no place for family life in this triumvirate; they are all about serving the Israelites. Now, after almost forty years of total dedication, the picture is changing. Miriam dies, and not long thereafter, Aharon dies too. The people have never known anything else. Will Moshe die too? (spoiler alert: yes) How will they go on? When anxiety about the future overtakes them, as their beloved leaders die one by one, they express themselves through the familiar language of complaint.

Even when we have faith, we may still experience anxiety. Moshe himself, the greatest leader of all time, was anxious when he was called upon by God to lead. The Israelites, after forty years in the wilderness, have no reason to doubt that they will be cared for. The water was never going away; it only paused briefly while mourning Miriam's death. The manna would continue until they were safely in the Promised Land. But anxiety is a natural reaction to uncertainty. And when we are anxious we may fall back into familiar patterns of behavior that don't serve us well. In the coming chapters, we hope that the anxiety will be transformed into excitement as the Israelites prepare for their entry into the Promised Land.



Susan Hornstein views her Yeshivat Maharat studies as the synthesis of her professional and avocational work to this point. Susan holds a BA from Brandeis University and a PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Brown University. She grew up in Boca Raton, Florida, where her family was instrumental in founding the Jewish community. The values she learned from her parents of seeing a need and discovering how your own talents can help to fill it have been hugely influential throughout her life. Susan had a long career in User Experience Design, and a stint as a teacher and administrator at Sinai Special Needs Institute. Both of these endeavors involve designing systems and experiences for recipients who are often underserved. A passionate student of Jewish text and Hebrew language, she has learned at Hebrew University, Michlelet Bruria and Yeshivat Har Etzion, and has taught in Hebrew Schools, synagogues, and groups around Central New Jersey. She has tutored several dozen Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, some of whom have gone

on to tutor students of their own. Susan is also a musician in voice, piano, and guitar, and is the conductor of the Central Jersey chapter of HaZamir, The International Jewish Teen Choir. She is on the board of her synagogue and is a founder of the over 30-year-old Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley. She lives in Highland Park, New Jersey with her husband, and has three grown children, one in Washington, DC, and two in Israel, all working in Jewish education.