

Chukat

July 16, 2016

וַתָּמֹת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לְעֵדָה.

Numbers 20:1 And Miriam died there and was buried there. And there was no water for the community.



The portion Chukat is largely focused on water. First the mysterious red heifer is mentioned as the animal whose ashes would be used to create ‘water of purification.’ Then the underground well water that had been present throughout the Israelites’ desert wanderings disappears after Miriam’s death. Rabbinic commentary (*BT, Ta’anit 9a*) explains that well water was provided to the Israelites during their desert wandering as a result of Miriam’s merits and leadership. This explains why the verse just after Miriam dies states that water became unavailable thereafter. Next, Moses, instructed by God to demand water from the rock instead strikes it twice (perhaps in frustration at the complaints of the Israelites) causing a grim consequence. Later, Moses asks neighboring leaders for passage through Edom, and promises that

the Israelites will refrain from drinking from the wells there. Moses requests the same of the Amorites. The water needed for drinking, bathing, and purification rituals for so many amounted to vast quantities. Despite wandering in the wilderness for the past years, there was a supply of fresh water for the priests and the Israelite people. Since the biblical description places them very near to the Dead Sea, the ancient Israelites either found rivers and tributaries or had discerned how to create potable water.

Safe and sufficient water access stands as the most pressing global issue today. How does Israel fare?

Following in the footsteps of their biblical forebears who managed to create reservoirs and cisterns of incredible magnitude during the First Temple period on the Temple Mount and in the areas of Beersheva, Arad, and Bet Shemesh, the communities of the New Yishuv in the late 19th century sought to do the same. They recognized that life in the arid region would not be viable without adequate potable water and non-potable sources sufficient for agricultural needs.

Entering Palestine, these early settlers continued the Israelite legacy of innovation and ingenuity that would turn large segments of dry, desolate, disease-ridden land into lush, richly productive farms, and vineyards.

As the population has expanded and the need for water increased, Israel has continued to invest in additional systems and apply regulations to ensure that the country can meet the needs of its citizens. About 80% of the available natural water lies in the north of the country leaving only 20% in the south. The National Water Carrier (NWC), a conduit for natural water sources completed in 1964, carries water to the center and south of the country. Since the early 1990s, the NWC has supplied more than half of the country’s drinking water. To meet growing water needs, Israel has enlarged its existing supply by developing non-conventional water sources and promoting conservation. This includes: recycling wastewater, intercepting runoff from rain and floods into reservoirs, artificially inducing rainfall, and, of course, desalinating nearby sources. Most recently, drought

taxes, a government imposed additional tax levied according to water usage and a major disincentive in a country with already high taxes, have also been a successful means of reducing corporate and individual overconsumption.

Advances in desalination techniques have revolutionized the production of potable water. According to a 2012 report by the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Israel's agricultural sector has grown into one of the world's foremost leaders in water conservation.

In the past few years, Asian nations, the United States, Mexico, and several European countries have contracted with Israel's Water Authority to replicate models for routing, conservation, purification, reclamation, desalination, pollution abatement, and water loss prevention in order to respond to the challenges of our global shrinking water supply. Carrying on the legacy begun in the biblical days and mentioned throughout this torah portion, modern day Israelis are using ingenuity to supply themselves and now others around the globe with water.

Discussion Questions:

What are the means by which Israel has endeavored to secure water? Should they capitalize on their ingenuity for their own advancement? Or, in some cases, should Israel offer their expertise with no expectation of reward?

Were Israel to fail in keeping up with the demands for water supply, how might that undermine the state's economic, political, and social infrastructure?

Could or should supply of water to Israel, the Palestinians, and Jordanians be an incentive for greater economic cooperation?

Additional Resources:

Saki Knafo, [Selling the Desert's Water-Conservation Lessons to the Rest of the World](#), The Atlantic, May 28, 2015

William Booth, [Israel knows Water Technology, and it Wants to Cash In](#), Washington Post, October 25, 2013

Zafir Rinat, [Drought Tax](#), *Ha'aretz* May 30, 2013

Ariel Rejwan and Yossi Yaacoby, [Israel: Innovations overcoming water scarcity](#), OECD Observer, No. 302, April 2015

Yuval Elizur, [Over and drought: Why the end of Israel's water shortage is a secret](#), *Haaretz*, Jan 24, 2014

Israel Video Network: [The Miracle of Science: Providing Drinking Water in the Desolate Desert](#)