

Amid their vicious cycle of complaining, rebelling, punishment, and regretting the Israelites now must face a new reality: They are losing their senior leadership. The first to die is Miriam: “The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.” (20:1) Miriam has always been associated with water. It was she who waited until the Egyptian princess found her baby brother Moses floating on the Nile in his little boat and arranged for their own mother to be his wet nurse. Talmud Tractate Sotah 9b: “For good deeds a person is rewarded measure for measure. Miriam waited for Moses for one hour at the shore of the Nile. ... Therefore the Jewish people delayed their travels for 7 days for her when she was stricken with *tzara'at*.” After the Israelites’ safe passage through the Sea, Miriam (the first time she is mentioned by name) celebrated with timbrel, dance, and song (Exodus 15:20-21). Her well provides the Israelites with water in the desert, and when it dries up after she dies, the people once again turn against Moses with their trusty old accusation that he has led them out of Egypt to their certain death in a barren land. This is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. Frustrated, hurt, and angry, Moses lashes out against them, striking the rock rather than speaking to it as HaShem had commanded. As we know, for this act both he and Aaron learn that they too, will not live to bring the people into the Promised Land. Later, after conflicts with Edom and other inhabitants of the land, Aaron’s death, another bitter accusation when the people grow tired of eating manna and are punished with bites from venomous snakes, and more journeys, they encamp on the other side of the Arnon river, on the border between Moab and the Amorites. “From there to the well; that is the well of which the Lord said to Moses, ‘Gather the people, and I will give them water.’ Then Israel sang this song: Ascend, O well ...” (21:16-17) Our midrashim have much to say about this mysterious well, which arises to remind the Israelites of the many miracles HaShem was performing for them – miracles that equal the miracle at the Sea. They tell of the mountains closing in to crush the inhabitants who have assembled in caves there to attack the Israelites. “When Israel crossed upon those mountains without knowing about all these miracles, the Holy One of Blessing said, ‘I will let My children know how many troops I destroyed because of them.’ So the well descended into the caves and brought out innumerable skulls, arms, and legs. Thus when Israel returned to seek the well, they saw it shining like the moon in the midst of the wadi, as it discharged the limbs of the troops. ... But was not the well with them from the beginning of the 40 years? It is simply that it had gone down to inform about the miracles, while Israel remained at the wadis and said, ‘Rise up O well, sing to it.’” Tractate Ta’anit 9a adds: “When Miriam died the well disappeared ... and there was no water for the congregation. But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.” Miriam’s death is only the beginning of a momentous transition for the people. She, Moses and Aaron have had to be more like parents than leaders, comforting and cajoling, while enduring their complaints, accusations, and threats and trying to teach them the skills they will need to coalesce and survive. Now, 39 years after leaving Egypt, the old generation has nearly died out and their progeny is still learning what independence entails. Their next loss comes just as their Edomite cousins, the offspring of Esau, have barred them from crossing their land, forcing them to turn back. When they reach Mount Hor, Aaron dies. According to the midrash, the people refuse to believe it, even when Moses, with Aaron’s son Elazar dressed in the garments of the High Priest, come down from the mountain without him. “They said, ‘How could the angel of death hurt him, a man who has halted the angel of death and held him back [during the plague in last week’s parashah].’ ... They said to them, ‘If you return him, well and good; but if not, we will stone you.’ Then Moses rose in prayer, ... Immediately the Holy One of Blessing opened the burial cave and showed him for them.” (Midrash Tanchuma 17) “The whole congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for 30 days.” (20:29) Moses must now lead alone. Talmud Tractate Ta’anit 9a teaches that three good sustainers arise during the Exodus with three good gifts: the well for Miriam, the guiding pillar of cloud for Aaron, and the manna for Moses. When Miriam dies there is no more water, but the well returns in the merit of Moses and Aaron. When Aaron dies the cloud disappears and the Canaanite king of Arad hears and thinks he can go to war against the Israelites, but both the well and the cloud reappear in the merit of Moses. When Moses dies, all of them disappear. Fortunately, they do not die all at once. Miriam dies in the month of Nisan (beginning of the year), Aaron in Av (middle of the year), and Moses in Adar (end of the year). Even so, each death is a major transition for the people. Miriam, Aaron, and Moses were precisely what the Israelites needed during the initial transition from slavery to freedom. Now it is up to their successors to guide them as they continue the process and assume the responsibilities of obtaining water and food, defending themselves, and building a stable society. As we all know, moving forward into the next phase of life requires patience, discernment, and insight – something the entire world desperately needs for the many transitions occurring right now. May we be inspired by the perseverance, strength, and vision of these three leaders as we negotiate the perils facing us today.

Shabbat shalom!