

The Well of Tradition and Miriam's Well

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The Well of Tradition and Miriam's Well

One of our people's greatest strengths is using our tradition as a wellspring to renew our heritage as we pass it down from generation to generation. As Jews we have a living relationship with our past. Jewish history, Jewish traditions, and Jewish memories are not placed in museums and libraries for scholars to research. They are part of our people's daily lives. When we study our sacred texts, retell our stories, celebrate our successes and mourn our losses, we seek to make deep personal connections to our people's heritage. When we succeed, we gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the richness and strength in Jewish life. Every generation needs to renew Judaism according to its vision and concerns. To teach Judaism to our children, we need to make it alive for ourselves. Each generation asks new questions and brings its own concerns and understandings to our sacred texts and cherished traditions. One small example of our tradition's ever flowing well of inspiration comes from a traditional reading of this week's Torah portion, Hukat. We read about the death of Moses' sister, the prophet Miriam (Numbers 20:1). Joined with the announcement of her passing is a note that our ancestors had run out of water to drink (Numbers 20:2). The association of these two events provided the foundation upon which the sages of the Talmud built a beautiful legend about the abundant well of fresh water that followed Miriam as she wandered with her people throughout the desert. So long as she lived, the well was a fountain of living water that sustained the people. This source of strength and sustenance, however, dried up upon her death (Rashi on Numbers 20:2; b. Ta'anit 9a; Song of Song Rabba 4:14, 27). This legend emphasizes the importance of Miriam in the forty years our people spent in the desert and shows her to be a full partner with her brothers, Moses and Aaron. Her courage and enthusiasm sustained our people. Her death was a great loss for our ancestors and her two brothers. The Torah underscores this point by telling us that almost immediately after her death, Moses and Aaron are almost overwhelmed by the challenge to provide water for our people. Recently, this story has taken on a new significance. Today, as women join men as never before as leaders of the Jewish people, we seek ways to acknowledge this new reality and bind it to the living tradition of our people. The legend of Miriam's Well gives us one such opportunity. Today, at many contemporary Passover Seders there is a new custom of placing a goblet of water on the table to represent Miriam's well. Its presence on the table provides an opportunity to talk about the significance of Miriam and the role women play in the Passover story and in the life of the Jewish people. It helps us to relive the story by reminding us that real people and real families experienced the Exodus. It reminds us of our people's abiding sense of God's protecting presence in the difficult weeks, months, and years after leaving Egypt. It teaches us about the indispensable, life-giving power of righteous leaders. We are living in a time of unbelievable change. Who could have predicted the tragedies and triumphs our people experienced in the past century? The science, politics, and economics of our world present new and unexpected challenges to Jews and to all people. As Jews we are also living in a period of extraordinary growth and creativity as we rise up and meet these challenges. We are blessed to possess a rich and deep sacred heritage that often, in surprising ways, helps us bind our present day concerns with the life giving waters of our faith and tradition.

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