

OR HAMIDBAR

SPIRITUAL JUDAISM IN THE DESERT

Singing of, and to, the Well – Parshat Hukat, 5782

וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֵרָה הוּא הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' לַמֹּשֶׁה אֲסֹף אֶת־הָעָם וְאֶתְנָה לָהֶם מַיִם: (ו)

אֲזַ יִשִּׁיר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת
עָלַי בְּאֵר עֲנִי־לָהּ:
בְּאֵר חֲפְרוּהָ שְׂרִים כְּרוּהָ
נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בְּמַשְׁעֲנֵתָם

וּמִמִּדְבָר מִתְנָה: וּמִמִּתְנָה נַחְלִיאֵל וּמִנַּחְלִיאֵל בְּמֹת: וּמִבְּמֹת הַגִּיאֵ אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁדְהַ מוֹאָב רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וְנִשְׁקָפָה עַל־פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן: (פ)

1. Numbers 21:16-20

And from there to Be'er, which is the well where YHVH said to Moses, "Assemble the people that I may give them water."

Then Israel sang this song:

Spring up, O well—sing to it—

The well which the chieftains dug,

Which the nobles of the people started

With maces, with their own staffs.

And from Midbar [*or with the Septuagint "from the well"*] to Mattanah, and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland [*or "Jeshimon"*].

2. Mishnah Avot 5:6

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.

3. R' Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bartenura (Italy, Land of Israel, 15th-16th cent)

"and the mouth of the well": The well of Miriam that went with Israel in the wilderness on all of the journeys. And some say, that it opened its mouth and uttered song, as it stated (Numbers 21:17), "rise up, O well; answer it."

4. Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (Poland, 19th cent), S'fat Emet, Hukat, 1874

The mouth of the well was created on Shabbat Eve at twilight. As it is written, "Drink water from your cistern and fluids from your well" (Proverbs 5:15). Cistern is gathered waters, and well is a flowing spring. In every Jew there is an inner life-point. As it is written, "And [God] blew into his nose the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). Only, a person must find this point. It is a person's work to have all of his actions drawn by this point. This is, "Drink water from your cistern," which is work during the [regular] days of the week. On the Holy Sabbath, "and fluids from your well," because the well is opened and a new light comes, and that is the supplementary soul.

4. Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 9a

Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Yehuda, says: Three good sustainers rose up for the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt, and they are: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And three good gifts were given from Heaven through their agency, and these are they: The well of water, the pillar of cloud, and the manna. The well was given in the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud was in the merit of Aaron; and the manna in the merit of Moses.

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When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is stated: “And Miriam died there” (Numbers 20:1), and it says thereafter in the next verse: “And there was no water for the congregation” (Numbers 20:2). But the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron.

5. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Lithuania, 19th cent), Haamek Davar on Numbers 21:18:1

The well dug by princes. In the period that they were in the Wilderness, and the well was next to the Tent of Meeting, the princes, i.e., the leaders, would dig somewhat deeply so that a river would flow to their tribe. And afterwards: **The nobles of the nation excavated** additionally, to make more rivulets, so there would be a lesser burden on the people. The kind hearted people of the nation would make small diggings extending from the large diggings to draw the water to their family.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 55a-b

The son of Rav Shmuel commanded his workers that they give thirteen thousand dinars to Rava from the crop [*alalta*] produced in his fields on the banks of the Panya River.

Rava sent this question before Rav Yosef: What is called *alalta*; what crops are included in the category of *alalta*?

Rav Yosef said: It is as it is taught: And they agree with regard to one who vows that *tevua* (grain) is forbidden to him that it is prohibited for him to eat from only the five species of grain; just as *tevua* includes only the five species, so too *alalta* includes only the five species.

Abaye said to him: Are the two cases comparable? Although *tevua* means grain and includes only the five species, *alalta* means crop and includes all items that grow.

The messengers returned with the answer to his question and came before Rava.

He said: That was not a dilemma for me, i.e., the fact that *alalta* means all items that grow. This is the matter that is a dilemma for me: What is the legal status of profits from the rent of houses and the rent of boats? Do we say: Since they depreciate, their legal status is not comparable to that of a crop? Only items that are consistently profitable are similar to crops. House boats deteriorate with use, and their depreciation diminishes the profits. Or perhaps, since their depreciation is not conspicuous, their legal status is comparable to that of a crop.

The Rabbis stated Rava’s reaction before Rav Yosef.

Rav Yosef said: And since he does not need us, and he believes that he knows the answer himself, why did he send us the question? Rav Yosef became angry with Rava.

Rava heard that Rav Yosef was angry and came before him on Yom Kippur eve to appease him. He found the attendant of Rav Yosef, who was diluting a cup of wine with water before him.

Rava said to the attendant: Give me the cup so that I will dilute the wine for him.

The attendant gave it to him and Rava diluted the cup of wine.

While Rav Yosef, who was blind, was drinking the wine, he said: This dilution is similar to the dilution of Rava, son of Rav Yosef bar Ḥama, who would dilute wine with more than the standard amount of water.

Rava said to him: Correct, it is he.

Rav Yosef said to Rava: Do not sit on your feet until you tell me the explanation of this matter: What is the meaning of that which is written: “And from the wilderness Mattana and from Mattana Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel Bamot” (Numbers 21:18–19)?

Rava said to him that it means: Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, deserted before all, the Torah is given to him as a gift [*mattana*], as it is stated: “And from the wilderness Mattana.” And once it is given to him as a gift, God bequeaths [*naḥalo*] it to him, as it is stated: “And from Mattana Nahaliel.” And once God bequeaths it to him, he rises to greatness, as it is stated: And from Nahaliel, Bamot, which are elevated places. And if he elevates himself and is arrogant about his Torah, the Holy One, degrades him, as it is stated: “And from Bamot the valley” (Numbers 21:20). And not only is he degraded, but one lowers him into the ground, as it is stated: “And looking over [*nishkafa*] the face of the wasteland” (Numbers 21:20), like a threshold [*iskopa*] that is sunken into the ground. And if he reverses his arrogance and becomes humble, the Holy One, elevates him, as it is stated: “Every valley shall be lifted” (Isaiah 40:4).

When Rav Yosef heard that interpretation, he understood that Rava was aware of the error of his ways in acting arrogantly toward his teacher, and was pacified by Rava’s display of humility.