

Parshas Chukas 5771

NOT YOUR AVERAGE WATER- FOUNTAIN – WONDERS OF THE DESERT II

We had the opportunity last week to shine the spotlight on the marvel of Moshe's multifaceted staff. This week's *parshah* features yet another of the "Wonders of the Desert," also contained in the Mishnah's list of the "specialty items" that came into being during the first week of Creation:

עָשָׂה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֹשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הוּא, פִּי הָאֲרֶז, וְפִי הַבְּאֵר, וְפִי הָאֶתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמַּטֵּה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַכֶּתֵב, וְהַמְּכַתֵּב, וְהַלּוּחֹת. וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים, אֵף הַמְּזִיקִין, וְקַבּוּרְתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אֲבֵרָהֶם אֲבִינוּ.

"Ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath during the twilight period (i.e., right before the onset of the Sabbath), and they are: The mouth of the ground, the **mouth of the well**, the mouth of the donkey, the rainbow, the manna, the staff, the *Shamir*, the writing, the writing implement, and the tablets. Some also include the demons, Moshe's grave and the ram sacrificed by our forefather Avraham (in place of his son, Yitzchak)."

Before focusing on the precise meaning of the Mishnah's term "mouth," the overall institution of the well itself deserves much scrutiny. Chazal provide many descriptions that richly depict the amazing utility of this apparatus:

One of the well's distinguishing features was the fact that it was not stationary, but actually travelled together with the Israelite camp as they traversed the desert. This was partially made feasible by the fact that the well itself was of spherical shape and would roll on the desert floor to the accompaniment of the travelers, even over mountains and down into valleys. When the Jews halted and broke camp

and the Tabernacle was erected, the well would also halt and take up position in the Tabernacle's courtyard (*cf. Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2 with Peirush Maharzu; Tosefta Sukkah 3:3*).

The method through which it provided its waters is no less noteworthy. The tribal chiefs would approach the well with their staffs in hand. They would then recite the "Song of the Well" (recorded in this week's *parshah*): "Arise, o well, answer her" (*Bamidbar 21:17*). In response, the well would do just that: its waters would churn and rise in the form of a column (*Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2, Tosefta Sukkah 3:3*). This appeared to serve as a "cue" for the chieftains to begin to draw their rations, which were actually quite plentiful, as we shall soon see.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE – A PRECURSOR TO VENICE

An understanding of the basic layout of the Israelite camp is necessary to fully appreciate the elaborate water distribution system. The twelve tribes were divided into four companies (consisting of three tribes a piece, obviously), each of which encamped in one of the four directions under a particular banner. (For example, the "Camp of Yehudah" encamped in the east and was comprised of the tribes of Yehudah, Yissochor, and Zevulun; the "Camp of Reuven" lay to the south, comprised of Reuven, Shimon and Gad; and so forth [see *Bamidbar 2:1-31*].)

The leader of the particular banner company (e.g., Nachshon ben Aminadav for the "Camp of Yehudah") would approach the well on behalf of the three tribes of his company. Through his staff, he would divert water toward his company; the water would then stream in the direction of that company. Then the tribal leaders of the company's individual tribes would take over. They would further divert

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the water toward their particular tribe, thus creating even more tributaries. With water now heading toward each tribe in the company, the heads of the individual families within each tribe would then further divert the water toward their families. This process was repeated amongst all four of the banner companies (*Bereishis Rabbah 70:8 with Anaf Yosef and Peirush Maharzu; Bamidbar Rabbah 19:26; Tosefta ibid.*).

Such an arrangement created a huge network of running water flowing throughout the entirety of the Israelite camp. In fact, the Medrash states that as a result of the abundant streams, a woman who wished to visit her friend in a neighboring company had to do so by boat. However, the immense volume of water proved quite beneficial for the nation. Aside from the obvious drinking properties, the water would inundate barren areas and give rise to a lush and verdant oasis (referred to in the familiar Psalm: “Hashem is my Shepherd, I shall not lack; He lays me down in fields of grass and leads me by tranquil waters [*Tehillim 23:1-2*]). Moreover, the surging waters would eventually become so plentiful that they reached the sea; from there, they retrieved much treasure and drew it back to the camp (*Bamidbar Rabbah 19:26; Tosefta ibid. with Chazon Yechezkel*).

THE MOUTH


This brings us, of course, to the specific item highlighted by the Mishnah: the *mouth* of the well. Its inclusion in the Mishnah’s exclusive list seems to imply that – in addition to the well itself – there was something singular about the mouth in particular. Perhaps the Mishnah means to reflect another Midrashic statement (*Bereishis Rabbah ibid.*), which describes the well’s mouth as a small sieve (according to the Vilna Gaon [*Haghos to Tosefta, ibid.*], the top of the well actually contained numerous small holes, like a sieve [or modern-day salt-shaker]). That being the case, the mouth of the well was truly extraordinary. The huge deluge of water that turned the desert into something resembling an aquatic wonderland all emerged from but a tiny opening.

From Rashi’s comments on the Mishnah, however, we see yet another quite interesting aspect of the well’s properties – specifically through its “mouth.” Already, we have seen that the well was receptive to verbal communication, as it

would respond to the song of the tribal chiefs by readying its waters. Yet Rashi states that the well itself seemed to take part in this exchange. The verse, “Arise, o well, and answer” can be understood as directed at the well itself: “You, o well, should answer.” That is, the well also participated in the Song of the Well. The Tosafos Yom Tov adds that this term fits well with the adjacent items in the Mishnah: “The mouth of (Bilam’s) donkey” refers also to a talking mouth, as Bilam’s donkey responded to his beatings. The “mouth of the well” would likewise refer then to a “talking well.” The “mouth of the earth” that swallowed Korach was yet another example of a talking entity – but that is another story altogether, the subject of a previous article (*Mishnas Chayim, Korach, 5768*).

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