

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Chukat

NUMBERS 19:1-22:1

Study Guide written by Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein

Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Dr. Lisa D. Grant, and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph.D., editors

Rabbi Hara E. Person, series editor

Parashat Chukat Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Keeping the Community Safe from Contamination

– Rituals After Contact with the Dead

Theme 2: Death and Rebellion in the Wilderness—Who's in the Lead?

INTRODUCTION



Parashat Chukat (“law [that]”) contains instructions intended to keep the emerging Israelite nation safe and secure as it approaches the end of its journey to the Promised Land. This parashah acknowledges the realities of death, both of community leaders and of members. In doing so, it provides the people with rituals that will keep the contamination surrounding death from endangering the community and thus ensure its continuity. These rituals include opportunities for purification and renewal after contact with impurities. The parashah begins with the commandment to create a water-based mixture called “water of *niddah* [lustration],” which provides an antidote for the impurities that stem from contact with corpses, human bones, or graves. Our ancestors believed that such contact released invisible, airborne substances that endangered the entire community by threatening God’s presence among the people. The process of deriving the water of lustration begins when the priest slaughters and burns an unblemished red cow. The priest sprinkles some of the cow’s blood in front of the Tent of Meeting. We see the power of blood to render humans impure in the actions that the priest, the person who burns the cow, and the person who gathers the ashes of the cow must take before they can return to the camp. Immediately after the red cow ritual, the text reports the death of Miriam and a subsequent drought that causes the people to rebel. God then informs Moses and Aaron that they will die before leading the people into the Promised Land, as punishment for how they handled this rebellion, which occurs at a place the text calls Meribah (“waters of rebellion”). Aaron’s death follows shortly after the rebellion, so Moses ensures the priestly succession by transferring Aaron’s vestments to his son Eleazar. God’s active role at Meribah shows the people that everyone in the community must obey God’s commands precisely. The episode

teaches that while earthly leaders are temporal, God's presence—guiding and leading the people—is eternal.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 915–16 and/or survey the outline on page 916. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

THEME 1: KEEPING THE COMMUNITY SAFE FROM CONTAMINATION—RITUALS AFTER CONTACT WITH THE DEAD



Contact with or exposure to the dead renders an individual ritually impure for a period of seven days. A person who does not perform the rites of purification after such contact remains contaminated and presents a grave danger to the community by defiling the Tabernacle, where God's Presence on earth resides. The punishment for those who fail to purify themselves after contact with the dead is one of the most severe in ancient Israel, *kareit* (excommunication), a punishment that reflects the potentially catastrophic result of unchecked ritual impurity.

1. Read Numbers 19:11–22, which describes the rituals for those who come into contact with a corpse, human bones, or a grave.
 - a. Verses 11–13 outline the procedure for those who touch or are exposed to the dead. What is the danger from contaminated individuals who fail to purify themselves? How does the repetition of the words for purity and impurity in these verses help you to understand this danger?
 - b. The penalty for failing to purify oneself after contact with or exposure to the dead is excommunication (*kareit*) (v. 13). Why do you think contact with the dead warrants such a serious punishment? Why do you think nearness to a dead person renders uncovered vessels impure (v. 15)? What do these rules indicate about ancient Israelite attitudes toward the dead?
 - c. In verse 17 we learn that *mayim chayim* (translated here as “fresh water”) must be added to the ashes from the fire in which the red cow was consumed earlier in the parashah. This is part of the purification ritual for people (or their possessions) who come into the tent of one who dies or who touch a corpse found in the open. This term is also used in Leviticus

14:5 and 14:50, as part of the purification ritual for a *m'tzora* (a person afflicted with *tzaraat*, a skin eruption sometimes compared to leprosy) or a house similarly afflicted. According to the Central Commentary on Numbers 19:17, what can we understand from the connections between the purification ritual in this parashah and that in the Leviticus verses about the relationship between death and *tzaraat* in these priestly texts?

- d. Compare the warning in verse 20 with that in verse 13. What differences do you notice? How does each warning express and emphasize the dangers from those who fail to undergo the purification ritual?
2. Read "Ritual" by Ellen Bass, in *Voices* (p. 935). Bass, who helped care for her elderly mother, wrote this poem soon after her mother died.
- a. What actions does the speaker perform in the poem's first stanza?
 - b. How is bathing the dead body like the setting the Passover table or performing the ritual of *tashlich* (casting bread crumbs into water) on Rosh HaShanah? What is the point of these comparisons?
 - c. What impact does the poet's subsequent knowledge of *taharah*, the traditional ritual for preparing a body for burial, have on her feelings about the actions she describes in the first stanza? In your opinion, to what extent does it matter whether or not the poet performed the ritual washing for the dead according to prescribed tradition? What impression does the poet give about whether or not it matters to her?
 - d. How did you react when you learned that the person in the first stanza is the poet's mother? Why do you think the poet introduced that information in the third stanza and not at the beginning of the poem?
 - e. What does the description of the mother in the fourth stanza add to the poem? What point do you think the poet tries to make with this description of how her mother spent her Sabbaths?
 - f. How does touch connect the ritual described in the first stanza with the poem's last line?
 - g. What is the relationship between the basin of water in the first stanza and the water that flows over the body (third stanza) in the ritual of *taharah*? What connection do you see between the use of water in this poem and the "water of lustration" (Numbers 19:9) and the "fresh water" (19:17) in *parashat Chukat*?
 - h. What experiences have you had with the deceased? How does your firsthand experience with death color how you read the biblical text and this poem?

THEME 2: DEATH AND REBELLION IN THE WILDERNESS —WHO'S IN THE LEAD?



The theme of death and its relationship to communal continuity continues in *parashat Chukat* with the deaths of Miriam and Aaron and the impending death of Moses. The death of Miriam, which the text tersely describes, is followed immediately by the report that the people are without water, which leads to a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron, seeking to calm the rebellion, beseech God for help. The anger that informs their actions, perhaps fueled by Miriam's death, results in their ultimate punishment: God will not permit them to lead the people into the Promised Land.

1. Read Numbers 20:1, which describes the death of Miriam.
 - a. The Bible does not record the deaths of most women characters. Unlike other female characters in the biblical text, Miriam's reputation does not come from being someone's mother or wife. The Bible portrays Miriam in a variety of ways: ensuring her brother Moses' survival (Exodus 2:4–8), leading women in song when God delivers Israel from the Sea (Exodus 15:20–21), and being punished by God after challenging Moses' leadership (Numbers 12:1–16). She is also given the title of “prophet” (Exodus 15:20). How do these fragmented views of Miriam help us to understand her significance in the Torah and the reason her death is mentioned here?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary on this verse, what evidence does Rita Burns use to determine that the *Tanach* regards Miriam as a leader?
2. Read Numbers 20:2–13, which describes the events that transpire at Meribah.
 - a. Verses 2–3 state that “the community” and “the people” join forces to quarrel with Moses and Aaron. What does the use of these terms suggest about how the biblical text views the Israelites and their relationship to Moses and Aaron?
 - b. The people complain about the absence of water, a substance closely associated with Miriam (see Exodus 2:1–9 and 15:20–21). Just before the text reports Miriam's death it details the ritual of “water of lustration [*niddah*]” (see Introduction), a substance that is made from “living water” (*mayim chayim*; Numbers 19:17). What do these associations of Miriam with water suggest about Miriam's role in the Israelite community and the impact of her death?
 - c. In many respects, the episode in this parashah parallels one that is recounted in Exodus 17:5–6. What is the difference between God's command to Moses in Exodus 17 and that in this passage (Numbers 20:8)?

- d. Compare God’s instructions in Numbers 20:8 with how Moses carries out God’s command in verses 9–11. To what extent does Moses follow God’s orders? In what ways does he deviate from those instructions?
 - e. How does Moses characterize the people when he addresses them in verse 10? What does his language reflect about his attitude toward the people and his emotional state at this point in the story?
 - f. In verse 8, God commands Moses and Aaron to assemble the people and “before their very eyes” produce water from the rock. Verse 12 tells us that Moses and Aaron did not trust God enough to affirm God’s sanctity “in the sight of the Israelite people.” Why do you think the text emphasizes sight in these verses? What point does this help to communicate about the meaning of the events in this episode?
 - g. In light of your close reading of verses 8–13 and the observations you made in response to the prior questions, what explanations would you propose as to why God punishes Moses and Aaron so severely?
 - h. What is your opinion of the reasons early rabbinic interpreters provide for God’s severe punishment of Moses and Aaron (see Central Commentary on vv. 12–13)? How do these explanations compare with your own reading of this text?
 - i. How does the name “Waters of Meribah” (v. 13) echo the themes of water in this parashah? According to the Central Commentary, how does this term symbolize both renewal and darkness?
3. Read Numbers 20:22–29, which describes the death of Aaron and the succession of Eleazar as high priest.
 - a. Compare the language in verse 22 with that in verse 1. What is the significance of the similarity in these two verses, which precede the mention of Miriam and Aaron’s deaths, respectively? What do you think accounts for the differences in how the text describes Miriam’s death in verse 1 and Aaron’s in verse 24?
 - b. The Torah uses the phrase “be gathered to his kin” (v. 24) in connection with only six male leaders: Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Aaron. Numbers 12:14–15 uses the same verb (*asaf*) to describe how the people “readmitted” (literally “gathered in”) Miriam, allowing her return to the camp after her purification from God’s punishment of a skin affliction. What does this connection add to your understanding of how the Torah views Miriam?
 - c. Numbers 20:25–29 describes God’s instructions for the succession of Eleazar as high priest. In your view, why does the text state that Moses carries out these instructions “in the sight of the whole community” (v. 27)? How does the image of sight connect this verse to verses 8 and 12

(see above, 2f)? How do you understand the significance of the Israelites “seeing” the events these verses describe?

- d. Verse 29 notes that the people mourn Aaron for thirty days, the same period of time for which the people will mourn Moses (Deuteronomy 34:8). What can we learn from this about the way that the Torah views Moses and Aaron?

4. Read the Another View section by Ora Horn Prouser, on page 931.

- a. What can we learn about Moses’ reaction to the death of his sister Miriam from the way he handles the crisis over water that follows her death?
- b. What does the link between the word for “rebels” (v. 10) and Miriam’s name suggest about Moses’ behavior in striking the rock, according to Horn Prouser?
- c. Horn Prouser asserts that the elaborate mourning for Aaron reflects Moses’ understanding that his silence about Miriam’s death was a mistake. Can you think of a situation in your own family in which the way the family mourned the death of one of its members changed the way family members mourned a subsequent death?

5. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein, on pages 931–93 (“Miriam died,” “Miriam died there”).

- a. Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7.4 states that when the righteous are born no one notices, but when they die many people are affected. How does early rabbinic literature use the marvel of Miriam’s Well (which the Bible does not mention) to illustrate this point?
- b. What is challenging about the Talmud’s teaching that the deaths of righteous people can have an atoning effect? How do you understand Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon Meiri’s interpretation of the Talmud’s view?
- c. How does the Talmud (BT Mo’ed Katan 28a) describe the deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (three of the six people who did not die as ordinary mortals do)? How does the Talmud arrive at this interpretation? Why do the Rabbis of the Talmud find it necessary to make Miriam’s death by God’s “kiss” implicit rather than explicit?

6. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Carol Ochs, on pages 934–35.

- a. According to Ochs’ midrash, what does Moses understand about Miriam’s death as he climbs Mount Nebo, preparing for his own death? How does this understanding reflect a leadership role that was lost with Miriam’s death and the concern that part of the community died with Miriam? How does rabbinic tradition, according to Ochs, link what was lost with Miriam’s death to the people’s cry for water?

- b. According to Ochs, Miriam's gift was to "help the women of Israel recognize and claim their homes as a sacred place." How does this interpretation broaden the view of holy space as connected only to the Tent of Meeting?
 - c. How do you understand Ochs' view that women's leadership role, after Miriam, has been to pass their faith and traditions on to their children?
7. Read "Moses Leans Over the Stone" by Jill Hammer, in *Voices* (p. 936).
- a. What is the connection the poet makes between Torah and water in the poem's first stanza? Who is the speaker?
 - b. What is the relationship between the fight the speaker has with his brother and sister in the poem's second stanza and the stone his mother shows Aaron and Miriam? What is the connection between this and the way some biblical commentators understand Moses' striking the rock (Numbers 20:11)?
 - c. What does the poem's third stanza suggest about the relationship between looking "for the underside of things" and finding an "old love"?
 - d. How does this poem help you understand Moses' motivations for striking the rock? How does the poet's reading of this episode compare with your own?
 - e. Can you think of a time when you were under pressure to act and frustration caused you to behave in a way that, although it yielded results, had negative consequences for you?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. Our ancestors believed that contact with the dead was physically dangerous. How does this compare with present-day attitudes regarding physical contact with the dead? To what extent have you been involved with the physical aspect of death as part of the mourning process? How have those experiences shaped your understanding of the issues related to death raised in this parashah?
2. One of the themes of this parashah is ensuring the continuity of community after a change in leadership. Can you think of a time in the life of your synagogue, or in another community, when there was a change in leadership after many years? What concerns arose for the community during this time? How were these concerns addressed? What can we learn from this parashah that can guide us when such changes occur?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea R. Weiss, editors

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