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There is a big jump in Parashat Hukat. We ended last week's parasha still in the second year after the exodus from Egypt. We begin this week's parasha in the 40th year! There are many diverse issues mentioned in the parsha. Miriam and Aharon die. There are some incidents that seem repeats from the past, such as complaints about water and food. But there are also incidents that connect to the future - several confrontations with other nations as the Jewish people approaches the promised land. Among all these incidents is a strange song that Israel sings. In verse 21:17 we have a short, strange song, in which the Jewish people seems to be praising a well:

אֵז יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עָלֵי בְּאֵר עֲנּוּ לָהּ; בְּאֵר הַפְּרוּיָה שְׁרִים כְּרוּיָה נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בְּמַחֲקָהּ בְּמִשְׁעָנָתָם

Then Israel sang this song: rise up well, sing to it, a well that the ministers dug, the generous of the people hewed, with the sceptre and with their staves.

What is this song about? Why is it here? We are also of course reminded of the song at the splitting of the sea. There the song is sung by Moshe and the Jewish people. Here it just says that Israel sings. Where is Moshe? Why isn't he mentioned?

Many commentators say that this is the well that accompanied the children of Israel in the desert. But why now?

One answer is that when Miriam died the water stopped and now it returned in the merit of Moshe (see Bavli Taanit 9), so they are praising its return.

Rav Hirsch suggests an alternative answer. We sing a song after the miracle, therefore they sang after they saw the Egyptians drown at the Red Sea. This song is similarly after the miracle. The well that accompanied them is now reaching its resting place. They will not be needing the well from now on because their mode of connection to G-d is changing. While they were in the desert they had open miracles and were directly taken care of by G-d. They had the clouds of glory, the manna, the well. Now they are transitioning to a different relationship where G-d would be there for them in a less obvious fashion. They will have to actively look for water, grow their own food. This 40th year is a year of transition, and this is strongly felt in the parasha. They are beginning to fight wars and the old leaders are dying. The song of the well is another example of that. They are recognizing that the miracle of the well is coming to an end.

In Nedarim 55 our sages say that this song is a song for the Torah. The Torah is compared to water, it nourishes us and is our lifeline. The Sfat Emet continues this idea (תרנב, ד"ה (בענין). The well of water represents the Oral Law. The first song, at the Red Sea, was preparation for receiving the Written Torah, and at that point they felt they were ready to be G-d's servants. This song is our preparation to receive the Oral Torah. At this point they had been learning the Torah for 38 years and were ready to cleave to it. Cleave to it allowed them to be at a point that they can learn for themselves, they will be part of it. Just as physically they will have to be more responsible for themselves, so too spiritually they will take a more active part in serving Hashem, through the Oral Law.

As our people enters the land, it has to learn to live a more normal life, but in a G-d conscious and G-d centered way. It has to both internally cleave to G-d and also actively take care of itself.

I believe that in our generation we can really identify with this transition as we build our own country. Whether it is earning a living on a personal level, or building the national economy,

government and army. May we learn to tap into our well and cleave to it while building our land.

In memory of my father, Moshe ben Yehuda Aryeh z"l, who loved the land and managed to return and be buried in Israel. His third yahrtzeit will be next week.

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