



The Challenges of Providing Water

Mirele B. Goldsmith

THE ISRAELITES HAVE SPENT 38 years in the desert since leaving Egypt. Now they are camped at Kadesh and there is no water. They blame Moses.

God tells Moses to take his staff and order a rock to yield water. As he stands before the rock, Moses speaks angrily to the people, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?"

(Numbers 20:10) Moses strikes the rock twice. Water flows from the rock and the people and their beasts drink.

God is displeased and tells Moses and Aaron that they will not lead the people into the Promised Land. But why?

Most interpreters focus on the details of Moses' words and actions. Perhaps God is disappointed that he spoke to the people in anger. Maybe Moses is punished because he didn't follow God's instructions exactly, hitting the rock with his staff instead of speaking to it. Or perhaps because he failed to give credit to God, misleading the people into thinking that he had produced the water on his own. Yosef Albo, author of "Sefer HaIkkarim," provides a unique explanation. Albo says that Moses' sin was that he did not anticipate the people's need for water. He waited until the people complained of thirst, then spoke to them in anger. He should have felt pity for them and taken action to meet their needs before the people were in distress.

How could Moses have made this terrible mistake? Had water been so plentiful that Moses had begun to take it for granted? According to the Midrash, until this point in their journey through the desert the Israelites were accompanied by Miriam's well. It was only upon her death, announced in the Torah portion *Hukat*, that the well disappeared. Or perhaps Moses just thought that God would provide the water. After all, God had provided the Israelites with water by miraculous means before.

I came across Albo's interpretation while preparing for a conference on faith and water hosted by the Alliance for Religion and Conservation. The conference brought together people of faith, environmentalists, and international development experts addressing the need for water and sanitation in schools. Some 3,000 years after Moses, these people are also being called to respond to the desperate needs for water. The reports I heard at this conference provided moving reminders that water cannot be taken for granted. These leaders have learned the lesson taught to Moses at Kadesh.

WATER IS NOT ONLY ESSENTIAL TO ENSURE HUMAN beings' physical existence. Water is inextricably connected with the ability to live a good life. The projects presented at the conference have been designed to do more than supply enough water to sustain life. They recognize that children need water in order to thrive.

In Kenya, children must carry water to school to clean their class-



AVI KATZ

rooms; a project led by Magdaline Gitahi, of the Redeemed Gospel Church in Nairobi, is bringing water purification systems to schools. According to Dr. Mary Grey, in Rajasthan, India, only 5 percent of schools have water and sanitation facilities; if they go to school at all, girls stop going to school when they begin to menstruate because there is no latrine and no water for washing. Grey is building

schools equipped with latrines and rainwater harvesting systems. Manlio Dell'Araccia directs the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's program to dig wells in Ethiopia. The JDC works with communities to site the wells near schools so that girls, who often cannot go to school because they must collect water for their families, will be able to obtain an education.

But unfortunately, the consequences of developing water resources are not always entirely positive. Currently, China is trying to cope with the unintended consequences of building the Three Gorges Dam. The reservoir behind the Dam is so big that the weight of the water collected has caused earthquakes.

And in the years ahead Israel may regret investing so heavily in desalination to turn seawater into drinking water. Desalination requires electricity, which is generated by fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels is the cause of climate change, which is exacerbating drought conditions, thus increasing the need for water in a negative cycle that must be broken.

Indeed, the challenges of providing water for a growing world population, while still avoiding potentially devastating mistakes, require wise and bold political leadership.

What will this leadership look like? A few cryptic verses in *Hukat* hint at an answer. The people arrive at Beer, where God instructs Moses to "assemble the people that I may give them water." In appreciation, the people break into song. "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." (Numbers 21:17-18) Scholars explain that the chieftains and nobles did not actually do the digging. The tools they carried, the mace and the staff, represented the authority and financial resources they devoted to meeting the needs of the people for water.

Today's water challenges will not be met by hitting a rock or even simply by digging a well. *Hukat* offers today's leaders a few valuable lessons. Recognize the value of water. Don't wait for a crisis to address the need. Put the full weight of your authority and resources to work to meet the needs of the people. ●

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