



NISSAN

The Public Health Message of Miriam's Well: The Need for Plentiful and Safe Water

As Passover approaches, Jewish families all over the world prepare for their symbolic annual journey into the story of the Exodus, the journey out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom. One of the beautiful traditions associated with the Exodus is the story of Miriam's well. The importance of water – for individuals and for the community – is highlighted by this tale.

The need for clean, potable and plentiful water is historical and universal. Individuals without water die, and populations without this life requirement are in crisis.

The importance of water cannot be underestimated. Dehydration is fatal when an individual has a 20 percent reduction in available body fluid. Moreover, the list of positive health outcomes attributed to drinking water is lengthy. Among the most common clinically documented benefits are improved metabolism, skin condition, relief from muscle cramping, and bowel function. Other literature describes the impact of water on vitality, mood, productivity, and well-being.

While there are many claims about the effect of water on weight control, cancer remission and headaches, there is no data to support them. Actually the amount of water needed daily is an ongoing scientific debate. But we do know that water intake must vary based on personal activity, location, climate, etc.

Regardless of the clinical data, water is essential, and more than three thousand years after the Exodus, humankind faces the threat of a water shortage on an international level. Awareness of this pressing health concern is limited. We must recognize that the scarcity of water and its safety for human use are matters of tikkun olam (caring for the world).

Known problems with water sources include:

1. scarcity from urban population growth and droughts
2. accidental contamination from human and agricultural waste that can lead to water-borne diseases, such as enteric infections, cholera, typhoid, and amoebic dysentery
3. uncontrolled pollution from chemical and other industrial by-products.

All three concerns require public health management of both the natural and built environments. The diseases require personal and public health vigilance. Only through careful management of water and reclamation of all used water can the problems of scarcity be addressed. The modern State of Israel is a model for the public management of water resources, with 80 percent or more of its water being reclaimed for additional use.

Finally, water management systems are expensive. In some areas, safe water is only obtainable at a high price. In the United States, the perceived need for safe water has pushed many to buy bottled water. The “water business” with its millions of plastic bottles that need to be disposed of or recycled has a price tag of almost \$55 per gallon. And, the actual purity of bottled water has been questioned.

This year, the addition of Miriam’s cup filled with clean water can be a symbol of this divine gift as well as a call to action to face the problems of water purity and availability around the world.

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