

MIRIAM REDISCOVERED

MOSHE REISS

And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Micah 6:4)

Miriam appears in the Torah in only six brief references (Ex. 2:4,7-9, 15:20-21; Num. 12:1-16, 20:1; 26:59, Deut 24:8-9), and in the first two of those she is not even named – it is merely assumed that she is the sister of Moses who appears in these passages. She is mentioned also in I Chronicles 5:29 and in Micah 6:4 where she is placed beside Moses and Aaron as a leader of the children of the Israel at the time of the Exodus. There is a record of her death in Numbers, but no record of a husband or children – a rare example in the Bible of a woman notable without identification as someone's wife or mother. Only in a midrash is there a reference to a marriage with Caleb (Sotah 12a). Yet, even with this sparse record, Miriam daughter of Amram is distinguished as a prophetess,¹ a poetess and musician, and an outstanding figure during the years in the wilderness. Her strong personality has inspired midrashic elaborations and commentaries on her character and her deeds.

In the order of the biblical text, the first mention of her family is the marriage of a man and a woman of the tribe of Levi and the birth of a son who appears as though he were a first-born child (Ex. 2:1-2). Only later are the parents identified as Amram and Jochebed and it is learned that this child, who came to be called Moses, was their third child, after Miriam and Aaron. A midrash explains it this way: Balaam, the pagan prophet who appears in Numbers 22-24, predicted to Pharaoh that a Hebrew boy would be born in Egypt who would overthrow the kingdom. Therefore, Pharaoh ordered that all the male children of the Hebrews be drowned at birth. Amram, a leader of the Hebrews, declared that all the men should divorce their wives and cease begetting children. His daughter Miriam argued that her father's decree was worse than Pharaoh's, since Pharaoh wanted to destroy all the boys while Amram would eliminate both boys and girls (Sotah 12b). Persuaded by her reasoning, Amram remarried his wife Jochebed and Moses was the first child

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of the remarriage.² Miriam predicts to her parents "My mother is destined to bear a son who will redeem Israel" (Megillah 14a).

When the baby is set in a basket upon the waters of the River Nile, it is his sister who watches over him.³ There he is found and adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh – to whom the midrash gives the name Batya, meaning daughter of God (Exodus Rabbah 21:26). Now the sister takes the bold initiative of persuading the princess to have him suckled by a Hebrew woman, and even arranges that it be his own mother Jochebed, who is then paid to suckle her own son and also makes it possible for Moses to spend his earliest days with his own family and his own people.

AT THE SEA OF REEDS

Only when the Israelites have crossed the Sea of Reeds does the name Miriam appear in the record, and even here she is not specifically identified with the unnamed sister who had guarded the infant Moses. She is introduced as *Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister . . .* (Ex. 15:20) – the first mention in the Tanakh that a woman was endowed with the prophetic spirit. The linking with Aaron perhaps suggests that they have parallel roles; he as leader of the men and she as leader of the women, while Moses has his distinct and more exalted role.

Exodus 15 spans the end of the Israelite bondage in Egypt and the start of their journey to Mount Sinai and on to the Land promised to Abraham. At this fateful moment then did Moses sing and all the Israelites with him, this song to the Lord . . . (15:1) a paean of 18 verses of thanksgiving to the Lord and rejoicing in the delivery He brought to them. Then comes Miriam's exultation in song, music, and dance, and the Israelite women with her.

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and then all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them, 'Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea' (15:20-21). She hereby leads the Israelites in their first service of worship as free people.

We have here the first verse of her song. Whether there was ever more verses to follow it we do not know. Rashi suggests that Moses and Miriam both sang⁴ the same song, the men in chorus with Moses and the women with Miriam. In the text she composed, it might seem that Miriam was merely

repeating the words of her brother Moses, but there is a significant difference between her words and his. Moses begins his song in the singular, *I will sing to the Lord . . .*, whereas Miriam gathers the women to her and calls upon them to *Sing to the Lord . . .* using a grammatical plural form of the verb.

Toveh Cohen suggests the difference between the songs of Moses and of Miriam represents a difference in prophetic leadership:

This contrast between the two songs is also embodied in the words of the songs themselves It is difficult to imagine that the slaves just released from the yoke of bondage to Egypt would have been capable of understanding [Moses'] elevated poetic language. Miriam's song, in contrast, describes an event that just took place in simple, non-metaphoric language that could be easily understood by everyone. Moreover, if Miriam and the women broke out in song and dance in response to Miriam's chant, one can well imagine that they repeated its single verse time and again, so that in the end even those who had not understood it would surely be able to repeat it. Thus Miriam's song had the character of a popular religious observance in which all could participate; they could share the experience of rejoicing in the miracle and proclaiming their faith in their Lord who had delivered them.

Comparison of the two songs shows that Miriam set a different pattern of leadership from Moses. Moses was an elitist leader, perhaps closer to God Himself than . . . to the people. This might be one explanation for his repeated conflicts with the people. Moses did not perceive his role as based on dialogue and close connection with the people. . . . Miriam, in contrast, is extremely close to the people, as is evident from the character of the Song of Miriam, . . . Miriam chose to lead by the people by addressing them in a language they could understand – through a non-elitist religious rite, somewhat resembling the religious rites of surrounding peoples – and by transforming the magnificent but incomprehensible prophetic song into a chant easily learned by those by those who heard it.⁵

While not specifically stated, Cohen seems to argue that Miriam was speaking from a form of feminine leadership; participatory, experiential, internal, non-elitist and oral.

This passage also attests to Miriam's personal initiative. She sparks the enthusiasm of all the women who stream after her and join in with her. They thereby are led to display thanksgiving to the Lord through a creative artistic act, and are brought into a deep and multi-faceted spiritual experience. It may even be that Miriam here began the Israelite tradition of celebrating God's victories through dance (such as David's dancing in II Samuel 6:14/I Chronicles 15:29).

Toveh Cohen also seems to suggest that Miriam's role as a prophetess was expressed in her creation of a "religious rite" at the Sea of Reeds, comparing her to the ecstatic prophets who appear in I Samuel 10:5ff and I Kings 18:26ff.

MIRIAM AND THE CUSHITE WOMAN

When Moses takes an unnamed Cushite (Ethiopian) woman to wife, Miriam, along with Aaron, spoke against (or about, see Rashi) Moses concerning the Cushite wife he had taken (Num. 12:1). In this passage, the verb "spoke" [*va-tedabber*] is grammatically in the feminine singular, which implies she took the initiative and Aaron associated himself with her stance. Most traditional commentators take the Cushite woman to mean Zipporah and not a second wife.⁶

The next verse suggests another issue entirely: And they said *'Is it but through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken? Has He not spoken to us as well?'* Now, Aaron seems to be completely involved in the issue. Here, as in the previous verse, it is not noted to whom Miriam and Aaron addressed their words.

How the Cushite wife is connected to the prophetic authority of Miriam and Aaron is unclear. The dispute seems to be a non-sequitur. What does Moses marrying a Cushite woman have to do with God speaking to Moses? Has sibling rivalry, a major theme in Genesis, recurred here? Some commentators believe two separate stories have been conflated into one.⁷

The rabbis connect the two seeming different strains of the story thus: In the previous chapter (11:24ff), God granted the prophetic spirit to 70 elders and to Eldad and Medad. God seems to be distributing some of the responsi-

bility of leadership, spreading it out from Moses – something originally suggested by Jethro, the father of Zipporah (Ex. 18:14-26).

In the midrash, it is said that Miriam commented to Zipporah on how happy these men and their wives should be. Zipporah then told her that she and Moses had not had marital relations since God spoke to Moses.⁸ Both Miriam and Aaron note that when they had the spirit of God upon them they did not keep away from their spouses. This story connects two seemingly unrelated incidents. Miriam is advocating for Zipporah's conjugal rights. In this view, as in the midrash on her criticism of her father Amram, she speaks against men for forsaking their conjugal and parental responsibilities, another feminine perspective.

God then summons Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to the Tabernacle, and pronounces the unique standing of '*My servant Moses*' and denounces the brother and sister who were adding to his burdens (Num.12:4-10). The ancient Hebrew text regarding God's response is cryptic;⁹ however, God praises Moses as a prophet and leader and defines the issue as one of prophetic leadership, in which Moses is to be pre-eminent. Miriam is thereupon stricken with a disorder that turns her skin dead white – punishment for criticizing Moses' dark-skinned wife. Aaron, however, was spared this punishment, according to some interpretations, because a physical affliction would disqualify him from serving as a priest. It is the simple and earnest prayer of Moses that affects her cure.

While Miriam is subject to seven days of isolation as a consequence of "slandering" her brother (see Deut. 24:8-9), perhaps by not speaking directly to him, she is favored by the people who wait for her before proceeding: *The people did not journey onward until Miriam was gathered back* (Num. 12:15). The midrash says God did not have the people leave until Miriam returned to the camp (Deut. Rabbah 6:9).

MIRIAM'S WELL

Miriam is associated with (according to midrashic lore) the rolling well-rock that accompanied the Jewish people on their wanderings and provided fresh water in the desert, not only for the people, but also for their cattle and sheep. It also made the desert bloom with green pastures and beautifully

scented flowers.¹⁰ Small wonder the people loved and respected her. Moses provided manna and Miriam provided water, both required for survival.

When she died a strange thing happened. The well suddenly dried up, and the rock from which the water used to flow disappeared among the other rocks in the desert *and the people gathered against Moses and Aaron* (Num. 20:1-2). Now the people knew for sure that it was in Miriam's merit that they had enjoyed fresh water all those years in the wilderness. They became fearful that they would now be left without water, and, as they had done so often before, they raised a hue and cry against Moses and Aaron.

God told Moses to gather the people and, in their presence, to speak to the rock to give water. Moses said '*Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?*' (Num. 20:10) Angered by the rebelliousness of the people, he hit the rock twice with his staff, and the water began to gush. Moses missed an opportunity to sanctify God's name in public, hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. It would have been a great lesson to the people to see how even a rock is obedient to God's word. Moses may well have recalled an earlier event when God told him to strike the rock for water to flow (Ex. 17:6), but this time God told him to speak to the rock. In consequence, God told Moses and Aaron that they would not enter the Promised Land, and would die in the desert along with all the generation whom they had led out of Egypt.

Is there a connection between Moses and Aaron striking the rock – instead of speaking – and their consequent punishment of never entering the Promised Land and Miriam's death? We can explain that perhaps Moses was so upset with his sister's death that he momentarily forgot God's instructions. It may be that violently hitting the rock was an expression of rage over his sister's death, or his profound sadness upon suddenly realizing the importance to Miriam to the people's health and himself.

THE DEATH OF MIRIAM

The next and last record of Miriam is when the Israelites, nearing the end of their long wandering, arrive at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin: There Miriam died and was buried (Num. 20:1). Aaron is buried by Moses and his successor Eleazar, and Moses by God's hand. Who buried Miriam? The midrash tells us that it was her brothers, Moses carried her head and Aaron her feet.¹¹

CONCLUSION

As we know, both Aaron and Miriam claim in Numbers 12:2 to have spoken to God; although there is no mention of God speaking to Miriam in the text of the Torah itself. Perhaps both were considered prophets due to their leadership qualities, one for the men and one for the women, whereas Moses was too close to God to be seen as a people's leader.¹²

Joshua will succeed Moses and Eleazer will succeed Aaron. Who will succeed Miriam? The midrash, but not the Torah, says that she had children with her husband Caleb, who became the ancestors of David and his line of kingship. Hur was one of these children. (Sotah 11b-12a).¹³ In Exodus 17:10 it is Hur (with Aaron) who helped Moses hold up his hands as the Israelite army defeated the Amalekites. In the Midrash (Ex. Rabbah 41:7, 48:3) Hur, together with Aaron, was appointed to the leadership of the people when Moses went up Mount Sinai for 40 days to receive the Torah and bring down God's Tablets. According to this midrash, Hur was murdered by the worshippers of the Golden Calf when he opposed them and tried to prevent them from committing that grievous sin. Hur's son (or grandson) was Bezalel, the artist who decorated the Tabernacle in the desert.

The prophetic tradition remembers Miriam as part of a triumvirate with Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4). She was the sister of our greatest prophet and of the first high priest in Israel, and a striking personality in her own right, the first woman in the Tanakh who appears not in the role of someone's wife or mother but as an active figure in the affairs of the emerging nation of Israel.

In recent days she has become a heroine and role-model for Jewish women, who go so far as to celebrate her in a Rosh Hodesh ritual, and to place a Cup of Miriam on the Passover Seder table, and even to fast on the date of her death, traditionally the 10th day of Nissan.¹⁴

NOTES

1. This is confirmed in the Talmud (BT Hul. 92a and Ta'anit 9a), and midrashim (Gen. Rabbah 88.5, Lev. Rabbah 27:6); numerous medieval Jewish commentators – Ibn Ezra, Abravanel, Malbim, and the Radak confirm Miriam's importance as a prophet. P.S. Kramer, "Miriam," in Athalya Brenner, *Exodus to Deuteronomy: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2000) p. 113.

2. Midrash Exodus quoted in Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973) pp. 287-288.
3. The sister is not named in these passages, but Miriam was the only daughter of Amram and Jochebed (Num. 26:59).
4. Her song seems to have an echo in Isaiah's *shiru l'Adonai, shir hadash* with God as a man of war and a warrior (Is. 42:10, 13).
5. <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/beshalah/co1.html>
6. Some (Rashi and Ibn Ezra) say the meaning of "Cushite" is "beautiful," others state that it refers to her dark complexion. Some interpret Habbakuk 3:7 as linking Cush to Midian, where Moses first met and married Zipporah. Few Jewish commentators take Miriam's censure to be hostility to foreign women. Joseph had married the Egyptian Asenath, Judah had married two of his sons to the Canaanite Tamar, and Boaz was to marry the Moabite Ruth.
7. Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?* SBL Dissertation Series 86 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), chapter 5.
8. This is noted in numerous midrashim including Sifra Numbers 99 and Midrash Tannaim 24:9 as noted by Devorah Steinmetz, "A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash," *Prooftexts*, No. 8 (1988) p. 48. See also Rebecca Schwartz, *All The Women Followed Her* (San Bruno, CA.: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001) pp. 166-171.
9. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004) p. 742. Also see Shawn Atteberry, <http://www.shawnaatteberry.com/2006/11/10/updated-standing-between-life-and-death>
10. James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997) p. 363 and BT Ta'anit 9a; Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Be-shallah, 7; Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, 15:35 and Midrash Tanḥuma, 2 Va-yedaber.
11. *Yalkut Shimoni ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Hotza'at Sefarim, 2002) p. 122.
12. Burns, "Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?"
13. In the Talmud (Sotah 11b) it is explained that the names used in I Chronicles (2:18) for Caleb's wives Azubah and Ephrath are one or the other a pseudonym for Miriam.
14. Alan Unterman, *Dictionary of Jewish Legends and Lore* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) p. 136. See also Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York: Grosset, 1996) p. 226



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

July	Psalms	46 – 75
August	Psalms	76 – 105
September	Psalms	106 – 135
October	Psalms	136 – 150
	Proverbs	1 – 15
November	Proverbs	16 – 31
	Job	1 – 13
December	Job	14 – 42

