

The Many Faces of Miriam

Miriam's Nature

ויאמר מלך מצרים למילדות וגו'. מה היו המילדות? . . .
רבי שמואל בר נחמן אמר: אשה ובתה, יוכבד ומרים...
אשר שם האחת שפרה, שהיתה משפרת את התינוק,
כשהוא יוצא מלא דם... פועה, שהיתה מפיעה את התינוק,
...כשהיו אומרים מת



פועה שהופיעה פנים כנגד אביה, שהיה עמרם ראש
סנהדרין באותה שעה, כיון שגזר פרעה, ואמר (שמות שם,
כב): כל הבן הילוד. אמר עמרם: ולריק ישראל מולידים!
מיד הוציא את יוכבד ופרש עצמו מתשמיש המטה, וגרש
את אשתו כשהיא מעוברת משלשה חודשים. עמדו כל
ישראל וגרשו את נשותיהן. אמרה לו בתו: גזרתך קשה
משל פרעה, שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים, ואתה על הזכרים ונקבות! פרעה
רשע הוא, וגזרתו ספק מתקימת ספק אינה מתקימת, אבל אתה צדיק, וגזרתך
מתקימת! עמד הוא והחזיר את אשתו, עמדו כל ישראל והחזירו את נשותיהם.
הוי, פועה, שהופיעה פנים כנגד אביה:

"And the king of Egypt said to the midwives . . ." (Ex. 1:13) Who are the midwives? . . . Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman says a woman and her daughter: Yocheved and Miriam. Shifra because she [Yocheved] beautified (*mishaperet*) the baby when it would come out covered in blood. . . . Puah because she [Miriam] would cause the baby to cry out/would resuscitate the baby when it was thought to be stillborn...

Another possibility: She [Miriam] was called Puah because she rebuked (*hofi'ah panim*) her father. Amram was head of the Sanhedrin when Pharaoh ordered the Israelite boys to be cast into the Nile, and Amram said: "Shall an Israelite lie with his wife for nothing?" He immediately separated from Yocheved, stopped having intimate relations with her, and divorced her, all when she was three months pregnant.

So all the Israelite men immediately divorced their wives too.

And Miriam told him, "Father, your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh! He only decreed against the males, but you have decreed against both the males and the females. Pharaoh is an evil man, and it is doubtful whether his decrees will come to pass; but you are righteous, and so your decree will be fulfilled!" Immediately Amram returned to his wife, and so did all the other Israelite men. That is the meaning of Puah - that she returned to their wives. Miriam was accordingly given the name of Puah, since she stood up to her father.

Shemot Rabbah 1:13

ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה. מנין היתה מרים יודעת שפירש משה מפריה ורביה?
אלא שראתה צפורה שאינה מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים. אחרה לה: מה לך שאין
את מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים? אמרה לה: אין אחיך מקפיד בדבר. לכך ידעה
מרים, ואמרה לאחיה, ושניהם דברו בו. והרי דברים ק"ו: ומה מרים, שלא
נתכוונה לדבר באחיה לגנאי אלא לשבח, ולא למעט מפריה ורביה אלא לרבות,
בינה לבין עצמה – כך נענשה; המתכוון לדבר בחבירו לגנאי ולא לשבח, ולמעט
מפריה ורביה ולא לרבות, בינו לבין אחרים ולא בינו לבין עצמו – על אחת כמה
וכמה.

(Numbers 12:1)... "and Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses": How did Miriam know that Moses had ceased from marital relations (with his wife Tzipporah)? Seeing that Tzipporah did not adorn herself as other (married) women did, she asked her for the cause and was told: "Your brother is not 'particular' about this thing" (intercourse, [being constantly "on call" for the word of God]). Thus Miriam learned of the matter. She apprised Aaron of it and they both spoke of it (as being a troublesome precedent for others.) If Miriam, whose intent was not to berate her brother, but to praise him, and not to diminish propagation (in Israel), but to increase it, and who spoke thus privately — If she was thus punished, then one who intends to speak against his brother, in defamation and not in praise, and to diminish propagation and not to increase it, and in public — how much more so (is he to be punished!) Sifrei Bamidbar 99:1

Miriam At The Red Sea



Chizkuni, Exodus 15:20:1

מרים הנביאה בעלת דברי
השבח כמו
ואהרן אחיך יהיה נביאך:

, "Miriam the prophetess;" the word "prophetess" is used here to describe Miriam's extraordinary ability to use words to express her feelings. According to Rash'bam, the word is also used as describing someone who preaches to people to behave morally and ethically correctly. Compare when G-d told Moses that his brother Aaron would be נביאך, which can hardly mean: "your prophet," as Moses outclassed him in that department.

'ותקח מרים הנביאה וגו'

עכשיו נעשית נביאה כי במעמד זה זכו גם הנשים לראות פני השכינה עד שאמרו כולם זה אלי, כארז"ל. (מכילתא בשלח פר' ג) ראתה שפחה על הים כו', לכך נאמר ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה, כי הנבואה התחילה במרים וכל הנשים יצאו בעקבותיה במעמד זה כי כולם זכו לנבואה, ולפי שאין השכינה שורה כ"א מתוך שמחה והנשים יש להם צער לידה ע"כ לקחה את התוף בידה ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתופים ובמחולות כדי שתחול עליהם רוח הקודש מתוך שמחה

This is the moment at which Miriam became a prophet. At this stage all of the women were capable of seeing the Shekhinah - but when the people said "This is my God!" everyone became capable of it...

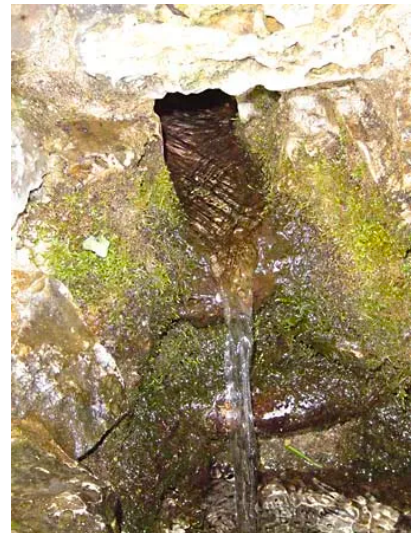
And this is why the Torah tells us that all of the women came out after Miriam - because prophecy began with her, and then all the women followed in her footsteps and in that moment became capable of prophecy too. And because the Shekhinah is not drawn to pain (and women do suffer labor pains) the women took tambourines and drums so as to create an atmosphere of joy for Her sacred presence.

Kli Yakar, Exodus 15:20 1-2

Miriam's Well

וכך היתה הבאר שהיתה עם ישראל במדבר דומה לסלע מלא [כברה] מפרפרת ועולה כמפי הפך הזה עולה עמהן להרים ויורדת עמהן לגאיות מקום שישראל שורין הוא שורה כנגדן במקום גבוהה כנגד פתחו של אהל מועד נשיאי ישראל באין וסובבין אותה במקלותיהן ואומרים עליה את השירה (במדבר כא) עלי באר ענו לה עלי באר והמים מבעבעין ועולין כעמוד למעלה וכל אחד ואחד מושך במקלו איש לשבטו ואיש למשפחתו [שנא] (שם) באר חפרוה שרים וגו' ... [כן מים מתמצין הימנה היא] נעשית נחל גדול והולכין לים הגדול ומביאין [משם] כל חמדת העולם שנאמר (דברים ב) זה ארבעים שנה [ה' אלקיך עמך] לא חסרת דבר.

So the well, which was with Israel in the wilderness, was like a rock of the size of a k'bara, and [the water] was bubbling up and rising as if from the mouth of a pitcher. It traveled with them up the mountains and down into the valleys. Wherever Israel camped it camped opposite them, before the door of the Tabernacle. The princes of Israel with their slaves surrounded it, and sang it this song: "Spring up, O well, sing to it." Then the waters bubbled forth, and rose on high like a pillar; and every one drew out the staff of their tribe and family, as it is said, "The well which the princes digged, Which the nobles of the people delved, With the sceptre and with their staves...."



The waters which emptied themselves from it became a great river, pouring themselves into the Mediterranean, and bringing back from there all the precious things of the world, as it is said, "These forty years ADONAI your God has been with you; you lacked nothing."
Tosefta Sukkah 3:3

וּפִי הַבְּאֵר. בְּאֶרֶה שֶׁל מֵרִים שֶׁהִיְתָה הוֹלֶכֶת עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּכָל הַמַּסָּעוֹת. וַיֵּשׁ
אוֹמְרִים, שֶׁפִּתְחָה פִּיהָ וְאָמְרָה שִׁירָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (בַּמִּדְבָּר כֹּא) עָלִי בְּאֵר עָנּוּ לָהּ:

and the mouth of the well: The well of Miriam that went with Israel in the wilderness on all of the journeys. And some say, that it opened its mouth and uttered song, as it stated (Numbers 21:17), "rise up, O well; answer it."
Bartenura on Pirkei Avot 5:6:3

ובמי באר יטעמו כל המשקים כאשר היה ביציאת מצרים:
And in the taste of the water they will taste any liquid they wish, just as was the case when the people left Egypt.
Kedushat Levi, *Beha'alotcha* 5

Miriam's Legacy

Exodus 2:1–10 features an unnamed sister of Moses who helps deliver him at the Nile River. Many commentators identify her as Miriam. Two genealogies listing Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as the sole children of Amram support the identification (Num 26:59; 1 Chr 6:3). She first appears by name, however, in the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 15:20–21). Called “the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister,” she leads Hebrew women in singing, dancing, and playing drums.

Though the meaning of the term *prophet* is here indeterminate, Miriam is the first woman ever to bear it. She becomes thereby the archetype of the female prophetic tradition, even as Moses heads the male (compare Deut 34:10). Contrary to the impression that her one stanza sung at the sea (Exod 15:1–18) is but an abridgement of the lengthy song attributed to Moses (Exod 5:1–31), historical and literary studies show that the latter version is itself the Song of Miriam. It belongs to a corpus of women's traditions that include the long Songs of Deborah (Judg 5:1–31) and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10).

After the episode at the sea, Miriam surfaces in the wilderness narratives. Accompanied by her brother Aaron, she speaks out against Moses (Num 12:1–6), faulting him for marrying a Cushite woman. But the text fails to explain the issue. The woman is not named. She may be Zipporah, the known wife of Moses (Exod 2:21, 18:2), or another woman. The meaning of “Cushite” is uncertain. It may refer to the African country of Cush (see Gen 10:6; 1 Chr 1:8) or to Midian, the region east of the Gulf of Aqabah from which Zipporah came (see Exod 3:1, 18:1; Hab 3:7). Most probably, the attack implicates Miriam in a struggle over the priestly leadership of Moses.

Miriam with Aaron also challenges the prophetic authority of Moses. She asks, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num 12:2). She understands leadership to embrace diverse voices, female and male. But the price of speaking out is severe. Though God rebukes both Miriam and Aaron, the deity punishes only her. Metaphorically, the divine nostril burns in anger to leave her stricken with scales like snow. Aaron pleads with Moses on her behalf, and Moses appeals to God. God responds by confining her outside the camp for seven days. This period of time verifies her cleanliness but does not restore her to wholeness. Whatever her particular disease, Miriam remains a condemned woman, a warning for generations to come (see Deut 24:8–9). After her punishment, she never speaks, nor is she spoken to. Indeed, she disappears altogether from the narrative until the announcement of her death and burial at Kadesh (Num 20:1).

Negative as well as positive traditions about Miriam testify to her prominence, power, and prestige in early Israel. She participates with Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelite community during the exodus and the wanderings. Her role in saving her baby brother and in celebrating the crossing of the sea highlights her concern for her people. Later they reciprocate. Despite the instructions of God and Moses, the people refuse to continue the march in the wilderness until the diseased Miriam is restored (Num 12:15). Three references to them at her death further underscore their loyalty to her.

Nature also honors Miriam. At her triumphal entry, the living waters of the Red Sea surround her (Exod 15:19–20); at her demise the wells in the desert dry up (Num 20:2). Centuries later, prophecy remembers her as the equal of Moses and Aaron in representing God before the people (Mic 6:8). Moreover, prophecy includes her, though not by name, within its eschatological vision. Jeremiah says that in days to come, Israel will have a new exodus. It will go forth again with drums, dances, and merrymakers (Jer 31:4). As the inaugurator of a performance and composition tradition of song, drums, and dances in Israel, Miriam continues to resonate throughout its musical life (see Pss 68:25; 81:2; 150:4).

Unlike most women in the Bible, Miriam is never called wife or mother. She has neither husband nor children. Jewish traditions, however, cannot tolerate her status as single. The historian Josephus deems Hur the husband of Miriam (Antiquities 3.54; see Exod 17:10–12). Rabbinic sources give her Caleb for a husband and Hur for a son (but compare 1 Chr 2:19).

Phyllis Trible, *Jewish Women's Archive*