

Female Figures in Tanach

April 2, 2020

Sources

Miriam

A. Megillah 14a:14-15

Miriam was a prophetess, as it is written explicitly: “And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand” (Exodus 15:20). The Gemara asks: Was she the sister only of Aaron, and not the sister of Moses? Why does the verse mention only one of her brothers? Rav Nahman said that Rav said: For she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron, i.e., she prophesied since her youth, even before Moses was born, and she would say: My mother is destined to bear a son who will deliver the Jewish people to salvation. And at the time when Moses was born the entire house was filled with light, and her father stood and kissed her on the head, and said to her: My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled.

But once Moses was cast into the river, her father arose and rapped her on the head, saying to her: My daughter, where is your prophecy now, as it looked as though the young Moses would soon meet his end. This is the meaning of that which is written with regard to Miriam’s watching Moses in the river: “And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him” (Exodus 2:4), i.e., to know what would be with the end of her prophecy, as she had prophesied that her brother was destined to be the savior of the Jewish people.

B. Excerpted from Chabad.org: *Miriam’s Well: Unravelling the Mystery*, By Yehuda Shurpin

Toward the end of the Israelites’ sojourn in the desert, the verse tells us, “The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron.” From the juxtaposition of Miriam’s death and the water shortage, the sages of Talmud understand that for all the previous 40 years, they did have a ready water source and that it was in Miriam’s merit. In fact, the Talmud explains that the three “gifts” the Jews had in the desert—the well of water, the pillar of clouds and the manna—were in the merit of Miriam, Aaron and Moses, respectively.

There is an ancient custom to draw and drink water from a well or natural spring after Shabbat. This is based on the saying of the sages that the waters of Miriam’s Well flow through all the wells and natural springs every Saturday night, and “anyone who encounters it and drinks of its waters will be immediately healed from all his afflictions. Therefore, they are accustomed to draw water every Saturday night, since perhaps they will chance upon the well of Miriam.”

Although we discussed the well specifically as being in Miriam's merit, in truth, our sages tells us that the entire Exodus was in the merit of the righteous women, led by Miriam.

Shiphrah & Puah

C. Exodus 1:15-21

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live."

The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?"

The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth."

And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.

And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

Vashti

D. Megillat Esther 1:10-12

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus,

to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman.

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.

Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. (For it was the royal practice [to turn] to all who were versed in law and precedent.

His closest advisers were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven ministers of Persia and Media who had access to the royal presence and occupied the first place in the kingdom.)

“What,” [he asked,] “shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?”

Thereupon Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

For the queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.

Esther

E. Megillat Esther 5: 4-16

When Esther’s maidens and eunuchs came and informed her, the queen was greatly agitated. She sent clothing for Mordecai to wear, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he refused.

Thereupon Esther summoned Hathach, one of the eunuchs whom the king had appointed to serve her, and sent him to Mordecai to learn the why and wherefore of it all.

Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate;

and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people.

When Hathach came and delivered Mordecai’s message to Esther,

Esther told Hathach to take back to Mordecai the following reply:

“All the king’s courtiers and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king’s presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.”

When Mordecai was told what Esther had said,

Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace.

On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai:

"Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"

Deborah

F. Judges 4:4-23

Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time.

She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.

She summoned Barak son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, has commanded: Go, march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun.

And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands."

But Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go."

"Very well, I will go with you," she answered. "However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Hagar

G. Genesis 21: 9-21

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.

She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.

But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.

As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."

Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes,

and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman.

He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

The Wife of Mar Ukva

H. Babylonian Talmud, Kethubos 67b; based on Soncino and ArtScroll translation

Mar Ukva had a poor man in his neighborhood into whose door-socket he used to throw four zuz every day [this was done anonymously]. Once the poor man thought: "I will go and see who is doing me this kindness." On that day it happened that Mar Ukva was delayed at the house of study and his wife was accompanying him. As soon as the poor man saw them moving the door to put the money in the socket, he went out after them. They fled from him and ran into a furnace from which the coals had just been swept. Mar Ukva's feet were getting burnt and his wife said to him: "Raise your feet and place them on my feet." [Her feet were not getting burnt.] Mar Ukva felt dejected as it appeared that her merits were greater than his. His wife said to him: "I am usually at home so the poor people find me easily and also the benefit they derive from my charity is immediate." [She gives the poor people food and her husband provides money.] And what was the reason for all that? Because Mar Zutra b. Tobiah said in the name of Rav (others state: Rabbi Huna b. Bizna said in the name of R. Shimon the Pious; and others again state, R. Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai): "It is better to throw oneself into a fiery furnace than to publicly shame another person"

