



INSTILLER OF FAITH, ENABLER OF REDEMPTION.

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Miriam is most well-known to us as Moses's big sister. Throughout this essay we will gain a recognition of Miriam's qualities and the effect she had on the destiny of the Jewish nation. Specifically, Miriam is deeply connected to the concept of redemption -- from Egypt, initially, and then extending into the future, to the final redemption at the end of days.

Miriam as a Young Girl

The first time we encounter Miriam, she is introduced to us under a different name:

*The King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifra and the other, Puah, "...every boy who is born... kill him, and let every girl live..." The midwives feared God, and they let the children live."
(Exodus 1:16-17)*

Only from the Talmud do we learn that Miriam and Puah are one and the same. (Miriam's mother, Yocheved, was "Shifra.") She was named for the nurturing action she performed with the Jewish babies: "Puah" refers to "cooing" and rocking a baby.

Another meaning of Puah could be "stood up to" (*hove'eah*), which refers to Miriam's standing up to Pharaoh and going against his will by refusing to harm the babies she was bringing into the world.

On the one hand, Miriam's name shows her gentleness and nurturing ability, but on the other hand it expresses her courage and strength -- even as a young girl - - to stand up for what she believes in and not give in to evil and treachery.

In the same Talmudic passage, we hear about one more person to whom little Miriam stood up:

"The man from the house of Levi went..." (Exodus 2: 1) -- he "went" at the advice of his daughter. Amram was the head of the Sanhedrin and when he saw that Pharaoh was throwing the Jewish boys into the Nile, he said: "Why bring children into the world for nothing?" He separated from his wife and all the men in the generation followed his example.

His daughter, Miriam, said: "Father, your decree is worse than Pharaoh's. He only decreed against the males, and you've decreed against males and females. He only decreed death in this world, and you've decreed both in this world and in the next. Pharaoh is evil, and chances are that his decree will not come to fruition, yet you are righteous -- surely your decree will come about!"

Amram listened and reunited with his wife, and all the men followed his example and reunited with their wives." (Sotah 12a)

After Amram reunites with Yocheved, Moses is conceived and born. As a result of Miriam's arguments, rationally and clearly stated without any hesitation (and with more than a bit of chutzpa), Amram -- the Jewish leader -- realizes his error. Along with everyone who follows his example, he continues to bring Jewish children into the world and ensures the nation's continuity and existence. Moses

himself becomes the vehicle for the Jewish people's redemption. All this is to Miriam's credit.

Miriam the Prophetess

Miriam was a prophetess who prophesied: "My mother will have a son who will redeem Israel." (Talmud - Megillah 14a)

Miriam is listed among the seven Jewish prophetesses. This prophecy was the source of her strength and conviction when she stood up to her father and insisted that he not abandon hope. And later it was her guiding light when she stood by the bushes to watch over her little brother who had been placed among the reeds in a basket:

And his sister stood from a distance to know what would happen to him. (Exodus 2:4)

"And she stood" -- with Divine inspiration resting upon her. (Midrash - Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael)

To "stand" is to be certain and confident about your beliefs. Miriam was completely sure that this boy would be okay and would grow up to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt. Her conviction was unshakeable even in the face of the many who despaired and lost hope in the future and tried to dissuade her. She alone adhered faithfully to this vision of a brighter future, and she infused her generation and its women with faith and trust in the coming redemption.

When Moses was born, the happiness and light filled their house for three months. Then, when the Egyptian investigators were on their way to Amram's house and the family was forced to put him in the Nile, in a basket, it seemed that Miriam had been wrong:

Her father... said: "Well, my daughter, where is your prophecy?" And when Moses was put into the basket among the reeds, her mother also... said, "My daughter, where is that prophecy?" (Midrash - Shmot Rabba 1:22; Talmud - Sotah 13a)

Miriam, a young girl at the time, responded with complete courage and conviction. She doesn't doubt herself, asking: *Where, in fact, is my prophecy? Maybe I was wrong?* Instead, she waits at the reeds, watching, to see how God will carry out His promise.

Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh, discovers the baby in the basket and pulls him out of the water. When the opportunity presents itself, Miriam approaches Batya and suggests finding a wet nurse for the young baby. How does she have the courage to speak to the daughter of a king? But Miriam knew that God must have arranged for Moses to be taken in and brought up by a member of the king's family. This made complete sense according to Divine plan, ensuring that Moses would learn leadership skills and grow up among royalty. Miriam then leads her mother to the palace as the wet nurse (for her own baby!) and sees the first stage of her prophecy fulfilled.

Inspiration for the Generation

Three good providers (parnassim) stood up for Israel: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. (Talmud - Taanit 9a)

Miriam, along with her two brothers, provided the Jewish people with the ingredients necessary for redemption. All three led the Jewish people in their own way: Moses by teaching Torah, Aaron by his service as the high priest, and Miriam by teaching the women. (Targum - Micha 6:4)

Through her insight and firm convictions, she encouraged the women to fulfill their mission of Jewish survival and continuity in the midst of hardship and pain. The commentators describe how, at the time of the building the Tabernacle in the desert, the Jewish women brought a unique donation of copper:

The Jewish women had mirrors which they used to adorn themselves, and they brought them as contributions to the Tabernacle ... God said: "These are dearer to me than everything, because through these the Jewish women bore many children in Egypt. When their husbands were exhausted from the toil of slavery, they would meet them with food and drink and decorate themselves with the mirrors... As a result, their husbands desired

them, and they conceived and had children ... as it says (Song of Songs 8:5): "Under the apple tree I aroused you." (Rashi - Exodus 38:8)

As Miriam infused these women with strong faith and trust in the future, they were able to rise above the despair and darkness and bring about very survival of the nation.

They also apparently had the presence of mind, in the midst of this genocide, to prepare in a most practical way for brighter days:

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand. And all the women followed her with tambourines and dances. (Exodus 15:20)

How did the women of this generation know to take tambourines out of Egypt, when there was barely enough time to take food? The righteous women of the generation were certain that God would perform miracles in the desert, so they brought the tambourines out of Egypt. (Rashi - Exodus 15:20)

This was Miriam's contribution: Dispel despair with the light of hope, enthusiasm, and faith in the future.

On a personal level, Miriam was able to make this transformation as well:

Why was her name Miriam? Because of the bitterness (mar). (Seder Olam Rabba 3)

Miriam's name encapsulates the status of the Jewish people during the greater part of her lifetime. She expresses and represents her nation, feeling their pain, and yet at the same time, encouraging them to prepare in every way for a brighter future and for redemption:

"Efrat is Miriam... since Israel was fruitful and multiplied (paru) because of her. Ach Rachel is Miriam... because all the women went after her ("Achareha") with celebration and dance after the splitting of the Red Sea." (Midrash - Shmot Rabba 1:17)

Miriam's Well

The well of water, which miraculously accompanied the Jewish people during their 40-year journey in the desert, was in the merit of Miriam. It is called *Be'er Miriam*, the Well of Miriam, whenever it is mentioned in the Midrash.

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, discusses how water corresponds to the character trait of kindness that spreads out to others (recall Rivka's drawing water from the well, as a metaphor for her character). Miriam was a deeply nurturing and caring person, and as a provider for the Jewish people -- in the spiritual as well as physical sense -- she merited the well which provided the nation with life-giving water for 40 years:

When the Jewish people were in the desert, the well stood beside the Tent of Meeting, and the officers of Israel dug a stream leading to their tribes. Then the more generous leaders dug smaller streams to cut down the inconvenience and allow for the water to flow directly to their families... It was Divine providence that the water would only flow toward someone who was generous, because water is the specific reward for kindness..."
(*Ha'amek Davar - Numbers 21: 18*)

According to the Maharal (Netzach Yisrael 54), a well symbolizes the yearning and longing of a human being to connect to God, by its flowing upward from the ground. This was Miriam's strength on a personal level, as well as her ability to influence and direct her generation (its women, primarily) from down here on earth, heavenward, through complete trust and belief in God.

Slip of the Tongue

Miriam's major mistake, for which she is punished and secluded outside the camp for seven days, is *Lashon Hara* (negative speech) about Moses:

Miriam spoke with Aaron about Moses regarding the Kushite woman whom he married. (Numbers 12: 1)

It seems outrageous that someone like Miriam should engage in gossip. She, who cared so much about Moses (even before he existed!) and about the welfare of the Jewish people, who was involved in teaching and leading the women to have courage and faith in the Almighty, should stoop to negative speech about the greatest prophet who ever lived, whom she undoubtedly respected and appreciated more than anyone else!

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni - Bamidbar 12:1) fills in the background for Miriam's inappropriate conversation with Aaron. Apparently, in speaking with Tziphora (Moses's wife -- the aforementioned "Kushite woman"), Miriam understood that Moses, having reached a level of prophecy where he was in constant readiness for a conversation with God, no longer engaged in conjugal relations with his wife. So Miriam spoke to Aaron, wondering why they also had not been asked to separate from their spouses, and whether Moses was perhaps behaving in contradiction to Jewish law:

Miriam said: "Has God only spoken to Moses? Hasn't God spoken to us as well?" God heard... and God came down in a pillar of a cloud and stood at the opening of the tent and called: "Aaron and Miriam." They both came out... and He said "...My servant Moses is not like [other prophets]. In all my house, he is loyal, face-to-face do I speak with him... And why did you not fear speaking about My servant, Moses?" (Numbers 12:2, 5, 7-8)

Perhaps, having learned about Miriam's strengths and virtues, we might be able to appreciate the root of her mistake. Even as a young girl, Miriam stood up to her father, when she sensed a danger to the continuity and survival of the Jewish people and a breakdown of family relationships. Throughout the difficult years in Egypt, she maintained her steadfast trust in the future redemption and encouraged the women to be involved in family relationships and in bringing children into the world. Her entire raison d'etre was building and strengthening the spiritual and physical nucleus of the Jewish family, which would combine to create the building blocks of the fledgling Jewish nation.

Here again, she sensed a threat to that cause to which her life was dedicated. What were to happen, she thought, if every prophet or leader took it into his head to separate from his or her spouse, in order to be more available for prophecy? Is spiritual greatness in conflict with relations between husband and

wife? Her worry about the danger to the spiritual and physical thriving of the Jewish nation sent her to discuss the issue with Aaron.

But here, her love for Moses and the Jewish people led her astray. Here she was assuming the role of older sister, hovering over someone who now was as close to God as anyone had ever been and would ever be in the future. She was projecting her agenda onto a situation which was way beyond her level. This negative speech was disrespectful to Moses and, thus, disrespectful to God.

The qualitatively different level of Moses -- that of a prophet whom God spoke to "face-to-face" -- was previously unknown until now, when God explained it. And as a result of Miriam's going too far in her protectiveness and desire to influence, we, the Jewish nation, received an unalienable account from God which became one of the 13 Principles upon which our religion is based:

The Seventh Principle of Faith: The prophecy of Moses, our teacher, is unlike any other prophecy... It is different in four ways... they are all below him in level... that he was able to speak directly to God without any intermediary... as it says (Numbers 12:8): "face to face I speak to him." (Maimonides - 13 Principles of Faith)

Although Miriam was punished and had to be secluded away from the camp and the people she loved so much, she was accorded great respect by God, as evidenced by His detailed answer and explanation. As well, the Jewish people, who waited seven extra days before leaving their encampment for her to return, showed that her dedication and good intentions were appreciated.

Until the End of Days

Ten things were created on the eve of Shabbat at twilight: the mouth of the well, the mouth of the [Bilaam's] donkey, Yitzhak's ram..." (Avot 5:46)

We have an account of Miriam's well having been created during the Six Days of Creation, at "twilight time" on Friday afternoon. This twilight zone seems to be a semi-miraculous time, not part of the natural six days, but not quite the ethereal Shabbat. This well of water is prepared in advance, by God, as a miraculous means of redemption from Egypt.

Also, at the End of Days, in the future redemption, we hear mention of the well:

The waters of the well are destined [in the End of Days] to come up from under the doorstep of each house and will flow out and become 12 streams corresponding to the Twelve Tribes ... and each field and vineyard which is not yielding fruit will be watered and will yield fruit. And they will enter and cover the Dead Sea ... and sweeten its waters, and it will flow all the way up to Jerusalem ... And anyone who is sick will wash in that water and be healed..." (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 51)

Miriam was a crucial factor in bringing about redemption by her "sticking to her guns" regarding the prophecy about a redeemer, and by her encouraging the message of hope and belief to the women of her generation. Indeed, it is later affirmed, "In the merit of righteous women were the Jewish people redeemed from Egypt."

So too, the well of water, symbolizing the yearning to reach God, having been created at the beginning of time, in the merit of the future Miriam, is a crucial element in the redemption from Egypt, and will reappear at the final redemption in the End of Days, at the time of the Messiah. Miriam's crucial role in Jewish history spans from Creation until the end of time!