

Parashat Shemot, 5770, 2010:

*Who Was Miriam?*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *aleah hashalom*, the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, and Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

*Sefer Shemot* introduces us to the illustrious triumvirate of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam – three of our people’s greatest prophets. Moshe and Aharon’s contributions to our people are universally recognized. After all, they were the pivotal figures in bringing *Yitziat Mitzraim* (the Departure from Egypt) to its celebrated fulfillment. Miriam’s role in this divinely ordained process, while less explicit, was none-the-less equally remarkable.

Michah, the great 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE prophet, proclaimed Miriam’s essential contributions to *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) when he declared: “For I [G-d] brought you up out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” (6:4, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Chazal (our Sages of Blessed Memory), as well, championed Miriam’s role in our people’s history in a Midrashic comment on this verse:

**and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam:** The Holy One Blessed be He said: “Come and see an important difference between Me and mankind. When an earthly king sends out his emissaries to the country, the country’s inhabitants are duty-bound to provide for their sustenance. In my case, however, I [G-d] did not do this. Instead, I sent three redeemers (*goalim*) before you, and you [the Jewish people] had no obligation to provide for their needs. Rather, the exact opposite took place and they provided for your needs! The Manna was in the merit of Moshe, the Clouds of Glory were in Aharon’s merit, and the Well was in the merit of Miriam. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Michah 554*, translation my own)

A parallel text to this Midrash is found in *Talmud Bavli, Taanit 9a*:

Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Yehudah said: “Three great leaders (*parnassim tovim*)

arose on Israel's behalf, and they were: Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam; and three wondrous gifts were given through them: the Well, the Clouds of Glory, and the Manna. The Well was in the merit of Miriam, the Clouds of Glory were in Aharon's merit, and the Manna was because of Moshe."(Translation my own)

Our Sages taught us that Miriam's prophetic gifts were revealed during her youth. Rashi (1040-1105) presents this concept in his commentary to *Sefer Shemot* 15:20 in the context of the "Song of the Sea" ("*Shirat Hayam*"): **Miriam, the Prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand:** "When did she prophesy? When she was [known only as] 'Aaron's sister,' before Moses was born, she said, 'My mother is destined to bear a son' [who will save Israel], as is found in *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 12b, 13a)." Indeed, this was the reason why Amram, Miriam's father and the *gadol hador* (the leader of the generation) remarried Yocheved, "a daughter of Levi" and the mother of Miriam and Aharon. As Rashi states in our *parasha*: "He [Amram] was separated from her [Yocheved] because of Pharaoh's decree (and he subsequently remarried her). This is the meaning of went, that he followed [literally, he went after] his daughter's advice that she said to him, Your decree is harsher than Pharaoh. Whereas Pharaoh issued a decree [only] against the males, you [issued a decree] against the females as well [for none will be born]. (*Sefer Shemot* 2:1, underlining my own) As a result of Miriam's prophecy and willingness to challenge her father for the sake of the future of our entire people, Amram and Yocheved were reunited and Moshe was born.

Miriam understood Moshe's future role of leader better than anyone else. Thus, she literally stood guard over him and ensured his physical and spiritual survival. As our *parasha* states:

[When] she [Yocheved] could no longer hide him (Moshe); she took [for] him a reed

basket, smeared it with clay and pitch, placed the child into it, and put [it] into the marsh at the Nile's edge. His sister stood from afar, to know what would be done to him. Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe, to the Nile, and her maidens were walking along the Nile, and she saw the basket in the midst of the marsh, and she sent her maidservant, and she took it. She opened [it], and she saw him the child, and behold, he was a weeping lad, and she had compassion on him, and she said, "This is [one] of the children of the Hebrews." His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call for you a wet nurse from the Hebrew women, so that she shall nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go!" So the girl went and called the child's mother. (*Sefer Shemot* 2:3-8, underlining my own)

The significance of Miriam's actions in her encounter with Pharaoh's daughter cannot be overestimated. As we have already seen, Moshe literally would never have existed without Miriam. Moreover, as the above passage intimates, without Miriam's divinely inspired intervention, Moshe never would have survived physically and spiritually to become the leader of *Klal Yisrael*. This idea was presented in unmistakable terms by my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, in his posthumous work entitled, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*:

Miriam is responsible for the emergence of Moses as a leader and redeemer of his people. If not for her, he would never have been imbued with great passionate love for his poor brethren. She suggested to the princess that a Hebrew wet-nurse be employed for the infant, preventing Moses from disappearing in anonymity and ignorance. (Page 118)

As noted above, Miriam was a prophetess before Moshe was born. *Chazal* teach us, however, that after Moshe was born, prophecy was taken away from her and given to Moshe (*Midrash Aggadah, Shemot* 15:20). If this was the case, why did the women so readily follow her and join her in singing *Shirat Hayam*? The answer to this question is really two-fold in nature. One answer is found in the Aramaic translation/explanation (*Targum*) of *Michah* 6:4: **And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam:** "... and Miriam to teach the women." Miriam, in a word, was the teacher of all of the women amongst the Jewish people. She was, quite simply, the *baalat hamesorah* (the Grand Mistress of the

Torah and its traditions). Consequently, the Jewish women naturally followed their beloved teacher in giving G-d-intoxicated musical praise to Hashem for the wonders and miracles He had performed for them at the Sea of Reeds.

The second, and quite novel answer to the question “Why did the women so readily follow Miriam and join her in singing *Shirat Hayam*?” is offered by the Rav in an unpublished public lecture on Parashat Shemot, presented December 30, 1980. Rabbi Soloveitchik maintained that:

*Yitziat Mitzraim* did not start with *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moshe). The consummation, the full realization, happened through Moshe, but the Jewish consciousness, the Jewish *emunah* (faith), the faith in the promise of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) [concerning the Redemption], was not just incidental. The people actually cultivated it – and sacrificed their lives - in order that this particular identity, this strange identity, should continue until the final fulfillment, which *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* spoke [about] to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov... (This, and the following transcriptions my own)

Who were the guarantors of this Jewish consciousness? Who were the spiritual leaders of our people in Egypt? None other than the Hebrew midwives Shifra and Puah, identified respectively by *Chazal* as Yocheved and Miriam. As Rav Soloveitchik so beautifully and creatively stated:

The verse “Now it took place when the midwives feared G-d, that He made houses for them,” (*Sefer Shemot* 1:21) means that the Almighty has turned over the leadership of the people in *Mitzraim* (Egypt) to the *m'yaldot* (the midwives). *V'yaash lehem batim* (that He made houses for them) means that they became leaders. The *m'yaldot* were entrusted with the leadership and the authority to watch, to lead, and to teach the message in *Mitzraim*.

For Rav Soloveitchik, Miriam was the more important of the two *m'yaldot* and the more important leader. In his view, the above-quoted phrase “Miriam, the Prophetess, Aaron's sister,” teaches us the extraordinary role Miriam played regarding the Exodus:

If not for her, perhaps, *Yitziat Mitzraim* would not have taken place... So basically, after the people left *Mitzraim*, the leader of the people was Moshe. Before they left from

*Mitzraim*, when Moshe was yet in Midian, during his long sojourn in Midian, the leader of the people was *Miriam Hanaviah* (Miriam the Prophetess).

We are now able to clearly answer the question with which we began: “Who was Miriam?” Miriam was none other than a great prophetess, a consummate educator, and the leader of our people in Egypt. As such, the entire nation honored and respected her. Little wonder, then, that the holy women of Israel joined her in song and rejoicing after passing unharmed through the Sea of Reeds (*Yam Suf*).

May the merit of Miriam the Prophetess protect us all and help bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (our Righteous Messiah) soon and in our days – just as her leadership, Torah teaching, and spiritual bravery set the stage for our salvation from Egyptian servitude. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

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