

# Miriam and Me

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## ***Preamble:***

*It is weird writing about Miriam, a biblical figure, while today, July 17<sup>th</sup> 2006, rockets are landing in the northern part of Israel. One of the places I hear mentioned on the radio is Tiberias and I remind myself that according to the legend, the Rabbis actually located Miriam's well in Tiberias, opposite the middle gate of an ancient synagogue which lepers went to in order to be cured (Deut. Rabbah 6.11). It serves as a starter to get me to continue writing yet another piece, but this time about Miriam and me, for I have been writing about Miriam for more than twenty years and have identified with her in different ways, depending on who (and where) I am at the time. It is not strange for me to think of her in connection with current events.*

## **Who am I?**

I am a feminist Conservative Jew living in Omer, a small, quiet, and upscale community in the Southern part of Israel. It is a place where it is possible to ignore disturbances going on in the rest of the country. It is here, not too far from Abraham's Well in Tel Sheva, I have been writing midrash since the mid 1980's, the direct outgrowth of my being the Torah reader in our Conservative/Masorti synagogue, appropriately titled *Magen Avraham* (shield of Abraham). I was, until my recent retirement at Ben Gurion University, an English teacher with a serious hobby, writing about women in the Bible and midrash. My favorite subject was and is Miriam, to whom I return many times for inspiration since she has often served as my alter ego.

## **Miriam as my Alter Ego**

When I was a young mother, juggling work with children, I envied her singleness and childlessness and her ability to concentrate on herself and her single-minded pursuit of a “career”. When my children were married with children of their own, I wrote about her relationship with her mother and sisters-in-law. During low points in my life, I identified with her bitterness at having been overlooked by life’s events and God. Whenever there were calls for papers about Miriam, I submitted either papers or *midrashim*. To my great disappointment, the last midrash I wrote in English about Yocheved’s daughter and daughters-in-law, in which I shared a mother’s concerns about the path her daughter was taking, was not included in a special issue about Miriam. My inspiration for Yocheved (Miriam's mother) was Kate Millet, whom I met at a conference in Georgia—and this lead me to write a free flowing midrash about her relationship with her daughter Miriam and daughters-in-law Elisheva and Tzipora. The Miriam in my tale is reckless, accustomed to having her own way, “playing with fire...and no real sense of woman’s place” (Graetz, 2001). When I got older, I began to envision her as a redemptive figure, one who had children and who had made her peace with God. That was when I wrote a midrash about her in Hebrew (Graetz, 2005).

### **The Name Miriam**

Like so many Jewish girls of my generation, there were the cute and popular girls with names like Barbara, Carol, Susan and those with Biblical names like Judith, Miriam, Ruth, and Naomi. Being tall and a basketball player, I envied the petite cheerleaders with Barbie-like names and felt that those of us with the biblical names were less popular. My sister had a very peculiar name, Menorah, and I always assumed that she was named that because my father was in synagogue the week when the portion of the Torah read was *beha'alotcha* (Numbers 8:1-12:16) and the *haftara* [additional passage from the Prophets or Writings] read for that week mentioned the seven branched menorah (Zechariah 2:14-

4:7 which is the identical *haftara* for the Sabbath of Chanukah). I did not know then how important *haftarot* (pl. of *haftara*) were going to be in my future writings.

We used to joke that it's a good thing he didn't name her Hanukah. Yet jokes aside, I always envied Menorah her special name. Only later on, when I became pre-occupied with Miriam, did I realize that at the end of the same Torah portion of *beha'alotcha* (Numbers 12) was where Miriam speaks out against God's chosen leader, Moses and that my sister should really have been named Miriam and not Menorah. So here I am full circle, trying to figure out why Miriam was important to me as a role model, rather than Naomi from the Book of Ruth, who is after all the person I'm named after. But that's easy enough, for although she too was bitter [*marah* in Hebrew], Naomi was an old woman, not someone with whom I could easily identify; at least not until recently when at ages 63 and 65, I prepared for sabbaticals in the U.S. and had to pack my bags and leave my three children and six grandchildren behind.

### **Different Miriams**

Of all the Miriams I have identified with, it is strange that the only Miriam I don't identify with is the ecstatic Miriam who plays the tambourine, the one that the cultic composer Debbie Friedman celebrated with all "the women dancing with their timbrels, follow[ing] Miriam as she sang her song, sing[ing] a song to the One whom we've exalted, Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long." When I discuss this with a friend, she says that it is odd, because, although I am a terrible dancer, I sing beautifully, was the Torah chanter in our Conservative/Masorti congregation in Omer, and was always a member of a choir. Not only that, but I know Miriam's Song (ascribed to Moses) in Exodus 15:1-21 almost by heart and read it with great enthusiasm in the synagogue, twice a year [on Passover and also when it is the weekly portion]. My memory is also helped that it is read daily in the *shaharit*/morning service. But, ecstasy is

not my thing and that Miriam is less interesting to me than the other Miriams in the Bible and Midrash. My Miriam is a big sister who challenges her father, who complains about Moses, who is bitter, and left alone to suffer from leprosy as a punishment from God. She is the one who may have felt abused by the Deity.

Before I began to write about Miriam, I wrote midrashim about the book of Genesis. Most of my female characters were very bitter, so much so, that my friend, the late bible scholar Tikva Frymer Kensky upon reading the early drafts, commented that they were not really feminist; they were just *kvetches* [Yiddish for complainers]. When I ran out of characters in Genesis I wrote two midrashim, one a political midrash about Deborah which was an anti-war editorial/ story which appeared first in the *Jerusalem Post* (Graetz, 2003b) under the name “Israel at Forty”, and another about Miriam, entitled “Miriam: The Discredited Prophetess,” which was first published in an issue on women in the *Melton Journal* (Graetz, 1988). In this midrash I created Miriam the doctor, a healer, a proud, and independent woman who complained about being left alone. This Miriam was professionally interested in her own illness of leprosy. She was a *bat-kohen*, a daughter of a priestly family and intimately acquainted with the diagnosis of disease. She was never consulted publicly, but her private opinions were highly valued because of her many years of experience.

This Miriam was beset by terrible doubts about the severity of her punishment. She thought it unfair that she, and not her brother Aaron, was being punished. For had not the two of them voiced complaints about Moses? She bitterly criticized the fact that those who were diseased had to expiate their sin by spending the entire period of quarantine alone—separated from others similarly afflicted.” She asked, “What kind of God demands that one endure this mental and physical pain in a state of loneliness!” She used her organizational abilities so that people could help each other. In doing this “she

realized that she had re-interpreted the law of *badad yeshev*, ‘you shall remain in complete isolation’ (Leviticus 13:46) and hoped she would not be punished for usurping the power of interpretation from Moses” (Graetz, 1997).

In 1989 I had a chance to talk about that Miriam in a Reconstructionist Synagogue in Montreal and then talked about her the following year in connection with the evil tongue in London. I entitled my talk, “Is *lashon ha’ra* [slander, lit. evil tongue] a Woman's Weapon?” Subsequently I presented a formal paper in July 1990, "Miriam: Guilty or Not Guilty?" at the Fourth Interdisciplinary Congress on Women in New York City which was later published as “Miriam: Guilty or Not Guilty?” in *Judaism* (Graetz, 1992), which has been reprinted several times and with name changes. “Did Miriam Talk too Much?” exemplifies clearly that in rabbinic midrash there is no unanimity among the sages about biblical women and men. The same women and men are depicted as good and bad, depending on the circumstances. I demonstrate that there are certain criteria that are used to decide when a particular biblical woman is to be portrayed positively and when the same woman is to be portrayed negatively. At this juncture, I was also interested in Miriam's strength and in workshops that I taught, linked her to the poet and novelist Marge Piercy who wrote that a “A Strong woman is a woman who loves strongly and weeps strongly and is strongly terrified and has strong needs” (Piercy, 1982).

I suggested that Miriam the strong outspoken woman was punished with leprosy because women in the biblical world were not supposed to be leaders of men, and that women with initiative were reprovved when they asserted themselves with the only weapon they had, their power of language: a power which could be used viciously and was, therefore, called *lashon ha-ra*, literally, evil tongue.

### **Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash**

#### The Perfect Role Model

I looked first at the many examples of the Miriam whom the Rabbis admire. One instance is their explication of Numbers 12:14ff, where it is written clearly that it was the people who did not journey until Miriam was returned to them. The Rabbis, however, said it was the Lord who waited for her. Not only that, but the “Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘I am a priest, I shut her up and I shall declare her clean’” (*Deut. Rabba* 6:9)! If God, portrayed as a concerned doctor, intervened in Miriam’s case and personally treated her illness, surely it followed that Miriam was someone to be reckoned with.

There were many midrashim which have to do with Miriam’s well, which is said to have been one of the ten things created during the twilight before the first Sabbath of the creation (BT *Pesachim* 54a). One of the few songs of the Bible, an obscure fragment of an ancient poem, is read by many Rabbis as referring to this well: “Spring up, O well—sing to it/The well which the chieftains dug,/ Which the nobles of the people started/With maces, with their own staffs” (Num 21:17-19).

Since the verse, which comes after Miriam’s reported death (Num 20:1), is followed by a statement that there was no water for the congregation (20:2), the Rabbis write that Miriam’s gift to us after her death was her song, which could cause the waters of her well to flow. The proviso was that the right person had to know how to address the well to get it to give water. Once again, Miriam was a singer, a woman of spirit. One who in a poem I wrote had her song stolen by a Moses who did not know how to sing, but only how to hit and kill. This Moses slew the Egyptian, sent many of his people to their deaths, and only knew how to hit the rock. He was not the right person to get water; it was his sister’s touch that was needed. As I mentioned in the preamble, the Rabbis located her well in Tiberias, opposite the middle gate of an ancient synagogue which lepers go to in order to be cured (*Deut. Rabba* 6:11).

Miriam is called a prophet in Exodus 15. Though the Bible does not relate any examples of her prophecies, the Rabbis interpret the passage “And his sister stood afar off” (Exod 2:4), to mean that she stood afar “to know what would be the outcome of her prophecy,” because she had told her parents that her “mother was destined to give birth to a son who will save Israel.” That prophecy, they say, is the meaning of: “And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel” (*Deut. Rabba* 6:14).

Another midrash about her concerns the virtuous midwives who saved the Israelite babies from the wicked Pharaoh. The Rabbis decided that the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, were none other than Yocheved and the very capable five-year-old Miriam. In this same midrash her father, Amram, is shown as a coward who stopped having intercourse with his wife, and even divorced her because of Pharaoh’s decree to kill the baby boys who were born to the Israelites. In this story, Miriam pointed out to him that “your decree is more severe than that of Pharaoh; for Pharaoh decreed only concerning the male children, and you decree upon males and females alike.” As a result, Amram took his wife back, and his example was followed by all the Israelites (*Lev. Rabba* 17:3). In this midrash, Miriam is praised for outsmarting her father, and for encouraging the people to be fruitful and multiply so that they will survive.

I always had a problem with the first part of this midrash. There were these two wonderful midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who saved the Jewish people, so why take their identities away from them and conflate them with Miriam and her mother? That leaves us with the names of two fewer women for future generations with whom to identify. On the other hand we do get to identify Miriam and her entire family as midwives, so there is loss and there is gain. In a wonderful tale “The Tenth Plague” about midwives the midrashist, Jill Hammer writes about Miriam’s mother and sister-in-law Elisheva who tend to a woman giving birth during the terrible time of the ten plagues (Hammer, 2001).

To the Rabbis, Miriam is a perfect role model, except for one thing; she is not married and does not have any children. So, to fix that, the midrash explains that the meaning of the passage, “And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He built them houses” (Exod 1:21), is that “they were founders of a royal family.” They show that Miriam founded a royal family, with David descending from her. The genealogy is a bit complex but, essentially, Miriam marries Caleb, who begets Hur, who has Uri who begets Bezalel, leading ultimately to King David (BT *Sotah* 12a and *Exod. Rabba* 1:17).

Many problems are solved by this marriage: Amram’s line is continued; Caleb, the faithful spy, is rewarded; and Moses’ children (sons of a black woman) are written out of Jewish history. But, most importantly, Miriam is not an anomalous, unmarried, spinster anymore; rather, she is a happily married mother and wife whose offspring brings fame and glory to her. Were it not for the incident when Miriam asserts herself and attacks Moses (God’s choice), Miriam would be one of the few women in the Bible about whom the Rabbis have nothing bad to say (BT *Berachot* 19a).

Had that been the case, I probably would have lost interest in Miriam, since what made her so fascinating to me were the many examples of castigation concerning her punishment by leprosy.

### The Bitter Miriam

If we return to the midrash where Miriam’s father, Amram, is portrayed as a coward who stopped having intercourse with his wife, and divorced her after Pharaoh’s decree to kill all the baby boys born to the Israelites, we will be reminded of the resourceful and assertive Miriam whom the rabbis loved. As a result of Miriam’s advice, Amram took his wife back, and his example was followed by all the Israelites (*Exod. Rabba* 1:13). In this midrash, Miriam was praised for her assertiveness.

Yet, in a midrash which has the same theme, and starts by portraying Miriam as a woman who herself cares about commandments and survival, she is punished for the same act of assertiveness. In this midrash (*Sifre Zuta* 12:1), Zipporah complains to Miriam that, since her husband Moses was chosen by God, he no longer sleeps with her. Miriam then consults with her brother, Aaron, and it turns out that, although they too have received Divine revelations, they—unlike Moses—did not separate themselves from their mates. Furthermore, they claim that Moses abstains to show that he is better than they are, and in Miriam’s view, Moses, rather than serving as a role model for observing the commandment to have children, abstains from conjugal joys out of pride.

Why did the Rabbis go along with Miriam in the case of Amram her father, yet punish her here? The Rabbis themselves ask this question. The answer has to do with R. Judah b. Levi’s saying: “Anyone who is so arrogant as to speak against one greater than himself causes the plagues to attack him. And if you do not believe this, look to the pious Miriam as a warning to all slanderers” (*Deut. Rabba* 6:9). In other words, one can stand for procreation as long as one does not attack the leader for not procreating! The leader is different! There are other criteria by which he is to be judged. Devorah Steinmetz argues that the Rabbis excused Moses from the commandment of “be fruitful and multiply”. They agreed that it was correct for him to dedicate himself totally to God; and that to be an effective leader he had to separate himself from the people (Steinmetz, 1988).

The Rabbis glorified Miriam when she asserted herself to defend the values of nurturance and motherhood, but disparaged her when she stepped out of line and spoke up to challenge Moses’ authority. While I was revising this last piece which would be published and republished as "Miriam, Guilty or Not Guilty" in various publications, I never stopped thinking or teaching about her. I wrote a poem, which later became part of

a triptych but this poem still carried the theme of bitterness and in fact was entitled “Miriam the Bitter” (Graetz, 2003a).

### **Miriam as a Redemptive Figure**

I wrote my first (and only) midrash in Hebrew about Miriam which I presented in April, 1999 to the Rabbinical Assembly [Conservative organization of rabbis] in Baltimore, entitled The "Barrenness" of Miriam. I wrote up the explanations about how I came to write it for the publication of my book *Unlocking the Garden* (Graetz, 2005) and at the Fourteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem gave it as a presentation entitled “Does God Love Barren Women?” This midrash came from a time when I started thinking of a Miriam who was more settled down and content.

The idea for this midrash came in the mid-nineties when I was sitting in our Conservative synagogue in Omer during the summer while a portion of the week mentioning Miriam was read. Since in our synagogue, we only read a triennial portion of the Torah (completing the Five Books of Moses in three years), I only thought of this once every three years! It was clear to me that one could extrapolate the barren and forsaken woman of the *haftara* and say that she was Miriam. Clear as this connection was to me, I was unable to find any rabbinical texts which made this connection or even hinted at it. So after searching over a period of five years, I grew impatient and had a click moment. I was a midrash writer, wasn't I? I had written many midrashim, so why not write my own! I decided to take the bold move of writing my own midrash to prove that this is why the rabbis chose the *haftara* and I wrote the midrash, originally in Hebrew, in the traditional rabbinic, archaic form. I later translated it into English in order to reach a wider audience. I spent about another five years perfecting this midrash, adding to it, and showing it to experts in classical midrash.

It was not only because of my insecurity in writing in Hebrew and in the traditional genre of rabbinic midrash that this rereading of Miriam was a turning point for me. It was part of my "growing up." It was on the day my mother died (May 27, 1999). That day I was sitting in the office of Avraham Holtz, professor of Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, going over the text with him for ideas and help in polishing the Hebrew. I had decided to publish it after the success of its presentation at the Rabbinical Assembly convention. But it took me a few years until I could get back to it—perhaps I associated it with my guilt in not being in Israel with my mother when she died.

The part of the text that intrigued me was that when Miriam spoke against Moses, God was incensed with Miriam. He withdrew his presence from her. She was cursed and shut out of the camp. For a relatively short moment God left her as the cloud withdrew from the tent and she was left with the scales of leprosy. When she is allowed back in the camp, after she is cured, God returns to her and she to Him. She is once more in favor. Was my identification with her partially because of my on-off relationship with my mother who had beaten me as a child? Was God my mother? Only recently when I have been doing some soul searching, in writing this article, has this thought occurred to me. With hindsight it is clear to me why at this juncture in my life I looked for a "happy ending" and for closure.

In the biblical text, Miriam is unmarried and childless. A major problem for the rabbis is that there is no closure for Miriam in the Bible. Giving her a happy ending is the background of their midrash and for my new reading of Miriam: Yes, God was angry at Miriam, but He takes her back. She overcomes the previous shame she felt when God disgraced her in front of the people, and the additional shame of her not being married. God will bring about this great change: the same Being who created her, who forsook her

temporarily, has returned [*teshuvah* in Hebrew] bringing His vast love. In my vision, the same God, who in anger hid His face from her in Numbers 12 is now taking her back and redeeming her. Miriam, who is associated with water, is united with the symbol of the people of Israel, when God promises her (and Israel) that the waters of Noah (or any catastrophe for that matter) will never destroy the earth again. God swears on this and creates a covenant of friendship with the people/Miriam—by giving her/them the promise of children, that is, a secure future. Thus in this new scenario, God's loyalty (*hesed*) to Miriam will no longer be in doubt. To prove this He takes her back with love and compassion (*rahamim*) which may also hint at the connection of opening of wombs (*rehem*). Procreation and the Davidic dynasty thus assure Miriam's/Israel's happiness and continuity.

My purpose was to create the missing midrash, that is, the one I am convinced exists. I am convinced that my midrash, based on biblical and midrashic tales, does not detract from the themes of reconciliation or from the allegory of marriage between God and his people. If anything it strengthens these themes by adding an additional dimension, another level to the allegory.

### **Essentializing Miriam**

When I wrote all this up there was one last issue that had to be addressed. For so many years, I had made it clear that the treatment of Miriam in rabbinic text is unfair. She got so many slaps in the face from the rabbis (when they associated her with gossip), not only from God. Was I guilty of reducing Miriam to her biological function, of de-emphasizing her prophetic and leadership abilities, of essentializing her by having Miriam ending up happily ever after with children? Surely this is the great sin, which we feminists have always been warned about!

Yet, as I grow older and less “bitter”, I recognize, without being apologetic, that in the context of biblical times, to be unmarried and childless means you have no status. By awarding Miriam a child (and the Messiah no less) we are fulfilling her in the biblical context. She not only gains a child, she is also the recipient of wisdom (*hokhma*). In solving the problem of the essentialization of Miriam, I decided to come to terms with the needs of the Jewish people and mine as a staunch Conservative Jewish woman. I am a strong believer in a women's right to control her own body. If I or one of my daughters every thought of having an abortion, I would be there for her.

As a feminist Jew in the twenty-first century who lives in Israel where there is a "demographic problem," I find myself using Miriam as a model for both leadership and continuity. It has been a truism to point to the diminishing birth rate of highly educated modern Jewish women. Seeing the importance of children and grandchildren to my own continuity, I think I can safely argue that one can be pro-natal, while not necessarily accepting that women be confined to their essentialist role. I stand in awe of the multiple roles that my two daughters and daughter-in-law do while simultaneously working, writing books, studying for the rabbinate, doing a doctorate, and raising children.

For the twenty five years that I have been writing midrash I have grown together with Miriam—from being the sometimes angry bitter rebel to being someone who is concerned with the future of the Jewish people. Being a grandmother gives one perspective. Strange isn't it?

**Conclusion:**

This is my Miriam. There are other women like her who were unappreciated in their lifetimes, but linger in our memory. Most recently I read of yet another Miriam, also a singer and inspiring leader, the great South African singer and civil rights activist, Miriam Makeba. This Grammy Award winning artist was often referred to as Mama

Afrika. She had many passports, and was an honorary citizen in many countries. After years of exile, Nelson Mandela persuaded her to come back to South Africa in 1990 where she died in 2008, mourned by multitudes. In contrast, our Miriam died, was mourned only for seven days by the people, and buried in an unmarked grave.

**Epilogue:**

*And so I find myself finishing this piece on August 16th 2006 two days after the cease-fire between Israel and the Hizballah. I have just finished reading the obituary about Uri Grossman, the son of David Grossman, the peace activist and novelist and in the same newspaper is the headline: "Knesset committee wants more married surrogates to carry babies for infertile couples". Without reading the article I am reminded of an August 9th headline in the Jerusalem Post (2006) by Yael Wolynetz, "Hundreds of soldiers sign over rights to sperm if they die" in which hundreds of soldiers nationwide have decided to sign biological wills, which determine the ownership of their frozen sperm before they go to battle. It reminds me of how important it is for Jews to have continuity. This is as essentialist as we can get as a nation—it is not only women who are concerned with pro-creating—in fact it is man's mitzvah. So I need not be apologetic about giving Miriam children and using her as a beacon for hope and continuity.*

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