

“MIRIAM TOOK HER TIMBREL OUT AND ALL THE WOMEN DANCED:” A MIDRASHIC MOTIF OF CONTEMPORARY JEWISH FEMINISM

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EMERGENCE OF THE MIRIAM ARCHETYPE IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LIFE

In Exodus 15:20, following Moses' Song at the Sea, we encounter an interesting passage: “*And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a drum in her hand; and all the women went out after her with drums, dancing.*”

Whereas Biblical tradition has tended to ignore, or at least minimize women's experience, here Torah provides a very clear description of a public women's celebration, led by Moses' older sister *Miriam Ha-Neviah*, Miriam the Prophetess.

This scene of women celebrating together with musical creativity, fervor and devotion has become a powerful image and rallying point for contemporary Jewish feminism. Over the past twenty-five years, Midrashic extrapolations of the Miriam motif have burgeoned within the North American Jewish community. Concomitant with the full empowerment of women as rabbis, teachers and ritual leaders, the motif of Miriam the Prophetess, a strong woman leader, teacher, healer and midwife, etc. has come to life in our times.

This image is finding expression in various forms of contemporary Midrash - poetry and music, ritual and liturgy, as well as in the visual and creative arts. As a case in point, twenty years ago the Passover Seder Miriam's Cup did not even exist. Today there are well over one hundred different types of Miriam's Cups available for purchase on the World Wide Web. Each year more and more Seder tables are incorporating a Miriam's Cup along with a brief ritual or liturgy welcoming *Miriam Ha-Neviah*. Similarly, a painted tambourine with images of Miriam leading women in euphoric dance has become a popular contemporary ritual object often given as a present to Bat Mitzvah girls. Miriam's image has begun to appear on painted *talitot*, and in children's books. Songs of Miriam are being included in Shabbat liturgy. And Miriam's Well Healing Services have entered Jewish life, frequently sponsored by mainstream Jewish Federations or Conservative synagogues.

Speaking in the terms of Jungian psychology, one could say the priestess archetype of *Miriam Ha-Neviah* is arising in contemporary Jewish consciousness, reflecting the re-birth and awakening of the feminine psyche.

In this article, I explore two contemporary Midrashim based upon the image of Miriam leading the women dancing in Exodus 15:20. These Midrashim, songs used liturgically in Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal communities, are: *Miriam - By the Shores* by Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael and *Miriam's Song* by Debbie Friedman.¹ *Miriam's Song* was written in 1988; *Miriam - By the Shores* was written in 1984. Besides being recorded on CDs, both Midrashim were published in *A Night of Questions - A Passover Haggadah*.²

I examine these two Midrashim against the background of traditional Midrash, highlighting differences between Rabbinic and contemporary Midrashic views of Miriam at the Red Sea. In addition, I delineate motifs found in these Midrashic songs, demonstrating how they reflect a new vision of Judaism emerging out of contemporary Jewish women's experience.

TWO CONTEMPORARY MIDRASHIM BASED UPON EXODUS 15:20

MIRIAM - BY THE SHORES

By the shores, by the shores,
Of the Red, Red Sea,
By the shores of the Red, Red Sea;
The light of day lit up the night
The children, they were free.

CHORUS:

And Miriam took her timbrel out and all the women danced. (2X)
Va'te-kach Miriam ha-nivea et ha-tof b'ya-da
Va'taytzeh-na col ha'nashim ah-cha-re-ha.

They danced, they danced
Oh, how they danced
They danced the night away
Clapped their hands and stamped their feet
With voices loud they praised.

They danced with joy

They danced with grace
They danced on nimble feet
Kicked up their heels, threw back their heads
Hypnotic with the beat.

CHORUS

They danced so hard, they danced so fast;
They danced with movement strong
Laughed and cried, brought out alive
They danced until the dawn.

Some carrying child, some baking bread
Weeping as they prayed
But when they heard the music start
They put their pain away.

CHORUS

Enticed to sing, drawn to move
Mesmerized by such emotion
The men saw us reach out our hands
Stretching across the ocean.

As they watched, and they clapped, they began to sway
Drawn to ride the wave
and all our brothers began to dance
They dance with us today!

They danced, we dance
Shechinah dance
They danced the night away
And all the people began to sing
We're singing 'til this day!!

FINAL CHORUS:

And Miriam took her timbrel out and all the people danced. (2X)
Va- te-kach Miriam ha-nivea et ha tof b'ya-da
Va'taytzeh-na col ha'nashim ah-cha- re-ha.

CODA:

*And the children were rockin' just as far as you could see,
By the shores, by the shores, my God, my God we were free.*

Lyrics and music by: Geela Rayzel Raphael
<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/rabbigr2>

MIRIAM'S SONG

CHORUS

*And the women dancing with their timbrels,
Followed Miriam as she sang her song,
Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,
Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long*

And Miriam was a weaver of unique variety
The tapestry she wove was one which sang our history.
With every strand and every thread she crafted her delight!
A woman touched with spirit, she dances toward the light

CHORUS

When Miriam stood upon the shores and gazed across the sea
The wonder of this miracle she soon came to believe.
Whoever thought the sea would part with an outstretched hand
And we would pass to freedom and march to the promised land!

CHORUS

And Miriam the prophet took her timbrel in her hand,
And all the women followed her just as she had planned,
And Miriam raised her voice in song-
She sang with praise and might
We've just lived through a miracle (yelled):
We're going to dance tonight!!

CHORUS

Lyrics and music by: Debbie Friedman
<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/dfriedman>

CONTEMPORARY MIDRASH VERSUS TRADITIONAL MIDRASH

Most apparent in these two contemporary Midrashim is the image of Miriam and the Hebrew women, liberated from Egyptian slavery, dancing and singing together in joyous celebration on the other side of the Red Sea. In Geela Rayzel Raphael's *Miriam - By the Shores* the depiction of women in near-ecstatic song and dance is poignant and compelling:

They danced, they danced
Oh, how they danced
They danced the night away
Clapped their hands and stamped their feet

With voices loud they praised.

They danced with joy
They danced with grace
They danced on nimble feet
Kicked up their heels, threw back their heads
Hypnotic with the beat.

A similar mood, accentuating women's collective celebration is intrinsic to the chorus of Debbie Friedman's *Miriam's Song*:

And the women dancing with their timbrels,
Followed Miriam as she sang her song,
Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,
Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long

In both Midrashim, Miriam is portrayed as a woman of power leading her Hebrew sisters in a victory dance and song. Interestingly, similar types of victory celebrations took place in ancient Mesopotamia when the priestess and her retinue of women composed songs of victory performed with accompanying dance and celebration³.

However, in exploring the traditional background underlying these contemporary Midrashim, it became glaringly obvious that for the men who composed Midrash and *parshanut* on Exodus 15:20, the image of Miriam and a group of women in sacred celebration at the Red Sea did not catch their attention - at all! In spite of what the Torah tells us, traditional Midrashic and homiletical texts, almost completely ignore the motif of women's collective, sacred celebration at the Red Sea, as if it never really happened.

TRADITIONAL MIDRASH AND PARSHANUT BASED UPON EXODUS 15:20

For Midrashic background to Exodus 15:20, I turned to three modern anthologies of Midrash - *Legends of the Jews*, edited by Louis Ginzberg⁴, *Sefer Ha-Agadah* edited by Bialik and Ravnitsky;⁵ and *Ishai HaTanakh*, published in English as *Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities*⁶. These collections are generally quite thorough in portraying composite pictures of Midrash through the ages. To my surprise, I discovered these anthologies had no Midrashim on Miriam's drumming and dancing at the Red Sea. Through further research⁷, I

came to see that the dearth of Midrash on Miriam at the Red Sea was, essentially, an accurate representation of traditional Rabbinic Midrash.

If Miriam and her drum leading the women in dance and song did not get the attention of the Rabbis, what did they find important in Exodus 15:20? We shall answer this question below after first presenting a collage of traditional Midrashic and homiletical texts based upon Exodus 15:20. Although not exhaustive, the material presented here is characteristic of how Rabbinic tradition and medieval *parshanut* reflected upon the Torah verse central to the Midrashic songs of Geela Rayzel Raphael and Debbie Friedman.

RABBINIC MIDRASH AND MEDIEVAL PARSHANUT BASED UPON EX. 15:20

‘Seven prophetesses’. Who were these? – Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther. ‘Miriam’, as it is written, And Miriam the prophetess the sister of Aaron. Was she only the sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses? – R. Nahman said in the name of Rab: [She was so called] because she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron [only] and said, My mother is destined to bear a son who will save Israel. When he was born the whole house was filled with light, and her father arose and kissed her on the head, saying, My daughter, thy prophecy has been fulfilled. But when they threw him into the river her father arose and tapped her on the head, saying, Daughter, where is thy prophecy? So it is written, And his sister stood afar off to know; (Exodus 2:4) to know, [that is,] what would be with the latter part of her prophecy. (Babylonian Talmud Megila 14a)

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took etc. The ‘sister of Aaron’ and not the sister of Moses! – R. Amram said in the name of Rab, and according to others it was R. Nahman who said in the name of Rab: It teaches that she prophesied while she yet was the sister of Aaron only. (Babylonian Talmud Sota 12b)

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand (Exodus 15:20): Aaron’s sister and not Moses’ sister? But because Aaron showed special devotion to her, she was called after him. (Genesis Rabbah 80:10)

Aharhel [Lit. ‘a perfect man.’] is Miriam: and why was she thus called? Because: And all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. (Exodus Rabbah 1:17)

And his sister stood far off (Exodus 2:4). Why did Miriam stand afar off? R. Amram in the name of Rab said: Because Miriam prophesied, ‘My mother is

destined to give birth to a son who will save Israel'; and when the house was flooded with light at the birth of Moses, her father arose and kissed her head and said: 'My daughter, thy prophecy has been fulfilled.' This is the meaning of: "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel" (Ex. 15:20); "The sister of Aaron", but not of Moses?- [She is so called] because in fact she said this prophecy when she was yet only the sister of Aaron, Moses not having been born yet. Now that she was casting him into the river, her mother struck her on the head, saying: 'My daughter, what about thy prophecy?' This is why it says: *And his sister stood far off* to know what would be the outcome of her prophecy. The Rabbis interpreted the whole verse as referring to the Holy Spirit.' *And she stood*, hinting at And the Lord came, and stood (I Samuel 3:10) His *sister*, hinting at: "Say unto wisdom: Thou art my sister (Proverbs 7:4). *From after* hinting at: From afar the Lord appeared unto me (Jeremiah 31:3). *To know what would be done to him*, hinting at: For the Lord is a God of Knowledge (I Samuel 2:3). (Exodus Rabbah 1:22)

Miriam the prophetess. And when did she prophesy? When she was still only Aaron's sister. Before Moses was born, she said: "My mother is going to bear a son who will save Israel (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b). Another reading: She is called Aaron's sister because he risked his life for her when she became leprous. A Timbrel. This is a kind of instrument. *In dance with timbrels.* The righteous women of that generation were so confident that God would perform a miracle for them that they brought timbrels with them from Egypt. (Rashi on Exodus 15:20)

Aaron's sister. In my opinion, since Moses and Miriam were both mentioned in connection with the song, the text wished to mention Aaron as well. Connecting his sister the prophetess with him does him honor, especially since he too was a prophet and holy to the Lord. It may also be a result of the tendency for Biblical verses to identify family members by their relationship to the eldest brother; see also I Chronicles 2:42, where Caleb is identified as "brother of Jerahmeel," the eldest brother according to I Chronicles 2:9. (Ramban on Exodus 15:20)

TRADITIONAL MIDRASH AND PARSHANUT ON EXODUS 15:20 - COMMENTARY

Apparent from a reading of these texts is the obvious contrast with the Midrashim of Geela Rayzel Raphael and Debbie Friedman. Whereas the contemporary Midrashic renditions envision the joyous elation of women singing and dancing on the other side of the Red Sea, by contrast, traditional Midrash pays little attention to the community of women, to the creation of "women's space." The texts presented focus almost exclusively on two distinct

phrases in the Torah text: *Ahot Aharon*, Aaron's sister, and *Miriam Ha-Neviah*, Miriam the Prophetess.

In the first case, Miriam is important, not in her own right, but by virtue of her brother Aaron (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b; Exodus Rabbah 1:22; Rashi on Exodus 15:20; Ramban on Exodus 15:20).

The second phrase highlighted by traditional commentators is *Miriam Ha-Neviah*, Miriam as Prophetess. No doubt a great deal can be said on this topic, (though beyond the purview of this article). However, briefly, Miriam is said to be one of seven prophetesses, according to Talmudic Aggadah; the other prophetesses being Sarah, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther (Babylonian Talmud Megila 14a).

In only one place do we find even a hint of recognition of the group experience of women's voices and bodies celebrating together to the sound of Miriam's drum. First, commenting on the word *tof* Rashi (on Exodus 15:20) writes: "*Tof/Timbrel*. This is a kind of instrument." He then continues: "*B'tupim u'vmakhalot/In dance with timbrels*. The righteous women of that generation were so confident that God would perform a miracle for them that they brought timbrels with them from Egypt."⁸ That's it!

The only thing traditional commentators had to say about this textual image of Miriam and the Hebrew women dancing and singing together is that these women were confident God would manifest a miracle at the Red Sea. The Midrash makes this story about God and pays no attention to the experience of the women's voices and bodies in ecstatic celebration. Yes, the women danced! But the Rabbis hardly noticed!

ADDITIONAL MOTIFS IN CONTEMPORARY MIDRASH ON EXODUS 15:20

SINGING, DANCING AND BAKING MATZAH

By way of contrast with traditional Midrash, in the contemporary works of Raphael and Friedman, the image that emerges most overtly is of women singing and dancing together. In *Miriam - By the Shores* there is an interesting elaboration on this motif:

Some carrying child, some baking bread
Weeping as they prayed
But when they heard the music start

They put their pain away.

Along with song and dance, women at the Red Sea continue to do “the stuff of life”. Engaged in the never-ending activities of raising children and feeding families, women continue to serve G!d and create sacred rituals through drum, dance and song. And more, as the line “they put their pain away” indicates: even if over centuries women experienced a great deal of pain through oppression and the vicissitudes of life, in joyous singing and ecstatic dance there is a palliation if not a complete elimination of life’s pains.

Additionally: the image of the women baking bread creatively picks up on the motif of Passover as found in Exodus 12:39:

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not remain, neither had they prepared for themselves provision.

As the Passover story highlights, in haste of departure from Egypt, freed Hebrew slaves baked unleavened bread - hence the origins of *Matzah*. But rarely do we consider who did the baking. According to Raphael, those women dancing to the beat of *Tof Miriam* were the same ones standing over the fire pit, baking bread for the escaping Israelites.

PROPHECY

Another traditional Midrashic motif that surfaces in contemporary Midrash is that of prophecy. In *Miriam’s Song* Debbie Friedman writes:

And Miriam the prophet took her timbrel in her hand,
And all the women followed her just as she had planned

These verses amplify a traditional Midrash which Rashi presents, based upon the *Mekhlilta*, describing how “the righteous women of that generation were so confident that God would perform a miracle for them that they brought timbrels with them from Egypt.”⁹ Debbie Friedman’s lyrical nuances suggest *Miriam Ha-Neviah* prophesied that she and the women would be celebrating with the sacred sounds of the beating drum at the Red Sea.

MIRIAM - A WEAVER OF DIVINE TAPESTRY

There are two other Biblical motifs integrated into *Miriam’s Song*: In the very first verse Debbie Friedman expounds upon the theme of Miriam as a weaver of tapestry:

And Miriam was a weaver of unique variety
The tapestry she wove was one which sang our history.
With every strand and every thread she crafted her delight!
A woman touched with spirit, she dances toward the light

This is a motif found in Exodus, where it is said women wove curtains for the Mishkan, the wandering Tabernacle of the Sinai desert:

And all the women who were wise hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen. And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom spun goats' hair. (Exodus 35:25-26)

G!D'S OUTSTRETCHED HAND AT THE RED SEA

The other Biblical image conveyed in *Miriam's Song* is in the phrase: "Whoever thought the sea would part with an outstretched hand?" This is an echo of Exodus 14:27 which describes how Moses miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea: "Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea" causing the waters to part.

THE RABBINIC PROOF TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY MIDRASH

Although sometimes subtle, it is clear that the both Friedman and Raphael, two of the more prolific *paytaniot* of our times, have done their textual "homework" in crafting their Midrashic music. In *Miriam - By The Shores*, Geela Rayzel Raphael cleverly uses the Biblical verse - "*Va'te-kach Miriam ha-nivea et ha-tof b'ya-da, Va'taytzeh-na col ha'nashim ah-cha-re-ha*" as part of the song's chorus. Replicating the style found in Rabbinic Midrash and liturgy, this verse serves as both a Midrashic proof text and liturgical *hatimah* - a summarizing verse - on her song.

MEN AND WOMEN DANCING TOGETHER IN HOLY CELEBRATION

Yet another image of note is found in *Miriam - By The Shores*. Towards the end of her Midrashic song Raphael writes of the men joining the women in dancing. This is certainly not in any way a motif of traditional Midrash:

Enticed to sing, drawn to move
Mesmerized by such emotion
The men saw us reach out our hands
Stretching across the ocean.

As they watched, and they clapped, they began to sway
Drawn to ride the wave
and all our brothers began to dance
They dance with us today!

Whereas “first wave feminism” spoke predominantly to women, and emphasized the challenges of women’s experience in the 1960s and 1970s, over time men were influenced and often inspired to support the clarion call of feminism, in general, and feminist Judaism in particular. In the original version of *Miriam - By The Shores* these two verses were not included. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, in a conversation with Geela Rayzel Raphael, noted how the freed Israelite men at the Red Sea would have wanted to celebrate in victory with Miriam and the women. In response to Waskow’s suggestion, Raphael added these two verses, reflecting a new image of Jewish men and women celebrating and worshiping G!d together as allies and friends. This image reflects a new vision of the Jewish life in which supportive men and powerful women collaborate and co-participate in the divine service and in the collective transformation of Judaism.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS - DANCING WITH *SHECHINAH*

On the whole, these two contemporary Midrashim do not contain extensive G!d language. These are not songs that wrestle with issues of G!d language, nor with the relationship between humanity and divinity. However, at the very end of her Midrash, Raphael presents a theological statement in writing:

They danced, we dance
Shechinah dance
They danced the night away
And all the people began to sing
We’re singing 'til this day!!

In ending her song, Geela Rayzel Raphael sees the women at the Red Sea singing and dancing together, in the presence of the indwelling G!d, *Shechinah*. The theological statement made here is this: where women celebrate together, there *Shechinah* - G!d in full glory - is manifest. It is this image of divinity, so characteristic of contemporary Midrash as a whole, which defines feminist-inspired Judaism in the twenty-first century.

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- ¹ Debbie Friedman died January 9, 2011, at the age of 59. In recognition of her contribution as one of the most important figures in contemporary Jewish music, the Reform movement's cantorial school has been renamed in her memory as the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.
- ² Joy Levitt and Michael Strassfeld, eds. *A Night of Questions - A Passover Haggadah*, (Elkins Park, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 2000).
- ³ I thank Rabbi Jill Hammer for this insight. See also Richard D. Patterson, "Victory at Sea: Prose and Poetry in Exodus 14-15" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (January-March 2004) 42-54.
- ⁴ Louis Ginzberg, (Ed), *Legends of the Jews*, Trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia, Pa: Jewish Publication Society, 2003).
- ⁵ Hayim Naahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends - Sefer Aggadah*. Trans. William G. Braude. (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).
- ⁶ Yishai Chasidah, *Ishai HaTanakh - Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities* (Brooklyn, NY: Shaar Press, 1994).
- ⁷ M. Friedman (Ed), *Otzar HaMidrashim*, Vol. 2: *Sefer Shemot*. (Israel: Tiferet Bakhurim, n.d.), Ex. 15:20.
- ⁸ Michael Carasik (Ed), *The Commentator's Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society) Ex. 15:20.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*