

MIRIAM'S JOURNEY IN TEXT AND MUSIC

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INTRODUCTION

We picture Miriam as a vibrant and joyful dancer, tambourine in hand. Miriam embodies confidence—even exuberance—in redemption, and not only at the Reed Sea. Even in her youth, she followed her conscience in refusing to obey Pharaoh,¹ and she spoke prophetic words to her father, inspiring him to change his behavior. Yet this image of Miriam may not be self-evident; reflecting on the arc of her life, Miriam surely experienced much anxiety, doubt, even bitterness.² Yes, in her youth she displays strength, confidence, and clarity of vision, and steps fully into her prophetic character at the Song of the Sea. But at other times, she is rebuffed by those more powerful, and made

to question whether she is a prophet after all. From Miriam we learn that we might be lucky enough to achieve glimpses of clarity and vision—but life in between those moments can be murky, filled with myriad experiences that dampen our dreams and cloud our vision. Hanging on to our confidence requires inner strength through disappointment, even—and especially—the disappointment of those who matter most to us.

In recent decades, many have taken on the custom to dedicate a meal during or before Pesah to celebrate Miriam. Inspired by this practice, we've created a mixed-media textual and musical meditation on her story. You

can use this piece to anchor your own celebration of Miriam, playing or singing each song as you learn and discuss each textual vignette. Or, you could take some time for yourself to read and reflect through music along the way. Through this exploration of Miriam's journey and its reception in text and music, we hope to bring to life the vibrancy of fleeting moments of inner clarity—in her youth and old age—and also to linger on the decades of doubt and uncertainty that filled most of her life.

Vatikach Miriam

Text: Exodus 15:20, 14:29

Music: R. Ariel Root Wolpe



We first encounter Miriam as “נביאה - prophet,” as depicted at the Song of the Sea. R. Ariel Root Wolpe’s *Vatikach Miriam* takes us on a musical journey from Miriam’s singular leadership, to her leadership of the women, and eventually her leadership of all Benei Yisrael. The song begins with a female voice—representing Miriam—declaring to the Divine, “With songs on our lips I will rush into the water.” With this invocation, the singular voice sings “וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֶחָד מִיָּדָהּ תִּמְבֵּל” - and Miriam the Prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand,” and as this first half of the verse repeats, a second and then third voice join, representing Miriam’s journey into a prophecy that begins to stretch beyond the self. We hear her leadership grow as a large group of women’s voices join on the second half, “וַתֵּצֵאן כָּל־” - and all the women went after her dancing with timbrels.” Eventually we hear male voices join on, “וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵלְכוּ בִּיבֶשֶׁת” - and Benei Yisrael went forth onto dry land into the Sea,” as Israelites of all genders joined her in song, solidifying her role as a leader of the full community. Although myriad voices join, support, and harmonize with Miriam over time, R. Wolpe’s setting concludes with the singular voice once more, a reminder that Miriam’s journey into leadership required her to tap into her own singular voice, even amidst the voices of those in her midst.

1 According to the midrashic tradition that Miriam and her mother were the midwives named in the Torah as Shifrah and Puah (see Sifrei Bemidbar #78; Talmud Bavli Sotah 11b).

2 In a recent essay, R. Wendy Zierler brings to the surface numerous traditions that reveal the centrality of bitterness and conflict in Miriam’s life. See “Re-encountering Miriam,” available at: thetorah.com/article/re-encountering-miriam

A SLAP IN THE FACE, TAKE 1: PARENTAL CRITIQUE

A midrashic tradition teaches that at a young age Miriam prophesied Moses' birth, telling her father he would be the forebear of a savior of Israel.³ He believes her enough to try and her mother conceives, but her father only expresses affirmation upon the first demonstrable evidence that the child is special. When the baby is born and their house fills miraculously with light, Miriam's father kisses her head saying, "Your prophecy was fulfilled!"⁴ One can imagine the sense of pride felt by a young Miriam, with the sensation of her father's kiss as a concrete manifestation of his belief in her prophecy. Yet, when the baby can no longer be hidden and is about to be cast into the Nile, Miriam suffers the sting of rebuke—either a verbal or physical slap⁵—as her father mocks her saying, "Miriam, where is your prophecy?"

With these words he casts upon Miriam the shadow of self-doubt. Perhaps she goes to watch Moses because she can't bear to go home knowing the pain she has caused her parents. Perhaps she cannot face her father without the baby. Miriam here embodies the feeling we might have when our naive optimism is punctured. But Miriam doesn't give up easily; *midrashim* see her following her mother to the Nile as an act not of desperation but of resoluteness. She "holds onto her prophecy," in the words of the *midrash*,⁶ and goes to stand by baby Moses in his ark upon the water.

As the plot swerves, it is hard to know when Miriam may have felt confidence or relief, and when she may have sunk into doubt. She manages to get baby Moses home for a few years as her mother nurses him, only for him to be abducted into the palace, her family hearing nothing of him for decades. The *midrash* does not describe Miriam's father kissing her again, nor affirming her prophecy after Moses is placed in the Nile. We may imagine that she believes her father is right, and that his mocking voice echoes endless-

ly in her ears: "Miriam, where is your prophecy?" The initial triumph of winning her father's approval morphs into despair at his lingering disapproval.

The sting of her father's verbal and/or physical slap may bring her to doubt whether she is a visionary or a fraud, perhaps even until the very moment of redemption. The Talmud (Sotah 12a) describes Miriam's life as one of bitterness (based on the root מ.ד.ה.⁷) and attributes to her two states: "חלילה נ" - she was ill and she was a youth." Perhaps this "illness" refers to her lifelong anxiety and self-doubt.⁸ In this reading, Miriam is a "suffering servant," abused by her father and doubted by those around her.

Another midrashic rendering of Miriam's first prophecy ends in her mother's disappointment:

מדרש משלי יד

וכיוון שהשליכוהו לניאור, עמדה
אמה וטפחה על ראשה, אמרה לה:
היכן נבואתך?

Midrash Mishlei 14

When they threw him in the river, her mother stood and she slapped her on the head, saying to her, "Where is your prophecy?"

At first glance, this may seem like a trivial adjustment, her mother's rebuke replacing her father's. Yet this change is significant; we might have thought (based on the patriarchal familial structure) of Miriam's mother as an encouraging figure, even while the father expresses anger. The mother's rebuff, in place of or in addition to the father's, is even more intense.

The switch from father to mother also introduces an ambiguity in this *midrash*, which opens up an entirely different emotional valence. Since the pronouns for both subject and object are feminine—"she slapped her"—the possibility arises that they are one and the same. Indeed, some rabbinic sources use this same idiom reflexive-

ly, to speak of women who slap themselves in the face.⁹ It seems to have been a known practice that women would slap their own heads out of desperation, as an outlet for emotional release (perhaps akin to "banging one's head against a wall").

If we interpret the *midrash* this way, Miriam witnesses her mother's despair as she casts the baby into the Nile and slaps her own head. She says "Miriam, where is your prophecy?" as an expression of her own desperation and pain, rather than mockery and rebuke of her daughter. Instead of the sting of her father's slap, Miriam lives with the imprint of her mother's pain. Though not physically bruising, this internal guilt may be no less difficult to bear. Miriam learns that an unfulfilled prophecy can inflict great pain upon those she loves most dearly.

3 See Mekhilta Massekhta de-Shirah 10.

4 Talmud Bavli Sotah 13a.

5 The Mekhilta imagines a verbal rebuke (נודך בזה), while the Bavli replaces this with a physical slap to the head (וטפחה על ראשה).

6 From the Mekhilta referenced in note 3 above.

7 See also *Pesikta Zutra* 15:20, and a discussion of this material in Zierler, "Re-encountering Miriam."

8 Rashi understands the Talmud as referring here to a later period in her life when she suffered the "illness" of *tzara'at* in Bemidbar 12. According to Rashi's reading, "youth" here would refer to the restoration of her skin in the conclusion of that story.

9 See Tosafot Bava Kama 91b, s.v. *ela hai tanna*: ואור"י דאין מביא ראיה אלא שאסור לחבול אפי' לצורך כגון אשה שטפחה על ראשה.

Mi Yiten Li Ever

Text: Psalm 55:7-9

Music: R. Miriam Margles



While we have explored Miriam's internal pain, laden with plagues of self-doubt, R. Miriam Margles explores the desire to escape from these plagues, deeply embedded in the human condition. The stormy winds of tragedy and hardship push even the strongest leaders to dream of escape. R. Miriam Margles' haunting setting of Psalm 55:7-9 explores the desire to fly away, like a dove to a place of refuge, to a wilderness beyond the present lived experience. The wistful desire for escape articulated in this verse is nestled within a psalm of true anxiety, fear, and tumult. "My heart is convulsed within me" says the Psalmist, "fear and trembling invade me" (Psalm 55:5-6). These words are directed at God, giving voice to a sense of loss and abandonment growing into uncertainty and anxiety. A lone voice—expressing the profound loneliness of uncertainty—sings this beautiful, simple melody, accompanied by a distant harmony, perhaps expressing the sense that this experience is universal. However distant, there is potential for kinship and comfort in this knowledge, and an opportunity to connect with even the ancestors of our tradition.

FROM SLAP TO SONG

When Benei Yisrael cross the Sea, Miriam erupts in song as her prophecy finally comes true. She morphs back into the young girl who believed in the clarity of her vision and shared it proudly (in the language of the Talmud above, she is restored to "נערה - youth"). As an old woman, she again embodies and experiences the vision of her youth.¹⁰

By some accounts, Miriam's song is actually the primary song, while Moses' song is secondary.¹¹ This idea reflects

that it was Miriam who first anticipated the moment of redemption, telling her parents to have another child, and she who instructs the people to sing when her prophecy finally comes to fruition. On the surface, it is a song about the redemption of the people but, looking at this moment through the lens of her parents' disappointment, it is also the moment when her own reputation is restored—the very moment in which she is called "Miriam the Prophet" (Ex-

odus 15:20). Perhaps this acknowledgment reflects her self-perception; after more than 80 years, she finally has a conclusive response to her parents' pointed accusations. She finally understands that she is, in fact, a person of clear prophetic vision.

Miriam HaNeviah

Text: R. Leila Gal Berner

Music: R. Deborah Sacks Mintz



Recognition of Miriam's prophecy is a multi-generational process, one that began in her own lifetime and continues to this day. It takes Miriam a full 80 years to truly perceive herself as a prophet—and this perception has continued to evolve and deepen through *midrash*, poetry, and song with each subsequent generation of women in Jewish leadership. R. Leila Gal Berner's late-twentieth-century poem expands upon existing classical texts to raise up Miriam as a leader who shall repair the world through "מי הישועה - the waters of redemption," and who will ultimately strengthen the world's song. R. Deborah Sacks Mintz continues this process with a new melody for R. Berner's poem, recorded entirely by women rabbis and musical-spiritual leaders. This ongoing process of Miriam's actualization is one facet of the ever-flowing waters of redemption; we hope to see women leaders add new layers of creative understanding—"במהרה בימינו" - quickly, in our days."

¹⁰ Miriam is not described explicitly in the Torah as being an old woman at the time of the Exodus, but this is deduced from calculations based on other data. Moses died at 120 after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Therefore, when Benei Yisrael left Egypt, Moses was 80 years old. Miriam, being Moses' older sibling, must have been older than 80 when she sang at the Sea.

¹¹ See Zierler, "Re-encountering Miriam." She refers to R. Dr. David Frankel's essay "The Song of the Sea and the History of Ancient Israel and Judah."

A SLAP IN THE FACE, TAKE 2: GOD'S CRITIQUE

Miriam's moment of clarity at the Sea after so many decades of doubt is not the end of the story. In a painful epilogue, she suffers another "slap in the face" when God rebukes her for speaking ill of Moses and Zipporah. There God specifically compares Miriam's circumstances to "her father spitting in her face" (Bemidbar 12:14). It must be so painful for her to hear these words, which bring to mind the episode of her father's slap. Miriam lived most of her life with the shame of her father's doubt, and now none other than God has criticized her, causing her to question her integrity as a prophet once

again. While other biblical prophets overcome their self-doubt through direct interaction with God,¹² God never reassures Miriam about her anxieties. Instead, her interaction with God aggravates her insecurity, returning her to a state of bitterness.

The rabbinic versions of Miriam's parents' reactions may come to push back on this extended shaming of Miriam. Perhaps God's comment to Miriam about a father who would spit in her face is actually the source for the invention in the *midrash* of her father's rebuke, in which he is ignorant of the power of Miriam's prophecy. Perhaps

this rejection of her father's rebuke in the *midrash* also implies a rejection of God's parallel rebuke of Miriam in the biblical text. Why would God diminish Miriam's prophetic role when her prophecy precedes that of Moses by many years? Perhaps our Rabbis mean to redeem and value Miriam's prophetic role more fully through the implication that God's rebuke, like her own father's, should not lead us to underestimate the power of her vision.

We Are Good, We Are Flawed

Text and Music: Batya Levine



The voices in our midst that cause self-doubt and internal strife can be loud, powerful, and debilitating—even when they come unintentionally from those trying to support us. In Miriam's rebuke by God, through our midrashic lens, we see hints of awareness that God was perhaps mistaken, that this rebuke deeply affected and damaged Miriam's internal self-perception and affected her ability to source the internal strength to lead. If even divine goodness is limited in this way—enabling God to cause pain with misplaced words—then what of our own? Batya Levine's *We Are Good, We Are Flawed* invites us to understand our own mistakes and misguided actions in connection to God's since, after all, "we are the breath of an imperfect God." The song goes beyond simply giving us permission to be kinder to ourselves; it juxtaposes human beings with the almighty Divine, highlighting both our limits and our potential. If God's words can cause harm, all the more so can ours; if God's words can heal, empower, and comfort, what tremendous power and potential our own words must hold.

DREAMING AGAINST ALL ODDS

Reflecting on Miriam's full life experience—and not just the role she plays in very specific and short-lived prophetic moments—we recognize more clearly the harder, darker aspects of dreaming; glimpses of clarity might occur only in far-flung moments, the smallest fraction of our lives.

In light of midrashic traditions about Miriam, this verse about age and prophecy takes on a different meaning:

יואל ג:א
וְהָיָה אֲמַרְיֵבן אֶשְׁפּוֹף אֶת־רוּחִי
עַל־כָּל־בָּשָׂר וְנִבְאוּ בְנֵיכֶם וּבָנוּתֵיכֶם
זְקֵנֵיכֶם חֲלֹמוֹת יְחַלְמוּן בְּחוּרֵיכֶם
חֲזִינֹת יֵרָאוּ:

Yoel 3:1

After that, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

A traditional interpretation of this verse understands the youth and the elderly as extreme cases: in the future **even** they shall prophesy [among all Israel]. An alternative interpretation, based on our reading of Miriam's story, holds that the youth and elderly are in fact especially poised to achieve clarity of vision. In youth and in old age, people are less influenced by what others think, less prone to abandon a dream

that others dismiss or criticize. In between these two life stages, we spend much of our lives dominated by other people's doubts, internalizing self-doubt, losing clarity, and questioning the viability of our dreams. We might wonder, like Miriam, whether our youthful visions are only traps leading to disappointment and resentment.

Miriam's journey poses sharp questions for us today: What (or who) shuts down our dreaming? How might we reclaim it? How might we overcome the doubt and disapproval that shadows so much of our adult lives? How might we stay strong in a world that so often feels like a slap in the face, asking us

12 E.g. Moses, in Exodus 3.

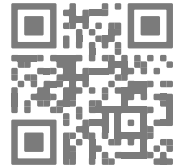
mockingly, “What happened to your prophecy?” Miriam beckons us to hold on to our dreams both in our brief mo-

ments of clarity and in our lifetime of uncertainty.

By the Waters of Babylon (Psalm 137))

Text: Based on Psalm 137

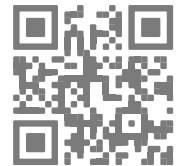
Music: Joey Weisenberg



Shir Hama'alot (Psalm 126)

Text: Psalm 126

Music: Joey Weisenberg



Miriam's journey through both the lightness and darkness of dreaming—the hopefulness and hopelessness—is mirrored in the dissonance between Psalms 137 and 126. These psalms are emblematic of the manner in which dreams can be motivating and hopeful, or painful and disheartening. Joey Weisenberg's *By The Waters of Babylon* tells of one of the darkest moments in the Jewish story, and the hardship of dreaming of a broken and forgotten world. The *niggun* that serves as the chorus of this setting of Psalm 137 is at once a song and a wail, capturing the beauty and pain embedded in this dark dream. We juxtapose this with Weisenberg's *Shir Hama'alot*, a setting of Psalm 126 that magnifies the hazy, open-hearted, hopeful beauty of being “נחולמים - like dreamers” through lush vocal harmonies and the electrifying sound wash of lap steel and guitar. These two songs, by the same composer, illustrate the extremes of the human experience—exile and redemption—through the extremes of dreams.

CONCLUSION

Our exploration of Miriam's journey leaves us with an image of life as a bridge or tunnel with light or certainty at either end, but darkness, fragility, and fear in between. As Miriam invites us to honor the clarity of vision in our youth and to hope for clarity in old age, her experience also demonstrates that we spend most of our lives in a state of

uncertainty. Miriam offers us fortitude, conviction in our own prophetic vision, even if others—even our parents, even God—would have us doubt ourselves. Her story can inspire us to offer others comfort and empowerment—just as her father's kiss strengthened her prophetic compass. Let us aspire to strengthen one another's dreams,

rather than shut each other down, so that we might live to see a world where not only the young and the old dream dreams, but clarity of vision illuminates and inspires throughout our lifetimes.

Gesher

Text: Rebbe Nahman of Breslov¹³

Music: R. Yosef Goldman



The journey of Miriam's prophecy is one of standing precariously on a bridge, traveling from one unknown to the next, finding strength amidst uncertainty. Rebbe Nahman reminds us not to be afraid while on this bridge, despite the lifelong challenges we face. R. Yosef Goldman's *Gesher* brings to life Rebbe Nahman's call through a layering of strings, keys, vocal harmonies, and percussion, all the while maintaining a steady pace, as we walk along this very narrow bridge. Fear and doubt along life's journey can be crushing and debilitating, yet Miriam's journey reminds us that the “עיקר - fundamental grounding essence,” is to not let that fear overwhelm us, to keep us from becoming who we are destined to become.

13 Based on Likutei Moharan II:48.