

Parashat Shemot, 5778, 2018:

Who Was Miriam?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

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, since the Torah teaches us that they were the pivotal figures in bringing *Yetziat Mitzraim* (the Departure from Egypt) to its celebrated fulfillment. Miriam’s role in this divine drama, however, was no less remarkable.

The prophet Michah publicizes Miriam’s fundamental involvement in the Exodus when he declares: “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) expand upon Michah’s words, and emphasize Miriam’s unique contribution to the Generation of the Desert:

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.” (*Talmud Bavli, Ta’anit* 9a, translation my own)

How did Miriam rise to this level? *Chazal* teach us that Miriam’s prophetic gifts were revealed during her youth. Rashi (1040-1105) presents this concept in his commentary on

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 found in *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 12b, 13a)

Miriam’s prophecy was the reason why Amram, Miriam’s father, remarried her mother, Yocheved. The Torah states: “A man of the house of Levi [Amram] went and married a daughter of Levi [Yocheved].” (*Sefer Shemot* 2:1) Rashi on our verse, provides us with the following explanation:

[Prior to this time,] he [Amram] separated himself from her [i.e. divorced Yocheved] because of Pharaoh’s decree [to murder all male Jewish babies]. This is the meaning of “went,” that he followed [literally, he went after] his daughter’s advice. [Based upon her prophetic insight Miriam] declared: “Your decree is harsher than Pharaoh’s. Whereas Pharaoh issued a decree [only] against the males, you [issued a decree] against the females as well [for none will be born if everyone follows you and divorces their wives!]” (*Sefer Shemot* 2:1, underlining and brackets my own)

As a result of Miriam’s prophesy-based challenge to her father to guarantee the future of the Jewish people, Amram and Yocheved were reunited and Moshe was born.

It seems that Miriam understood Moshe’s future role as leader better than anyone else.

Therefore, 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 must not

be underestimated. As we have already seen, Moshe would never have existed without Miriam. Moreover, as the above passage intimates, without Miriam's divinely inspired intervention, Moshe would not have survived, either physically or spiritually, to become the leader of *klal yisrael* (the Jewish people). This idea is proposed by my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993, known as "the Rav" by his students and followers):

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. (*Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, 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 join her in singing *Shirat Hayam* at the Sea of Reeds? The answer to this question is really two-fold. One answer is found in the Aramaic translation/explanation (*Targum*) of *Michah 6:4*: "And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam;" herein the Targum explains, "... and Miriam to teach the women." As the teacher of all Jewish women of her time, Miriam was the *ba'alat hamesorah* (the Mistress of the Torah and its traditions). Little wonder, then, that the Jewish women followed her in giving fervent praise to Hashem for the wonders and miracles He performed at the Sea of Reeds.

The Rav provides a second, and quite novel explanation as to why the women followed Miriam in singing *Shirat Hayam*:

Yetziat 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*, 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 [of] to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov... (Unpublished public lecture on Parashat Shemot; December 30, 1980, this, and the following transcriptions my own)

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

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* to the *m'yaldot*. *V'ya'ash 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 significant of the two *m'yaldot* and the more important leader. In his view, when the Torah describes her as “the Prophetess,” it thereby teaches us the extraordinary role Miriam played regarding the Exodus:

If not for her, perhaps, *Yetziat 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 truly appreciate Miriam’s role as a great prophetess, consummate educator, and leader of our people in Egypt. As such, the entire nation honored and respected her.

May Miriam’s Torah leadership and spiritual bravery once again serve as beacons of truth and light, and may they help bring the *geulah shlaimah* (the Final Redemption) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.