Women of Spirit and Song: Miriam and Deborah as Poets and Prophetesses in Biblical and Rabbinic Text

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Introduction

Women of the Bible are typically depicted as wives, mothers and daughters. In these traditional female roles, biblical women are able to make a significant contribution to the continuity of the Israelite people. The Bible honors them and recognizes their significance to Israel's society and history. However, there are a few women in the Bible who emerge in unconventional roles of independence and power. Among these women are those that are identified as prophets or prophetesses (*neviah*). While the Bible reports the existence of hundreds of potential male prophets, there are only four named female prophets, making them noteworthy. The Bible explicitly names Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah. What did these women do that earned them the title *neviah*?

A prophet's primary role is to "serve as a channel of communication between the human and Divine worlds."[1] Prophets serve as representatives of God, speaking God's word to the rest of the community. Several places in the Bible explain what a prophet's function is. In Exodus 4, speaking to Moses about Aaron, God says, "You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him" (Exodus 4:15-16; JPS translation). Later, in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses reports the words of Adonai, saying "I will raise up a prophet for them from among their own people like yourself: I will put My words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command and he will speak to them all that I command him; and if anybody fails to heed the words he speaks in My name, I Myself will call him to account" (Deuteronomy 18:18-19; JPS translation). In Jeremiah, we see one example of God calling to a prophet, explaining his role, and their relationship. "The word of Adonai came to me: Because I created you in the

[1] Leila L. Bronner. "Biblical Prophetesses Through Rabbinic Lenses." *Judaism* 40.2 (Spring 1991), 172.

womb, I selected you…I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations….And Adonai said to me: Do not say, 'I am still a boy,' but go wherever I send you and speak whatever I command you. Have no fear of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares Adonai. Adonai put out Adonai's hand and touched my mouth, and Adonai said to me: Herewith I put My words into your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:4-9; JPS translation).[2]

From these examples we can learn that a prophet is summoned by God, called to serve the Israelites on God's behalf. The prophet must speak the words given to him or her by God, telling the Israelites all that God has commanded. Yet, while the prophets are required to share God's words, their individuality is not suppressed. These men and women remain distinct, each with a unique personality that emerges from the biblical texts. Generally, the prophets are authoritative, charismatic figures leaders of the community, serving as role models for how to live a life of holiness and connectedness to God. Each of the examples above refers of a male prophet; one may therefore ask: do these criteria and patterns also apply to female prophets? To understand the role of female prophets (prophetesses), we must look more carefully at the role each of these women played in the Bible. When referring to these biblical women I use the terms prophet and prophetess interchangeably, understanding the Hebrew *navi* and *neviah* to be only a gender difference, not a difference in function.

Before turning to the named prophetesses, let us first examine the anonymous *neviah* of Isaiah 8:3. Isaiah says, "I drew near the prophetess and she conceived and she

[2] Deuteronomy 18:20-22 also describes how to tell the difference between a true prophet and a "false prophet. One can tell if a prophet is false if he or she speaks in the name of God, offering a prophecy that does not come true (Deuteronomy 18:22). This passage also notes that if a prophet speak in God's name a command which God did not give or speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet will die (Deuteronomy 18:20). Jeremiah 28:15-17 tells of one example of a false prophet, untruthfully claiming to speak as God's representative.

bore a son; and Adonai said to me, 'Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz'" (Isaiah 8:3; my translation). There is nothing in this verse indicating that this woman had a relationship with God, or served as God's representative. There is no suggestion that God spoke to her, or that she spoke on behalf of God to any individual or to the community. Contrasting this woman to other prophetesses, Susan Ackerman writes,

"Unlike these women, Isaiah's wife did not engage in a typical prophetic ministry, making proclamations about matters of public interest and participating directly in public affairs. Rather, the sole action attributed to Isaiah's wife is a domestically based enterprise in which almost all ancient Israelite women engaged: conceiving by her husband and bearing their child."[3] She also is the only woman called a *neviah* without being named, setting her further apart from the other female prophetesses. Ackerman explains that giving a woman a name in the Bible implies authority. Conversely, the namelessness of Isaiah's wife "suggests relative powerlessness."[4] Therefore, it is more likely that this label was an honorific title, given to her as a result of her marriage to the prophet Isaiah, and she should not be characterized in the same manner as other prophetesses.

Huldah's story appears twice within the Bible, in 2 Kings 22:13-20 and again (with essentially the same story) in 2 chronicles 34:21-28. King Josiah sends his men to see Huldah, a *neviah*, to validate the scroll that has been found. He says, "Go and seek out Adonai on my behalf and on behalf of the people and on behalf of all Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that was found" (2 Kings 22:13; my translation). What is in this scroll is unknown except that it is called "*sefer torah*", but Josiah is

[3] Susan Ackerman. "Why is Miriam Also Among the Prophets?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121.1 (2002), 49.
[4] Ackerman, 49.

concerned that his people have not behaved in accordance with this Divine word and will face retribution.

Therefore, Josiah's men went to Huldah for guidance and prophecy. We are told, "And Hilkiahu the priest and Ahikam and Achbor and Shaphan and Assiah went to Huldah the prophetess, wife of Shallum son of Tikvah son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe and she sat in Jerusalem in the second quarter and they spoke to her" (2 Kings 22:14; my translation). Huldah is described as both a prophetess (*neviah*), and as the wife of Shallum, the keeper of the wardrobe. Ackerman explains that neither the position "keeper of the wardrobe" nor this particular Shallum are ever referred to again in the Bible. Thus, we are unable to determine exactly what Shallum's place in society was, and what the position keeper of the wardrobe meant in this culture. It is likely that this position merited some rank and status, and that Shallum was a member of the society's upper class. Ackerman writes, "Women who are a part of this kind of upper-class household may, by virtue of the power available to their families, be accorded opportunities to exert power as individuals, even if they live during a time when the overall possibilities for women's exercise of power are constrained."[5] Athalya Brenner suggests that the details given to Huldah's husband are included to "lend her words authority and credibility."[6]

Huldah may have been allowed greater power in the community due to her husband's position and her class. However, Claudia Camp argues that although Huldah is identified by her husband's name, "such a formal convention does not detract from her

[5] Ackerman, 59.
[6] Athalya Brenner. *The Israelite Woman.* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 59.

own royally recognized authority to speak in the name of YHWH."[7] In fact, Huldah does speak on behalf of Adonai, and King Josiah and his men recognize that she is a spokeswoman for God. King Josiah tells them to "Go and seek out Adonai" (2 Kings 22:13; 2 Chronicles 34:21), acknowledging that Huldah is a symbol of Adonai's presence and voice.

It is interesting to note that the men sent to have the prophet validate the scroll are not troubled by the fact that she is a woman. Nor are the narrators of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles surprised that this prophet was Huldah. Brenner remarks that the choice of the prophet in these verses is odd. "Why not seek God's counsel from Jeremiah or Zephaniah, both prophetically active at the time, rather than an otherwise unknown woman?"[8] Perhaps Huldah was more respected than her colleagues. Or maybe the King, knowing that Jeremiah often spoke badly of the government, knew what he would say, and hoped that Huldah would have a better vision for him, even though she did not.[9] Possibly other prophets were unavailable, or maybe she was the most suitable person for this job and the most authoritative.

The fact that she was a woman does not pose a concern for the figures of the Bible. She functions in her prophetic role, authenticating the scroll, speaking for God, and prophesying what will happen in the future. On God's behalf, Huldah conveys a message to King Josiah—"Behold I am bringing evil on this place and on its inhabitants, all the words of the book that the king of Judah read" (2 Kings 22:16; my translation). Huldah delivers an unfavorable message (although with some personal assurances for the

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[7] Claudia Camp. "Huldah." *Women in Scripture.* Carol Meyers, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 96.
[8] Brenner (1985), 59.
[9] Tikva Frymer-Kensky. *Reading the Women of the Bible.* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 325.

king himself), foreseeing the destruction of Jerusalem, and setting in motion Josiah's religious reforms. Part of these reforms included cult centralization, eliminating the shrines and "high places" of the Judean countryside and bringing all of the priests to Jerusalem. Ackerman explains that Huldah disappears from the Bible as soon as the descriptions of these reforms begin. She writes that centralization is "detrimental for women who seek to assume power within their society. Huldah may have vanished from the tradition at precisely the moment Josiah's reforms begin, because Josiah's program of increasing centralization and institutionalization made it difficult and perhaps impossible for her to maintain her position of prophetic authority."[10]

Even if Huldah may have been unable to remain in a position of power, she was unquestionably a pivotal figure. Her validation of the scroll is what Camp calls "the first recognizable act in the long process of canon formation. Huldah authenticates a document as being God's word, thereby affording it the sanctity required for establishing a text as authoritative, or canonical."[11] According to many contemporary scholars, the scroll of the Torah (*sefer hatorah*) that Huldah authenticates is the book of Deuteronomy, which would mean that the book is part of Scripture as a result of Huldah's words. Her role as *neviah* can be compared to the descriptions of prophets given above: serving as God's representative, speaking to a greater community; she offers predications of what the future will hold for the Israelites; and is recognized as being a symbol for God's presence. However, whereas many male prophets faced resistance when they delivered God's messages to kings, Huldahs' words are heeded immediately. The king and the community do not question either her message or authority to speak for God.

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[10] Ackerman, 59.
[11] Camp, 96.

Unlike Huldah, whose story appears twice and as a story, Noadiah is mentioned only once (Nehemiah 6:14). During Nehemiah's attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem during the fifth century BCE, various individuals and groups, opposed and hindered this project (Nehemiah 1-7). Despite this supposed opposition, Nehemiah was ultimately successful in restoring the walls. Since this book is written from Nehemiah's perspective, we are unable to determine how accurate his account of this resistance is. Brenner suggests that it is likely "exaggerated so as to enhance the impact of his achievement."[12] Nehemiah lived at a time of social unrest, at least in part due to hunger and debt (Nehemiah 5:1-5). There was also significant tension between Nehemiah and leaders of neighboring communities. Nehemiah believed that his enemies were spreading the rumor that Nehemiah has hired prophets proclaiming him king over Judah, and that they also had hired a false prophet to lure him into a trap (Nehemiah 6:7, 10-13). Perhaps out of frustration and anger, Nehemiah cries out, "O my God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, these deeds of theirs and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who have been intimidating me!" (Nehemiah 6:14; my translation).

Noadiah is the only prophet, except for Shemaiah, mentioned by name at this point. From this, Brenner concludes that she was the leader of Nehemiah's political foes, or at least the prophets that he accuses of intimidation, and that she was likely an important, politically powerful figure.[13] Tamara Eskenazi writes that "Context implies that she too had high status. Like the other prominent opponents in this verse (Tobiah and Sanballat), she could have opposed his building of the walls of Jerusalem."[14]

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[12] Brenner (1985), 60.
[13] Brenner (1985), 60-61.
[14] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi. "Noadiah." *Women in Scripture.* Carol Meyers, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 132.

However, nothing further is known about this woman. Eskenazi notes that it is likely she was from Judah, otherwise Nehemiah would have called her a foreigner in order to discredit her further.[15] Her background, deeds, character and history are a mystery. It is unclear what she has done to warrant the title *neviah*. Ackerman suggests that Noadiah prophetic ministry serve as an example of the power women could assume in destabilized society.[16] Although we know next to nothing about her, Nehemiah acknowledged her leadership abilities when he called her a *neviah*, and remarked that he was able to be intimidated by her. Was this intimidation a result of her status as spokeswoman for God? Although this is unclear from the text, it is clear, based on this verse, that in the postexilic era, as well as before, women were recognized as prophetesses, serving in role of divinely inspired leadership.

While the Bible only mentions five prophetesses, the Talmud names seven. "Who were the seven prophetesses? Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, Esther."[17] Miriam, Deborah and Huldah are included based on the fact that they are called prophetesses in the Bible. For the rabbis, the definition of prophecy is not as clear-cut as it is in the Bible. A variety of functions and characteristics is attributed to these women that they called prophetesses. Some of these women engaged in religious instruction or prayer; others (according to the rabbis) were able to foresee the future; some spoke to God; and others take great risks to ensure the survival of the Israelites. Sarah, the rabbis claimed, was speaking with God and giving advice to Abraham. Hannah was considered a prophetess because she predicted the future in her song; and Abigail also foretold the future in a way that helped David. Esther, according to the

[15] Eskenazi (2000). 132.
[16] Ackerman, 57.
[17] Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14b

rabbis, had a prophetic spirit was gave her strength and enabled her to save her people. While she might not have spoken to God, or foretold the future, she was an important person who redeemed her people.[18] The rabbis were, in general, uncomfortable, with the notion of female leadership. They praised the actions of women when it involved holy work, but were critical when they saw the women becoming too powerful outside the home. As we will see with Miriam and Deborah, the rabbis often reshaped these women's actions, interpreting them so that they fit their own theological, cultural and societal understandings.

Miriam and Deborah are two women called prophetesses in the Bible whose activities are described in some detail. These women have more in common than just the title *neviah*, they also are poets: The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 is attributed to Deborah, while a few verses of *Shirat Ha-yam* in Exodus 15 are credited to Miriam. These women serve as leaders of the community with grace, compassion and charisma. Yet neither leads alone, each of them serving alongside a male counterpart; Deborah with Barak, and Miriam with Moses. This paper seeks to explore Miriam and Deborah in depth, examining who they were as women in their time, what it meant that they were prophetesses, and how we might understand their songs. Through a careful analysis of the biblical material and rabbinic illustration of these two women I will attempt to uncover their voices, and discover Miriam and Deborah as prophets and poets.

This paper examines the significance of these prophetesses by examining biblical and rabbinic texts in order to determine how these women are depicted in each of these bodies of literature. I have divided the paper into four chapters, two devoted to Miriam and two focused on Deborah. "Chapter One: Miriam in the Bible" is further divided into

[18] Bronner (1991), 182-183.

six parts, representing the six places Miriam appears in the biblical text that I analyze (Exodus 2, Exodus 15, Numbers 12, Numbers 20, Deuteronomy 24, and Micah 6). Using exegetical methods of studying genre, literary setting and intention, I seek to discover what role Miriam played in each of these section, and what it meant that she was a prophetess. "Chapter Two: Miriam in Rabbinic Texts" provides a survey of representative rabbinic material in a attempt to understand how the rabbis viewed Miriam. "Chapter Three: Deborah in the Bible" parallels the first chapter, and is likewise divided into two parts: the first studying Deborah in Judges 4; and the second uncovering the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. "Chapter 4: Deborah in Rabbinic Texts" follows the model of Chapter Two, and provides an illustration of Deborah in representative rabbinic literature. Finally, in the concluding section, I compare and contrast Miriam and Deborah, detailing the many ways these two women have been linked together.

Chapter One: Miriam in the Bible

Part 1: Miriam in Exodus 2

Genre

Exodus 2 opens with the announcement of a marriage and a birth. It tells the story of a child's first days and months; and the story of who is responsible for determining his future. Exodus 2:1-10 is generally considered to be an infancy narrative. These kinds of narratives trace the lives of important people back to their birth. The typical format includes an account of a marriage, pregnancy and a birth. Within the telling of the birth and the beginning of the child's life, unique circumstances are emphasized, often highlighting God's role in the life of this person who will be so significant.[19]

1 Samuel 1-3 is one such infancy narrative: detailing the pregnancy, birth and early years of Samuel. These chapters emphasize the miracle of his birth, and his profound connection to God that culminates with God's call to him. The most well-known example, outside Jewish tradition is the infancy narrative of Jesus in Luke 1-2. In these chapters, as in 1 Samuel, we are introduced to the mother first. The pregnancy is announced, and is in some way miraculous. We are told of the birth of the baby, and then given details of how he lived his early years.

For both Samuel and Jesus, it is apparent that their births are the results of exceptional, God-inspired circumstances. Can the same be said about the infancy narrative of Moses? His story is unusual, perhaps even extraordinary, but it does not fit entirely with these other infancy narratives. The required elements are certainly found

[19] Irmtraud Fisher. *Women Who Wrestled with God.* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005) 121.

within these verses—there is an announcement of marriage, pregnancy and birth. In contrast with the above stories, God is not mentioned once is the Exodus 2 narrative. While God may be working behind the scenes, it is the women's life-saving actions that are emphasized. They are the ones who resist Pharaoh's decree, initiating the Israelite redemption. This story can be labeled an infancy narrative, but it is more about the women who help to make this infant's life a reality.

Some scholars view these opening verses of Exodus 2 as an "abandoned hero motif." He is, in fact, placed in a basket and set along the Nile River, seemingly abandoned. This beginning to his life appears to fit the characteristic motif that is found in the stories about births of heroes.[20] A famous example from Greek mythology can be found in the story of Oedipus' birth. His father, Laius, heard a prophecy that his son would kill him. Fearing for his life, Laius pierces Oedipus' feet and leaves him to die, exposed on Mount Cithaeron. However, a herdsman finds him and gives him to Polybus, King of Corinth. The king and his wife raise Oedipus as their own child, and he grows up unaware that he was adopted.

A similar tale in classical literature tells the story of Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of the city of Rome. This legend explains that Amulius, desirous of the kingship which belonged to Numitor dethroned the king and ordered Rhea Sylvia, his daughter, to become a Vestal Virgin, a priestess sworn to abstinence. However, she became pregnant, and Amulius, furious and terrified that these children would one day try to overthrow him, ordered Rhea Sylvia and the twins to be killed. However, the servant ordered to kill the twins was unable to do so, thinking they were too innocent to

[20] Nahum Sarna. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus.* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. 1991) 267.

be murdered, so he placed them in a basket on the Tiber River and left them. The basket eventually washed ashore where they were found, and nursed by a she-wolf until they were discovered by Faustulus, a shepherd for Amulius. The shepherd brought the boys home where he and his wife raised the twins as their own sons.

Another example of an abandoned hero is Sargon of Accad, a famous Akkadian king, known for his conquests of Sumerian city-states in the 24th and 23rd centuries BCE. According to a mid-seventh century Assyrian biography, Sargon was a self-made man, whose mother was a priestess, not allowed to have children, so she had this child in secret. He did not know his father. His mother put him in a "vessel of reeds...cast (him) into the river." According to this tale the water drawer found him took him in and raised him.[21]

In many respects, Moses fits into this genre. He too was abandoned, exposed on the Nile River, taken in by strangers, raised by the Pharaoh's daughter, until it is time for his destiny to be fulfilled, for him to lead the Israelites. However, there are striking differences in the story of Moses' birth that cannot be ignored. He, unlike those in the other examples, is not born into a royal family. His family was enslaved and oppressed. He is not abandoned because a relative is concerned that he might be overthrown by this child. Moses is one of many male Hebrew baby ordered murdered by Pharaoh, although this edict was issued out of fear of the Israelites, and their increase in number and power. Moses is separated from his family out of their deep love and concern for him. He is not exposed on the river to be killed, but placed lovingly and tenderly in a protective basket and watched over protectively. Unlike the others, he is never truly separated from them. His adopted mother knows that he is a Hebrew child, and allows his mother to be a part

[21] William H.C. Propp. *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18.* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). 155.

of his life as a baby. Knowing who he is, she allows him to grow up, although she might continue to hide his true identity.

The figures surrounding Moses' birth are all women. We first hear about the two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, who risk their lives to save these Hebrew babies. Then "a Levite woman conceived and bore a son" (Exodus 2:1-2). She also risks her life to hide her child until she could hide him no longer. It is only then that she placed him in a basket and sets him on the river. The child's sister anxiously watches over her brother, making sure that he was taken care of, relieved that the Pharaoh's daughter rescues him and takes him in, agreeing to let the unnamed sister bring a nursemaid, the child's mother, to take care of the baby. All of these strong women play the significant, crucial role in the survival of this child.

Moses certainly is presented as an abandoned baby and his story may fit in with the abandoned hero motif. But this version of the motif concentrates on the roles of women, their resistance to oppression, their life-creating and their life-saving skills, rather than on how these events relate to Moses' qualifications and who he becomes later in his life.

Literary Setting

The beginning of the book of Exodus presents a very different picture of the conditions of the Israelites than the one they found themselves in at the end of Genesis. When Genesis concluded, the Israelites were living in Canaan—the land that God had guided Abraham to—and their social groups were made up of close-knit families. Joseph had just been reunited with his family and was living a life of luxury in a high position in

Egypt. His story serves as a transition between the patriarchal narratives and the Exodus.[22] Joseph is sold by his jealous brothers into slavery and ends up in Egypt. Using his talents, he works his way into the good graces of Pharaoh and a high position in the royal court. When famine breaks out in Canaan, the rest of his family joins him there in order to preserve their lives.

When the book of Exodus begins, the Israelites find themselves in an entirely different position. The current Pharaoh is unaware of Joseph and his position (Exodus 1:8). The Israelites are considered a group of immigrant refugees, living in a land that is not their own, and thought of as a threat to the ruler. However, part of God's promise to the patriarchs has been fulfilled: the Israelites are indeed a great nation (Exodus 1:7). In this foreign land they have been fertile and have increased, much to the dismay of Pharaoh. It is the second part of the promise—that Israel will possess the land of Canaan—that now must be satisfied and the realization of this will consume the rest of the Torah.

While the first chapter of Exodus can be considered a transition from Genesis, together with the second chapter it serves as a prologue to the exodus from Egypt. These chapters set the stage, explaining why conditions have worsened for the Israelites, why Pharaoh's anxiety over this foreign nation living in his land increased. Then they introduce us to the man who will rescue these people from their oppressed lives. With every hero, it is necessary to have a remarkable birth story.

Exodus 2:1-10 is surrounded by descriptions of the Israelites' oppression. Both before this section and after, we are told of the cruelty imposed upon these people, the labor they were forced to endure. For just a few verses, this description comes to a halt,

[22] Fischer, 113.

and we are told about the birth of Moses. No information about his childhood is given. We meet him in his infancy, as he is hidden then set in a basket on the Nile River and rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter with the collaboration of Moses' sister and mother. Nothing further is told of this child until we encounter him again, fully grown, a man with a conscience who cannot endure the sight of an Egyptian beating a Hebrew (Exodus 2:11-12).

Perhaps the narrators and redactors of the Torah considered it unnecessary to include any more information about the life of Moses. Who he was as a child was unimportant; it is who he will become as a leader of the Israelites that is more significant. The snapshots of his life that are included before he takes on this role of leader serve to illustrate why he is the man that God called—he was chosen from birth to be the hero, and endowed with the qualities and the morals that were needed to serve God and the Israelites.

In addition to looking at Moses within this setting, we must consider where his sister is found within these verses. The unnamed sister, thought by most to be Miriam,[23] is located in the middle of two other women. She is introduced after the child's mother gives birth to the baby and places him on the Nile. We read, "His sister stationed herself at a distance to know what would happen to him" (Exodus 2:4). The story continues with Pharaoh's daughter discovering the baby in the basket, "When she opened it and she saw the child and behold, the boy was crying. And she had compassion for him and she said, 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children'" (Exodus 2:6). This first appearance of Moses' sister comes literally in the middle of these two strong-willed, independent

[23] *The JPS Torah Commentary*, and *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, both note that this sister is Miriam. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L Weiss, ed. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. (New York: URJ Press, 2008).

women. Phyllis Trible, in her article "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadow" suggests that this position makes Miriam their mediator, giving her an active role in shaping the destiny of her brother.[24]

Intention

Exodus 2:1-10 is generally analyzed in terms of Moses and his birth. We examine where this child came from in order to understand the man and the leader that he became. Interpreters study his birth, evaluate his abandonment and look for evidence of God's presence or of his uniqueness. The other figures found within these verses are often overlooked in many studies. Based on the language of the birth announcement (Exodus 2:1-2) one might assume that Moses is the first born child to the family in Exodus 2. However, we learn in verse 4 that, if fact, this child had an older sister. Typically in the Bible there is less significance given to the birth of daughters than there is to the birth of sons. In the Genesis narratives, this is especially true, due to the fact that the son will fulfill God's promise to the patriarchs.[25] In fact there are only two similar birth accounts of daughters. There first one is hardly an "account" but rather an "announcement" in Genesis 30:21, with tells of the birth of Dinah, the daughter of Leah, "And afterwards she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah." This announcement comes at the end of a long list in which the rest of Leah's sons are born and named and their meaning explained. Hosea 1:6 also announces the birth of a daughter to Hosea. However, neither of these verses provides the detail surrounding the child's birth and

[24] Phyllis Trible. "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows." *Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Athalya Brenner, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 167-168.
[25] Jopie Siebert-Hommes. "But if she be a Daughter...She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2." *Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Athalya Brenner, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 62.

infancy in the way that Exodus describes the beginning of Moses' life. In birth, just as in life, Miriam remains in the background, allowing her brother to be the star. As Phyllis Trible writes the birth announcement "effect the elevation of Moses at the expense of his sister."[26]

This quiet introduction presents us with Moses' sister, yet in this section she remains unnamed. Can we even be sure that this young sister is the Miriam that leads the women in song as the Israelites cross the Red Sea? There are no other references to any other sister of Moses anywhere in the Torah. Although scholars frequently comment on her anonymity in Exodus 2, most would agree that it is indeed Miriam. It is necessary to ask, then, why not give her a name in this section? Even though Miriam's role is crucial in this section (as will be further discussed below), the Biblical narrators may have wanted to emphasize Moses in these verses, rather than his sister. If we look closely at the text, we can discover that in fact, Moses is the only person given a name in these ten verses. And he is not named until verse ten. We might infer from this that the names are so much less important in this section than the action that is occurring. Ironically, names are significant in so many in the Torah. Names often describe who a person is, his or her characteristics, and qualities; they describes the circumstances in which children came into the world or the hopes their parents have for them; sometimes these stories indicate a deep relationship or encounter with God. So despite the deep meaning that names have throughout the Bible, Exodus 2 is purposely devoid of any names. The narrator makes it impossible to interpret a person's character based on his/her name. Readers must simply investigate the actions and analyze the roles that characters are playing to understand who they are.

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[26] Trible, 168.

Moses' sister is first described as "stationed at a distance" (Exodus 2:4). It is logical to assume that she stood *merahok* in order to know what would happen to her brother. Looking at the verse in this light, we can understand her as protective and nurturing. Her family depends on her for information regarding the fate of the baby. Yet she is called "his sister" not their daughter. And despite some later interpretations nothing indicates that she was sent out to watch over him. On the contrary, the self-reflexive verb (*v'tetatzav*) makes it clear that she is responsible for her action. Miriam might have possessed all of these characteristics, however, by not giving her a name, the text further keeps her at a distance. We are not allowed to know much about this young girl. We can make our assumptions, draw our conclusions, but she is given no description. Siebert-Hommes suggests that a better translation for the word *merahok* might be "afar off." This translation indicts the qualitative separation, rather than the quantitative separation.[27]

While Exodus 1 begins with a list of names, this section contains only the name of Moses. Irmtraud Fischer explains, in her book, *Women Who Wrestled with God,* that this "story of oppression is not about individual persons identifiable by name; it is about typical characters located according to their social position within the family."[28] The daughter of Levi is included along with the daughter of Pharaoh to describe how they both become mothers of this future leader, while his sister stands by the family during a crisis. She continues, "It may be that the persons in the action have no names because liberation from the house of slavery in Egypt belongs to the fundamentals of Israel's credo. Thus Deuteronomy repeatedly emphasizes the actualizing *we*....The namelessness of the victims and the resisters eases the identification of later generations with them: *We*

[27] Siebert-Hommes, 69.
[28] Fischer, 120.

were oppressed, and YHWH has delivered us."[29] Moses' sister, and his mothers may go unnamed in these verses, but the exodus story owes a great deal to these women. These independent women, who risked their lives to save another, deserve some recognition for their role in history.

Moses' sister may not have a name, and her participation may have been discreet but her actions determine her brother's future. Far from the passive observer she is often described as, Miriam's action has significant consequence. In Exodus 2:4 we read, "And his sister stationed herself (*v'tetatzav*) a distance to know what would happen to him." This verb is in the hitpael, self-reflexive form, indicating that Miriam stationed herself by the side of the river to know what would happen to her brother. She was not sent by either of her parents, but took the initiative on her own to watch over her baby brother, showing devotion and resourcefulness.

She is first presented as quietly watching, simply wishing to know what will happen to her brother. Perhaps she wants to make sure that he is protected and well taken care of. But in the next two verses, it becomes clear that Miriam is moving closer to the action. She is not just a bystander—she is willing to take a risk for the benefit of her brother and her family. She approaches Pharaoh's daughter saying, "Should I go and call for you a woman to nurse from the Hebrew woman and she will nurse for you the child?" (Exodus 2:7). Not only does Miriam come forward to speak with this royal daughter, but she makes suggestions about how the boy might be best cared for. Phyllis Trible explains, "By putting the phrase 'for you' immediately after the verbs *call* and *nurse*, the sister expresses solicitude and offers servitude. She also shapes the future by defining the

[29] Fischer, 120.

need of Pharaoh's daughter to secure a Hebrew nurse."[30] It is possible to surmise, based on Exodus 2:7-10, that the sister is the one who plants the idea of adoption in Pharaoh's daughter's mind. The princess has compassion for the child, but does not know yet what she will do with him. The sister is the one who suggests that the princess is able to keep this baby for herself, and the sister will help make arrangements for his care.

Given permission by the Pharaoh's daughter, the sister went to get the child's mother. In this verse (Exodus 2:8) she is no longer referred to as *achoto, his sister* but called *almah, a young woman*. She has taken charge of the situation, assuring that her brother will be well-cared for, and not separated from his family. Because of this independence, she is rewarded with a distinct description of who she is, no longer simply associated with this baby. It is interesting to note that she is not called Moses' sister once in the book of Exodus. She is referred to as Aaron's sister (Exodus 15:20, Numbers 26:59, I Chronicles 5:29), but it is not until the book of Numbers that she is once again called Moses' sister (Numbers 26:59, I Chronicles 5:29). Perhaps she had fulfilled her sisterly duty to him in his infancy. She assured that he was taken care of, she helped to shape his destiny, and then she was allowed to have an identity separate from his.

The women at the beginning of Exodus are given a significant role. Whether they are named, as the midwives are, or unnamed (i.e., the Levite woman, daughter of Pharaoh and sister) each plays a large part in the how the future of the Israelites plays out. J. Cheryl Exum suggests that the purpose of these verses are to serve "as a kind of compensation for the fact that women are not given a role in the bulk of the account of the exodus and the wanderings." [31] Using this reasoning we can understand that if they

[30] Trible, 168.
[31] Exum, 85.

are given an important role in the prologue to the exodus and in shaping the destiny of the Israelite's leader then perhaps their later lack of participation will not matter as much. I am unconvinced that the Biblical redactors were so concerned about the lack of female presence in the rest of the exodus story that they purposely included this section in order to give a greater voice to the women.

A further understanding as to the reason why women are allowed to play such an important role in these chapters is that "God (behind the scenes, in this case) uses the weak and lowly to overcome the strong and powerful. The inferior, but clever, women successfully defy the powerful Egyptian pharaoh. I prefer not to view these women as "weak and lowly" or "inferior," though clearly in this setting, in this era, they were not considered equal to men. However, these women are portrayed smart, determined and compassionate. This section tells the story of a birth. It is logical that women would be the primary characters in a section devoted to the creation of a life. Although this explanation places women back in their traditional roles, these verses show us that even in these roles women are able to behave in untraditional ways. They are the ones whose actions are celebrated and who are granted status in the early chapters of Exodus. They disobey Pharaoh's commands; they protect the future hero; and because of the actions of these brave women the Israelites escape enslavement in Egypt and are led to the Promised Land.

Based on this first encounter with Moses' sister, we cannot be sure why she is later called a prophetess. It is clear from this introduction that she is devoted to her baby brother, that she is a strong, independent woman, and that she will, along with her brother

help to lead her people. Perhaps her aid in this chapter, and how it impacts the future, is part of why she is one of a few women designed *neviah* in the Bible.

Part 2: Miriam in Exodus 15

Genre

Shirat Ha-Yam, the Song of the Sea, is considered by most to be a victory song, one that was first sung by Moses and the Israelites after God redeemed them from Egypt, and then miraculously parted the sea for them, rescuing them again from the Egyptians who were pursuing them. Today, as we chant these verses of Torah in our synagogues, we stand as a congregation, respecting and sharing in the gratitude our ancestors must have felt in that moment. We call the Shabbat we read this portion *Shabbat Shirah*, the Shabbat of the Song, giving it a special title and honor. This song certainly was sung at a momentous moment. And the Exodus story itself is a significant part of our Jewish communal memory. However, it is necessary to examine this song in greater detail in order to understand it beyond an emotional reaction.

There has been much discussion among Biblical scholars with regard to who these verses should be attributed to, the original order of the song, and whether Moses or Miriam composed the entire Song of the Sea. I will examine these possibilities in detail and draw conclusions below.

All twenty-one verses of *Shirat Ha-yam* celebrate the victory. However, the two verses that are specifically attributed to Miriam can be looked at on their own as well. In Exodus 15:20-21 we read, "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam answered them, "Sing to Adonai for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and its

rider He has cast into the sea" (my translation).[32] As Rita Burns writes in her book, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?* "Battle was a common phenomenon in the ancient Near Eastern word and, like its neighbors, Israel knew the experience well. It was, no doubt common for the victors to celebrate their success."[33] Judges 11:34 provides a similar example of women coming out to celebrate a victory with music and dancing. "When Jephthah arrived at his home in Mizpah, there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with timbrel and dance!" (JPS translation). When David returned, successful after a battle with the Philistine, we read about a similar celebration in 1 Samuel 18:6-7. "When the [troops] came home [and] David returned from killing the Philistine, the women of all the towns of Israel came out singing and dancing to greet King Saul with timbrels, shouting, and sistrums. The women sand as they danced, and they chanted: Saul has slain his thousands; David his tens of thousands" (JPS translation). In each of these examples, the celebration belongs to women and includes music and dancing. The Exodus and the 1 Samuel examples also include a two-line chant exalting the victor. However, as Burns explains, there is a crucial difference in Miriam's celebration. She is honoring Adonai with her celebration as opposed to a captivating warrior who leads the Israelites.[34]

Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes suggests that Miriam's victory song contains "the formal characteristics of a hymn."[35] These characteristics include the invitation to praise, descriptions of Adonai's character or great doings, followed by the explanation as to why

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[32] I generally do not refer to Adonai as "He." However, in this case, it is awkward to repeat "Adonai three times in one verse, and in Exodus 15:3 God is envisioned as a male warrior, so it is more logical to use the translation "He" in this instance.
[33] Rita Burns. *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1980), 16.
[34] Burns, 17.
[35] FokkelienVan Dijk-Hemmes. "Some Recent Views on the Presentation of the Song of Miriam." *Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Athalya Brenner, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 205.

one should sing out to Adonai. "Divine exaltation" is considered its own genre within ancient Near Eastern Literature, and this entire song, lauding God's saving power, detailing the miracles of salvation and exuding gratitude, certainly falls into this category.[36] Burns explains that it is important to understand the hymnic characteristics in Miriam's song because her song, unlike the one found in 1 Samuel or Judges, is cultic in nature. "Miriam's playing of the timbrel, like her dance and song, must not be viewed as an empty or arbitrarily chosen joy-filled gesture, but as ritual to accompany the life-creating and life-sustaining action of the Divine Warrior...on Israel's behalf."[37] This is more than simply another example of a woman going out to greet victorious warriors. Rather, every one of Miriam's actions described in this victory song has ritualistic intent.

In addition to honoring God, the Song of the Sea summarizes the exodus narrative. The poem assumes that the reader has read the narrative, and does not go into detail about each of the occurrences. Rather, it provides an overview of what happened and focuses on celebrating God's role in each of these events. This format is not unique, but found as well in the Book of Judges, chapters 4 and 5, within the story and song of Deborah. This type of literature is also evident in Egyptian sources where we find two accounts of one event—one told in poetry and the other in prose.[38]

Taken individually, there are many pieces of this song that can be compared with other texts. However, as a whole, "this poem cannot be made to fit a single form. It is not comparable to any one psalm, or song or hymn or liturgy known to us anywhere else

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[36] Gunther W. Plaut, ed. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. (New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005), 452.
[37] Burns, 39.
[38] Sarna, 74.

in the OT or in ANE literature. It is...a poem of mixed type."[39] This should hardly surprise us, since it is a song motivated by a unique, extraordinary occurrence that happened only once in Israel's history.

Miriam's two line chant praises God through song, with women joining her with dance and timbrels. Similar examples of celebrating God with music and dance can be found in other biblical literature, including Psalms. Psalms 81:2-3 instructs us to "Sing joyously to God, our strength; raise a shout for the God of Jacob. Take up the song, sound the timbrel, the melodious lyre and harp (JPS translation). Psalm 150 tells us to use many different instruments in our praise of God. "Praise God with blasts of the horn; praise God with harp and lyre. Praise God with timbrel and dance; praise God with lute and pipe (Psalm 150:3-4; JPS translation).

Miriam's words in Exodus 15:20-21 can also be compared to the words of other prophets in the Bible. Isaiah frequently used poetic language to praise God, to celebrate God's miraculous words, and to incite the fervor of the Israelites. Isaiah says, "Adonai goes forth like a warrior, Like a fighter He whips of His rage, He yells, He roars aloud, he charges upon His enemies" (Isaiah 42:13; JPS translation). Like Miriam, and the Song of the Sea, Isaiah depicts Adonai as a warrior, heroically defeating enemies. Miriam is called *neviah* for the first time in Exodus 15:20. Perhaps, using this prophetic, poetic language, extolling God as praiseworthy and powerful, now puts Miriam in the category of prophets.

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[39] John I. Durham. *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 3: Exodus*. (Waco: Word Books, 1987). 203.

Literary Setting

This dramatic song is found in the portion entitled *Beshallach*. In this portion the Israelites escape Egypt is chronicled. We witness their transition from enslavement to freedom; from the sea to dry land; they are hungry, exhausted, frustrated and angry. They experience the entire range of emotions in this parashah (Exodus 13:17-17:16). Yet, the Song of the Sea tells us of their exaltation, their celebration of freedom and of God. The title of this portion, *Beshallach*, means "in the sending" and refers to the time "When Pharaoh let the people go" (Exodus 13:17). However, in this appropriately titled parashah, the Israelites are constantly being sent; they are sent out of Egypt, they are sent across the Sea of Reeds; they are sent out of enslavement; and they are sent into freedom. They move as a people, as one community; following their leaders, obeying the instructions given by God.

The Song of the Sea is one brief moment of gratitude and joy in between their uncertainty and their anxiety, yet it is also the turning point in the story of the Exodus and in many ways its conclusion. This song is found between the rescue from Egypt and the beginning of their long sojourn in the wilderness. Immediately before and after the song, the Israelites cry out in anguish and fear to Moses, regretting their decision to follow him out of Egypt. In Exodus 14:10-11 we read, "As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to Adonai. And they said to Moses, 'Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?'" (JPS translation). But God again rescues the Israelites, parting the sea for

them, and drowning the Egyptians behind them. And the Israelites again have faith in Adonai and in Moses (Exodus 14:31).

However, after the song—in which they expressed praise and gratitude for all that God had done for them—they once again face hardship. "Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds They went into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" (Exodus 15:22-24; JPS translation). And again God provided for them, supplying sweet water to drink. This is a story of constant ups and downs. The Israelites leave behind a life of oppression, but it was a life they knew, and face the unknown. Yet God consistently intervenes, providing everything they need. The Song of the Sea, marking the conclusion of the liberation from Egypt, is a longer interlude of praise and thanksgiving for everything God has given to them, for their freedom and the life they are looking forward to.

This song is sung at the edge of the sea, immediately after the Israelites crossed into freedom. Miriam is depicted concluding this song, with a two-line chant and the women join her in song and dance, praising God for the miracles they have experienced. The last time we saw Miriam, it was as the anonymous sister of Moses who watched over him—also standing beside water. Thus, "women and water frame the story of Israel's beginnings, from servitude to freedom."[40] The women of Exodus 1-2 were responsible for Moses' survival, and had a significant hand in the redemption of the Israelites. It is

[40] Carol Meyers. "Crossing the Sea and Cries in the Wilderness." *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds. (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 379.

justified, therefore, that they have a role in this song of thanksgiving and praise, and are given the final word in this glorious *Shirat Ha-yam.*

Intention

The Song of the Sea is a turning point for the Israelites as they experienced freedom for the first time in generations. However, this song is a defining moment for Miriam as well, as she is named for the first time in the Torah. Previously, in Exodus 2:4, 7-9, though present in the story, she remained anonymous. There is one other Miriam mentioned in the Bible, the son of an Egyptian princess (1 Chronicles 4:17-18). William Propp explains in *Exodus 1-18*, "Since both Miriams have Egyptian connections, most scholars derive *miryam* from Egyptian *mri* 'to love'—but without explaining the terminal –am."[41] There is some scholarship that indicates an old Canaanite root *rym* meaning 'give.' There is also an Ugaritic noun *mrym* which means 'height' or 'peak.' Therefore, Miriam could mean 'Eminence.' A Hebrew interpretation of her name might be 'the one who sees water.'[42] We are never given an explanation of her name in the Torah, and there is no conclusive interpretation of the name Miriam. Whether her name means 'beloved', 'the one who sees water' or 'eminence', each seems to fit one aspect of who this woman is. Or perhaps, scholars throughout the ages have found a way to interpret her name so that it fits her personality and provides us with a greater insight as to who she might have been.

Almost as if to compensate for not being named the first time we meet her, and the uncertainty about what her name means, in Exodus 15:20, Miriam is given two titles

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[41] William H.C. Propp. *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 1-18.* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 546.
[42] Sue Levi Elwell. "Miriam's Song, Miriam's Silence." *The Women's Torah Commentary.* Elyse Goldstein, ed (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 140.

in addition to her name. She is the first woman to be called a *neviah*, sharing this title with Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah. Miriam even receives this title before her brother Moses does. Aaron is called a prophet in Exodus 7:1, meaning that he serves as Moses' spokesman and speaks on his behalf. Aaron, in this case, serves both Moses and God, instructed by both of them as to what messages he should impart. In Exodus 4:15-16 God speaks to Moses, saying, "I will be with you and with him (Aaron) as you speak, and tell both of you what to do and he shall speak for you to the people" (JPS translation.) Prophets are those who are called by God to served as God's representatives and speak on behalf of God. A prophet is generally someone called upon to communicate divine messages to humans, as Aaron does in the above example. This title given here to Miriam is vague and undefined. In Numbers 12:2, Miriam will reference her prophetic powers, explaining that God has spoken through her just as God speaks through Aaron and of Moses.

Why is she called a prophet in this section? Some suggest that her prophetic powers are directly related to her musical talents and performance. Burns notes that "Some have understood the juxtaposition of Miriam's dance and song and the designation of her as prophetess as indicative that she was an ecstatic."[43] However, when compared with other examples of ecstatic prophets (1 Samuel 10:5ff and 1 Samuel 19:20ff), the differences between these prophets and Miriam become clear. Miriam was suddenly struck with *ruah Adoani* (1 Samuel 10:6 and 1 Samuel 19:20). Although musical instruments may have been used in their celebration (1 Samuel 10:5), in both examples, prophets are illustrated speaking in ecstasy, not offering serious praise to God.

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[43] Burns, 47.

There are other instances of prophecy related to music that are not tied to ecstatic prophets. For example, Deborah is also both a singer and prophetess. S. D. Goitein, in his article "Women as Creators of Biblical Genre," notes that since Miriam and Deborah were the first two female prophets, and they are also both associated with song, it is entirely possible that poetry was the original form of female prophecy.[44] In this song, Miriam praises God, possibly speaking on God's behalf of all that God has done for the Israelites in their quest for freedom. Communicating with the human world, on behalf of God, is what determines a prophet. Furthermore, a prophet generally guides the spiritual life of their community, leading the people towards a deeper relationship with God. Miriam, through her song, encourages the Israelites to praise God and recognize all that God has done for them. Possibly, the inclusion of the title *neviah* at this point of Miriam's story is "the result of later religious personnel wishing to claim predecessors in the earliest stages of Hebrew religion."[45] If this is true, than Miriam status is elevated, as she is placed upon the ranks of Abraham, Aaron and Moses as prophet.

She is also labeled as Aaron's sister. One might have expected her to be called Moses' sister. After all, Moses just concluded a grand song, and his sister will now take her turn. Rashbam explains that "she is identified as Aaron's sister, and not Moses' sister, because Aaron was the first-born."[46] Nachmanides offers a different explanation, "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."[47] Aaron, Miriam

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[44] S. D. Goitein. "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres." *Prooftexts* 8.1 (January 1988), 13
[45] Burns, 47.
[46] Carasik, 118.
[47] Carasik, 118.

and Moses appear together as siblings in the genealogies of Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 5:29.

Miriam's words in the Song of the Sea serve as a conclusion to the exodus from Egypt. Yet, rather than providing definitive closure her words have sparked discussion and controversy. Cross and Freedman suggest, in their ground-breaking study of the Song of the Sea, that it should really be titled "The Song of Miriam." This title does not necessarily need to imply authorship, but suggests "suggests the superiority of the tradition which associates the song with Miriam rather than with Moses."[48] Scholars have debated why her words are even included when this ending seems so much less grand than Moses' finale. They have suggested that the entire song actually was written by Miriam, but Biblical redactors attributed most of it to Mōses. Others propose that Miriam's section was much longer originally but in the final redaction was shortened, or that Moses was in fact seconding Miriam and their words were reversed. Scholars have analyzed the authorship, the language and different versions of the text in order to present each of their arguments.

Miriam's brief, two-stanza chant to Adonai repeats the first stanza of Moses' song, with one significant exception. In verse 1, Moses says *ashirah l'Adonai*—"I will sing," using the first person singular form, while in verse 21 Miriam says, *shiru*—"sing" in the imperative plural form. Burns explains this difference by noting that "The use of the plural imperative is much more common in Hebrew invitations to praise (see e.g. Pss

[48] Frank M. Cross. and David Noel Freedman. "The Song of Miriam." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 14, No. 4. (October 1955), 237.

47, 81, 96, 98, 100, etc.)...as a rule, songs were intoned by a leader. This might explain the use of the first person in 15:1."[49]

While this poem is often attributed to Moses, it is important not to overlook the fact that Exodus 15:1 tells us that "Moses and the Israelites sang this song to Adonai." The first stanza is written in the first person, leading some scholars to assume that it was Moses singing this section of the song. Nahum Sarna suggests that because of the "extensive use of parallel clauses, the opening prose statement that attributes the *shirah* to 'Moses and the Israelites,' and the notice about Miriam and the women also singing—all these suggest that it was sung antiphonally."[50] One understanding then, is that Moses, in this case, led the men in the song, while Miriam led the women. Other interpretations suggest that the song was sung responsively by Moses and the people. Perhaps they repeated, or completed a phrase that Moses began.[51] Or maybe, each person, having experienced God's redemption, sang the song from their own first-person perspective, with Moses and Miriam serving as leaders and initiators of the song.

Looked at superficially, it would seem that Moses' version is the original while Miriam's is a repetition. Phyllis Trible explains, "As a second closure, it is anti-climactic, no more than an after-thought, a token of the female presence."[52] She wonders why Miriam's conclusion even survived when it seems that these endings work in tension rather than complimenting each other. The response to this question, however, highlights the importance of Miriam's role in the Israelite community while somewhat diminishing Moses. Just the fact that Miriam's song is even included, argues Trible and other

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[49] Burns, 14.
[50] Sarna, 76.
[51] Sarna, 76.
[52] Trible, 171.

scholars, emphasizes its antiquity and its authority.[53] Although Biblical redactors sought to elevate Moses, they recognized Miriam's role in the community and were unwilling to eliminate her and her words entirely. By including a portion of her text, they indicate that she was still considered a leader, at least among the women, though she was not an equal to her brother.

Athalya Brenner suggests that the entire song once belonged to Miriam. Then a later tradition developed, ascribing the song to Moses. She proposes that the biblical narrator was faced with the dilemma of these two distinct traditions, and in an effort to accommodate both of them, "decided to take the easy way out by harmonizing the two traditions, thus making Moses the author and Miriam his female echo."[54] Trible has a slightly different version of this explanation, agreeing that the song once belonged to Miriam, but suggesting that it was the desire of redactors to give Moses the greatest prominence that took Miriam's words and attributed them to him. As compensation, and unable to entirely erase the Miriamic tradition, they repeated the opening stanza, giving these words to Miriam. The redactors added a brief narrative between the two songs to separate them.[55]

One piece of evidence used to support this understanding of the song is found within the narrative pieces. The way that Moses is presented in the song substantially differs from that in the early chapters of Exodus. In Exodus 14:31, the people had faith, *v'ya-aminu*, in God and in Moses. Moses had been given credit along with God for the salvation from enslavement in Egypt. However, in the Song of the Sea, there is no reference or credit given for Moses' actions in Egypt. It is focused entirely on God's

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[53] Trible, 171.
[54] Athalya Brenner. *The Israelite Woman*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1885), 52.
[55] Trible, 172

heroic deeds. Janzen argues that it seems that Moses is entirely absent from the song—unless he is one of people who refer to themselves in the first person in the first two verses.[56] However, it is also possible that if Moses was the author of this song that he excluded himself, and focused on God's role out of humility and gratitude. I do not believe that this is conclusive evidence that the song belongs to Miriam. It is an indication of the jarring, awkwardness of the text that would point to tampering and multiple authors, possibly from different times.

The view that Moses is seconding Miriam can be understood by looking at the grammar of the text. Miriam opens her song with "*shiru*", 'Sing', in the plural imperative. Moses then replies "*ashirah*", "I will sing (Exodus 15:1), which can be understood as a reply to Miriam's command. Looking at the text this way, the Song of Moses and Israel is a long and elaborate reply to the Song of Miriam and the women.[57] It is possible that they were placed in this order because there is some indication that Song of Miriam can be dated early than the rest of the song. Perhaps the song was simply compiled according the date it was written.

However, there is a more interesting way to look this composition. In Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam leads the women in song and dance celebrating the crossing of the sea and exodus from Egypt. The Israelites have just concluded a significant chapter of their lives and are about to embark on another journey. Miriam, along with several other women, can be found at the very beginning of the Exodus story. With the help of the midwives, her mother, and the Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was rescued, protected and nurtured. It was due to these women, and the risks they took to save this child, that the

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[56] Gerald J. Janzen. "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam." *Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Athalya Brenner, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 189.
[57] Van Dijk-Hemmes, 200.

exodus was able to occur. It is fitting therefore, that women, and Miriam in particular should be a key figure in the conclusion to the exodus. As Phyllis Trible writes, "Like the beginning, the ending of the Exodus story belongs to women."[58] And Miriam is the one who provides continuity from beginning to end.

Although scholars have different understandings of this text, it is clear that they view Exodus 15:20-21 as belonging to Israel's earliest literary traditions. Cross and Freedman write, "the Song of Miriam is the oldest of the extant sources for this event in Israelite history, being earlier than the parallel prose narratives."[59] From this early dating we can understand Miriam to be very much alive and an important part of the earliest generations of writers of Israelites history. The fact that she was included in such a prominent way (even if it was just the shorter section) indicates that considered an essential leader in the community.[60] I believe, like Brenner, that there were at one point different traditions with regard to the authorship of the song. At some point these traditions had to be merged, and unsurprisingly Moses was given prominence and authorship. However, not to exclude Miriam entirely, she was given a section of the song, and the implication that she was indeed a significant leader in Israel. Furthermore, she is titled a prophet in this section, which tells us more about her relationships with God and the Israelites and indicates the respect she was given by her the biblical redactors.

It is this song that has given contemporary readers of the Bible the impetus to claim Miriam as a model of female leadership in the Bible. In addition to presenting her as a leader, these short verses give Miriam a voice. She is portrayed as a talented musician, capable of gathering and inspiring the Israelite women. She is deeply

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[58] Trible, 172.
[59] Cross and Freedman, 239.
[60] Burns, 40.

connected to God, as evidenced not only through her title of prophetess, but also her song to Adonai, in which she celebrates and praises God's works with dance and music.

Miriam does not offer any prophecies in the Bible. She does, however, communicate with God through song and dance in Exodus 15. Based on this text, we might conclude that her talents, as a dancer and as a musician, contribute to being a *neviah*. However, it is not her dancing and her music alone, but what these actions indicate. Through her dance and her music, Miriam is using ritual expressions to communicate with Adonai. She speaks on God's behalf about God's remarkable actions in the world. And this may be considered a prophetic act. She is chosen as a leader—whether among all the people, or among the women—to lead, to praise God, and to communicate messages from God. It is not a coincidence that Miriam is present at the beginning and the ending of the exodus story. Miriam, along with Moses, was chosen to be a part of this story.

Part 3: Miriam in Numbers 12

Genre

The Numbers 12 narrative, which showcases Miriam, although not necessarily in a flattering light, does not clearly fit into a named genre the way that other sections have. We cannot neatly label and compare it to other verses in a similar way to other sections. This section has caused great discussion, analysis and debate for Torah scholars for generations. Interpreters have spent countless hours trying to understand what exactly is occurring in this text, what Miriam and Aaron are criticizing and why Miriam is punished with leprosy. Some scholars understand that Miriam and Aaron are challenging Moses' leadership, and trying to assume some of the control. If this is the case, we can call this text a rebellion text and compare it with Korach's rebellion just a few chapters later.

Numbers 16 tells two stories of rebellion. Korach and his followers challenge Moses' religious authority saying, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves about Adonai's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3; JPS translation). Accused of acting holier than the rest of the community, Moses instructs Korach and his followers that Adonai will make known who is holy and who is to be the leader of the community. In the second story of rebellion, Dathan and Abiram question Moses' continued leadership of the Israelites (Numbers 16:12-14).

These two, seemingly separate challenges are interwoven and made to look as one integrated rebellion against Moses' leadership. However, Korach's dispute is primarily priestly while Dathan and Abiram are concerned with civic leadership. These two

incidents are further separated by the different punishments each group receives. Dathan, Abiram, their wives and children are consumed by an earthquake "when the ground under them burst asunder" (Numbers 16:31; JPS translation). Korach and his followers, were also punished when "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up" (Numbers 16:32; JPS translation). Yet, we are told that two hundred and fifty representatives offering incense were consumed by fire of Adonai (Numbers 16:35). It is explicitly clear from the text that God exacted these punishments on the rebels. Both of these groups, in their challenges to Moses and Aaron, seem to have forgotten that these men did not rise to leadership on their own, but were chosen by God to be the religious and the civic leaders of the community.

Although Numbers 12 has been categorized as "rebellion text", it is necessary to examine it more closely and consider if it indeed fits in this genre. These types of texts are often called "murmuring motifs," descriptive of the actions of the Israelites in the wilderness, and their frequent complaining for rising up against Moses. Generally these texts open with the antagonists addressing the leader. The leader is challenged with a question about some past deed. Then, the addressee answers with a reason or a motivation for this action.[61] According to Burns, Numbers 12:2 fits with this stereotyped motif, in that it is a question addressed to God. This was not a question seeking information, but "an explanation of Moses' rights of leadership."[62] Even though Moses' leadership is being challenged, he remains silent. One might suppose from this, that God was the intended audience of this accusation, and indeed God replies to Miriam and to Aaron with a rebuke and a punishment. It is clear that the author was aware of other

[61] Burns, 62.
[62] Burns, 62.

rebellion texts, and used some of the same literary technique, but there are deviations in this section. This rebellion, similar to Korach's, is initiated by individuals, not the entire community. There is no face-to-face conformation with Moses, as is typical in the stereotypical motif.[63]

However, despite the variations from the stereotypical motif, Miriam and Aaron's quarrel can be more easily compared with Korach's rebellion. The original murmuring motif texts have to do with the people rebelling against Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, or his leadership in the wilderness. These texts often have to do with a lack of necessities in the desert, and the peoples' rising anxiety and frustration. Neither the Korach controversy, nor Miriam and Aaron's quarrel has any connection with the exodus or the journey in the wilderness. Each of them has to do with Moses' unique authority.[64] Each of these rebellions begins with a clash over leadership and holiness. Korach wanted the priesthood, Miriam and Aaron wanted God's word. In both episodes, relatives of Moses claim equal authority to that of Moses.

Miriam and Aaron's rebellion, in contrast, may have been a minor, private, familial affair. They say in Numbers 12:2 says, "Has Adonai only spoken through Moses? Surely God has also spoken through us?" With these words, they (like Korach) question the unique position of Moses, this time focusing on two issues: First, the marriage with a Cushite wife and his prophetic relationship with God. They challenge Moses' behaving as if God only speaks to him, and know one else, and noting they also are privileged to hear God's words. Their's is not a civic or religious rebellion as seen in the example above, but a claim to be as legitimate prophets as Moses. They suggest that

[63] Burns, 64.
[64] Burns, 66.

they are as qualified to lead the Israelites as he. Rather than receiving this acknowledgment, however, they are rebuked, and given a detailed explanation of just why Moses is so extraordinary and how God's relationship with him is so exceptional. God explains that Moses speaks with God "*peh el peh*" (Numbers 12:8). This mouth to mouth, or face to face encounter that Moses has with God is unlike any other prophet, who meet and speaks with God through a vision or a dream. Furious with them, God departs, and Miriam is left suffering from leprosy. Aaron appeals to Moses, and Moses prays to God to heal Miriam. God insists that Miriam endure her punishment for seven days. This difficult text leaves us with more questions than answers, questions that I will explore more fully below.

The significant differences in the endings between Numbers 16 and Numbers 12 must be noted. While Korach, Dathan and Abiran, as well as their families and followers were destroyed (Numbers 16:25-35), Miriam was stricken with an illness and shut out of the camp for seven days. Aaron received no punishment at all. Miriam's illness and isolation certainly must have been unpleasant, even painful, but she and Aaron survived their challenge. Clearly, there must have been some legitimacy to their claim of leadership or they would have endured a much greater suffering.

There certainly are similarities with the murmuring motifs, and with the Korach rebellion. It is easy to see why commentators regularly associate this text with others about rebellion. However, I would be cautious before labeling it in this way. There is no doubt that there is a quarrel or a question about leadership. Miriam and Aaron clearly challenge Moses about his leadership and God about Moses' authority. More than that though, it seems to be that they are wondering about their own place within the

community. They are curious as to what makes Moses so unique, and they are given a stern answer. But I believe that they are looking for reassurance that they are still people of prominence among the Israelites. Immediately following a chapter in which God's spirit rests upon seventy-two randomly chosen people (see below), they want to know that they are special as well. They are not simply siblings of Moses, but they are leaders and prophets in their own right. They are not trying to overtake Moses' leadership, but share in it. Hearing their concerns and questions, God responds, and ushers them into the Tent of Meetings. However, rather than recognize their insecurity and offer some reassurance, Moses is silent, and God offers punishment for Miriam – nothing to Aaron. These two are not rebels intent on destroying Moses; they are simply a brother and sister who desire some of the attention as well.

Literary Setting

Numbers 12 provides the longest and most complex narrative about Miriam. In each of the previous two texts in which Miriam has been encountered, she has been surrounded by women. Our first introduction to her in Exodus 2 places her at the water's edge, as the messenger between Pharaoh's daughter and her mother. When the Israelites were celebrating the successful crossing of the Sea of Reeds, she led the women in song and dance praising God. In this text, however, she is without her company of woman.

However, though Miriam is a key figure in this text, it is the exceptionality of Moses that is the theme of the chapter. When Aaron and Miriam challenge this notion, commenting that Adonai has also spoken through them, they are sharply rebuked, and reminded of Moses' humility and unique relationship with God. This chapter, which

exalts Moses, is directly linked to the chapters that come before and after it with its questions of authority and discontent.

Numbers 11-17 share a common theme—Moses and God are continuously challenged. In one example after another, members of the Israelite community, illustrating their discontent, confront Moses and God. In the unit containing Miriam and Aaron's challenge, Numbers 11:1-12:16, there are three such challenges found using the same format. In all three instances there are fixed elements that appear in the same order: "the sing of the people (or a group among the people); God's punishment: a petition to Moses requesting that the punishment be removed; Moses' prayer; the punishment's termination; and the naming of the site after the episode that occurred there."[65]

The first example is brief, only three verses, yet contains every one of these elements. Numbers 11:1 tells us that "The people took to complaining bitterly before Adonai" (JPS translation). Although it is unclear from this verse why the Israelites were complaining, this complaint was seemingly enough for God to punish them.

The next challenge in this unit is longer and more developed. The Israelites were upset that they had nothing but manna to eat (Numbers 11:4-6). Moses hears their cries, and turns to God, distress and exhausted (Numbers 11:10-15). He feels that he is unable to provide the necessary food and he is cannot take the burden of his leadership anymore. Pitying himself and feeling that there is no other way to end his sorrows, Moses asks God to kill him (Numbers 11:15). Instead, God instructs Moses to gather seventy of Israel's elders, "and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone" (Numbers 11:17;

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[65] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary.* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 854.

JPS translation). These seventy men are taken into the Tent of Meeting, and there they begin to prophesy when the spirit of Adonai rests upon them (Numbers 11:25). However, two men, who remained in the camp, Eldad and Medad, also experienced God's spirit resting upon them, and they too began to prophesy. Joshua, ever loyal to Moses, and fearing that his leadership is at risk, cries out to Moses, "Restrain them!" (Numbers 11:28). Moses is not threatened by the prophesying of these two young men, saying, "Would that all Adonai's people were prophets, that Adonai put his spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:29; JPS translation). Rather, Moses exhibits his humility in his willingness to share his leadership and prophetic abilities.

In this chapter God provides help and support for an overburdened leader. God spreads out God's spirit onto more members of the community, allowing them to take part in prophetic leadership with Moses. Yet, the translation often used for *v'yitnabu* when discussing the seventy elders, as well as Eldad and Medad, is "they spoke in ecstasy" rather then "they prophesied." This gift is understood as temporary, not permanent. Their prophecy is markedly different from the prophetic gifts of Moses. One might wonder how Miriam's and Aaron's prophetic gifts compare to those of Moses and those of these elders and Eldad and Medad.

The chapter in which Miriam and Aaron claim that God speaks to them follows this chapter where God is so generous in resting God's sprit upon Israelites, allowing them to experience—even temporarily what it is like to prophesy. This is the third challenge of the unit—Miriam and Aaron, speaking out against Moses, questioning his leadership and their own. It cannot be a coincidence that chapters examining prophesy and prophets in the Israelite wilderness community are found back-to-back. Miriam and

Aaron seeking greater status for themselves, asking, ""Has Adonai only spoken through Moses? Surely God has also spoken through us?" (Numbers 12:2; my translation). Moses, so humble in chapter 11, is described in chapter 12:3 "as very humble, more than any other man on the face of the earth." Yet, when Aaron and Miriam question their leadership and their role as prophets, they are not rewarded with kind words from Moses as Eldad and Medad are, but harshly rebuked and punished by God. We learn from the seventy elders, Eldad and Medad that anyone may be rewarded with the ability to prophesy. And we might learn from Miriam and Aaron that being called a prophet does not exempt a person from punishment. Nor does it entail them to challenge the guidance of God's chosen leader.

At the end of chapter 12, following Miriam's punishment, the entire community left Hazeroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran. From there, God spoke to Moses, and instructed him to send scouts to the land of Canaan to survey the land they would inhabit. When the twelve scouts returned, they reported to Moses, Aaron and the entire Israelite community. Though they did assure the Israelites that the land flowed with milk and honey, they were less encouraging when reporting on the cities and their inhabitants. All of the scouts, except for Caleb, were convinced that it was impossible for the Israelites to attack, since they were so much stronger. At this report, the Israelites cried out, again exclaiming, "if only we had died in the land of Egypt" or "if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is Adonai taking us to that land to fall by the sword?" (Numbers 14:2-3; JPS translation). The scout narrative details the people's discontent. Frequently in the wilderness, when they were lacking necessities they railed against Moses or against God until they received what they needed. However, it seems, as they spend longer in

the desert, their expressions of dissatisfaction get more frequent, louder and harder to satisfy. The Israelites have been journeying for a long time and are exhausted, frightened, and unclear about what is going to happen next. They turn to Moses, as the leader of the community, for answers and to relieve their anxiety.

This section, Numbers 13-15 continues on the same theme as the earlier chapters, challenges to Moses' leadership. These chapters offer an example of leaders of tribes rebelling against Moses. Through these six chapters in Numbers we are able to see members of every demographic in the Israelite community challenging Moses and God at some point—leaders, tribes, religious figures, and the larger community—all find reason to complain. Yet, despite all of these rebellions and challenges his authority, Moses remains as the leader because ultimately, he was appointed to this position by God, and it is God that guides him through these difficulties.

Intention

Numbers 12 provides the longest chapter about Miriam, but it is by no means the best known narrative about Miriam, nor is it the one that showcases her in the best way. Exodus 15:20 titles Miriam as a prophet, but it is in Numbers 12:2 that she claims to have been a spokesperson for God, deserving this characterization. However, despite her label and her assertion, there is no evidence that Miriam has offered any prophecies in the biblical text. In Numbers 12 God does speak to Miriam, although it is not to provide her with messages to deliver to the community. We are left therefore, to look deeper in the text, and draw our own conclusions determining why she was called a *neviah*. First,

however, we must carefully examine Numbers 12, in order to better understand this text, and to then speculate why Miriam is called a prophetess.

In Numbers 12 Miriam's companion this time is her brother Aaron. Although the text tells us that it is both Miriam and Aaron offer critical commentary, Phyllis Trible explains that Aaron is in a supporting role. She writes, "Miriam leads and Aaron supports her."[66] Miriam's leading role can be understood in part by looking at the Hebrew grammar of the first verse. In Numbers 12:1 *v'tedaber*, the singular, feminine form is written, rather than the more typical plural form, *v'yedabru*. It also lists Miriam's name ahead of Aaron's, which is out of the ordinary (v. 4, 5). These uncharacteristic forms, as well as the fact that Miriam was punished and not Aaron, indicate that it was Miriam who was the instigator. This does not mean that Aaron was an innocent bystander, but this text can teach us more about Miriam's than about him.

Looking at the Hebrew text, there is an implication of criticism. The Hebrew *va'tedaber b*...is generally translated as "spoke against." Other examples of the verb used in this form can be found in Numbers 21:5 "And the people spoke against God and against Moses" (*va'yedaber b*); and in Numbers 21:7 "We sinned because we spoke against Adonai and against you (*debru b*).

It is unclear from this text exactly what Miriam and Aaron are criticizing. They comment on both Moses' wife, and on their roles as prophets. In each case, the criticism is vague, and the reason behind Miriam's punishment is constantly debated. It is often assumed, especially in rabbinic texts, that this text is a warning against gossip and slander. In Numbers 12:1 Miriam and Aaron, "spoke against Moses concerning the Cushite women who he had taken as his wife." The Hebrew *cush* is an unknown area,

[66] Trible, 174.

referring possibly to Ethiopia or perhaps to an area of Midian. In Exodus 2:21, we learn that Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest, so it might be logical to assume that Cush is found in the Midianite territory. However, Judges 1:16 teaches that Moses' father-in-law was a Kenite, and his wife not from Midian or from Cush. Based on these texts it is difficult to determine if this woman mentioned in Numbers 12:1 is the same as either of the women from the other verses, or if she was a different wife entirely. It is possible that these are not three different wives, but that "they are three mutually independent versions of one of the original elements of the Mosaic traditions, i.e., that Moses had a foreign wife."[67] One way of reconciling this description of Moses' wife with other descriptions of her in the Bible is to understand *cushite* as an adjective meaning 'beautiful.'[68] Determining who this woman is is as difficult as understanding the reason for Miriam's quarrel with her.

Commentators have spent significant time analyzing this verse, and coming to certain conclusions about what must have been occurring. Some commentators suggest that Miriam and Aaron's disapproval stems from a disappointment that Moses did not marry an Israelite woman. This is a concern about intermarriage. Martin Buber takes this suggestion even further writing that, "What the brother and sister reproach Moses with is conditioned not by a general tendency to keep the blood pure but by the concept that continuation of the gift of prophecy...would be unfavorably affected by the alien element."[69] One might even speculate that there are racist undertones to this comment, with Miriam and Aaron objecting to her darker Cushite skin. Or perhaps this is a criticism of Moses for having taken another wife, in addition to Zipporah. Whether this

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[67] Burns, 69.
[68] Milgrom, 93.
[69] Martin Buber. *Moses*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. 1958), 167-168.

criticism has to do with racism, foreignness, rivalry, or separation, we can never say for certain. It certainly seems that many scholars are inclined to read into this verse a jealousy between the women. They seek to pit Miriam against Moses' wife, perhaps each vying for his attention, and the power among the Israelite community. These scholars all conclude, whatever implication is contained within Miriam and Aaron's words, they clearly should not have been talking about Moses behind his back.

This statement about Moses' wife precedes the true quarrel Miriam and Aaron have with their brother. I believe that they are less concerned about who he is married to, and more concerned about their own role within the community. Some contemporary scholars propose that since these two verses are so disjointed, and seemingly unconnected, perhaps there are of two different traditions that have been pieced together.

Moving on from their original comment, Miriam and Aaron challenge the notion that God has spoken only through Moses, saying, "Has Adonai only spoken through Moses? Surely God has also spoken through us?" (Numbers 12:2). This seems to be the core of their dissatisfaction. They want their prophetic status recognized as equal to Moses. There is a tradition that supports this claim: Exodus 4:15-16 and Exodus 6:13 indicate that God spoke through and to Aaron, Exodus 15:20 calls Miriam a prophet and Micah 6:4 indicates that God commissioned all three to lead the Israelites. However, the fact that they are Moses' siblings may have increased their desire to claim "prophetic equality with their brother."[70] Though Moses may have been happy to share in his leadership, God is unwilling to acknowledge anyone as on par with his chosen leader. In the examples described above, the challenges throughout this section of Numbers (chapters 11-17) illustrate that despite various attempts to overtake the civic and religious

[70] Milgrom, 94.

leadership, God has appointed Moses as leader, and he will remain in this position. God, we learn in Numbers 12:7-8, has a unique relationship with Moses. God maintains this relationship with Moses, by offering help when Moses becomes overburdened (as seen in Numbers 11) and punishing those would try to bring him down. Even if Aaron and Miriam have the gift of propheey, they are not equal to Moses, and cannot presume that they are.

Moses did not respond to Miriam and Aaron's challenge, perhaps an indication that he did not hear this complaint. Or we might understand that this question was not directed at Moses. However, Numbers 12:2 tells us that, "Adonai heard." And God responded, explaining exactly why Moses was so extraordinary. Ironically, Miriam and Aaron complain that God has indeed spoken to them as well, and though they are rebuked for not having the same prophetic role that Moses does, God calls to them directly in order to reprimand them in a "pillar of cloud" at the Tent of Meeting. God calls to "Aaron and Miriam" in verse 5, although in verse 8, God will explain that God only speaks directly to Moses. Though this might not have been a "face to face" meeting, God does speak to Aaron and Miriam, and does not once deny that their roles as prophets. God details the relationship with Moses, and how it is different from that of any of other prophet. Miriam and Aaron may well have been prophets, but their relationship with God does not compare with Moses'. God then rebukes Aaron and Miriam for speaking out against Moses, God's singular leader (Numbers 12:8).

This reprimand, and Miriam's punishment seems to be a direct result of their speaking out against Moses. God does not entirely deny their role as prophets, but is angry that in criticizing Moses, and in trying to elevate their statues, they actually are

diminishing Moses' position. Although they may communicate with God, and enjoy prophetic status, their communication is not "face to face" with God as Moses' is. Rather, they, like other prophets, likely communicate with God "in a vision, in a dream" (Numbers 12:6). Furthermore, even though Aaron is distinguished as a Kohen, this role still does not allow him the same privileges as Moses has. As God's divinely appointed leader, Moses is entitled to the utmost reverence.

Although the text tells us that both Miriam and Aaron engaged in this challenge, only Miriam was struck with leprosy. Why is she the only one forced to suffer this punishment? Most agree that this is evidence that she was the instigator in the challenge against Moses[71]. Aaron was considered the bystander, and as such did not deserve this severe punishment. This would further prove that Aaron is a secondary character in this text, and that it is really a narrative that serves to teach us more about Miriam.

Gunther Plaut suggests that, "while Miriam is punished corporally, Aaron is punished mentally. In his case, the mental suffering is far more intense than its physical counterpart."[72] Plaut believes that Aaron suffers not only from God's severe rebuke, but also from the guilt that he feels when he sees his sister suffering from leprosy while he is let off. The worst punishment for Aaron however, according to Plaut, is that he has to humble himself before his younger brother. "Humiliation is added to mental suffering and guilt."[73] Plaut's interpretation implies that Miriam's pain was short-lived, while Aaron's continued far beyond the seven days that Miriam was banished from the camp. I do not doubt that Aaron felt guilt seeing his sister punished while he was not. Aaron

[71] Milgrom, 93; Eskenazi and Weiss, 860.
[72] Plaut, 970.
[73] Plaut, 970.

appeals to Moses, apologizing for their misdeeds in the hopes that Miriam will be healed. However, Graetz notes emphasizing Aaron's pain in this way minimizes Miriam's pain.[74]

When God departed from the Tent, after severely chastising Aaron and Miriam, Miriam was covered with the snow-white scales of leprosy (Numbers 12:10). Milgrom explains that "leprosy was considered a punishment for offenses against the Deity in Israel (and elsewhere in the ancient Near East)."[75] If this is the case, than her punishment is a result of infuriating God for challenging Moses and trying to elevate her prophetic status to equal his. Some commentators note that Miriam's criticism of Moses' Cushite wife may have been racially motivated. Perhaps then, "snow-white scales" are a fitting punishment for objecting to his dark-skinned wife. However, there is no indication that this is the reason for her objection.[76]

Milgrom also writes, ""According to the rabbis, the chief cause for leprosy is defamation, interpreting *metsora* as *motsi shem ra*, 'slander.'[77] Miriam was caught gossiping about Moses' wife, and was therefore forced to endure this difficult illness as punishment. Had Miriam voiced her concern to Moses directly, perhaps she would have been spared. Graetz explains that leprosy is the punishment associated with slander, because one is quarantine when suffering from leprosy. In isolation friends and family are separated from each other. "This is also the effects of *lason hara*, the evil tongue, which cause separation. *Lason hara*, done often in secrecy has the effect of isolation the victim from the rest of society, often without her or him even knowing why.[78]

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[74] Graetz, 241
[75] Milgrom, 97.
[76] Trible, 177
[77] Milgrom, 97.
[78] Graetz, 239.

We are sometimes led to believe, through midrash and commentary, that though God may have been most angry with Miriam and Aaron for daring to compare themselves with Moses' leadership, ultimately she was punished for her first offense- criticizing Moses' wife. Some suggest that while both Aaron and Miriam complain about Moses' prophetic status, only Miriam criticizes Moses' wife, thus her punishment is a result of this criticism. Some explanations associate her leprosy with her slander, and understand this text as a warning for us against *lasom hara*: we should learn from Miriam's mistakes, and not speak ill of those around us.

Or perhaps, "Miriam alone is punished because she is a woman who dares to challenge authority."[79] Graetz suggests, "That Miriam was punished with leprosy because women in the biblical world were not supposed to be leaders of men, and that women with initiative were reproved when they asserted themselves with the only weapon they had, their power of language."[80] Her understanding fits alongside Rabbi Sohn's who writes, "Perhaps in her own day Miriam was a prophet and leader, and it was later generation who, in retelling the tales, silenced Miriam and all but banished her from the text. Perhaps it was the later generations who were not willing to have a woman with the gift of prophecy standing strong, inspiring the women of their own day to seek public roles and voice demands for themselves."[81]

The Torah: A Women's Commentary understands Miriam's punishment and God's response in a three different ways. After Miriam was punished with *tzaraat* Moses cried out to God, "O God, please heal her" (Numbers 12:13). God responds saying, "If her father had indeed spit in her face, would she not be ashamed for seven days? Let her

[79] Eskenazi and Weiss, 860.
[80] Graetz, 233.
[81] Sohn, 275.

be shut out of the camp for seven days, and afterwards let her be brought in again." First, God's words indicate the reason Miriam must be isolate for seven days is shame—like the shame that a daughter feels if she was insulted by her father. Second, the statement that a daughter is shamed for seven days when her father spits on her teaches us something about the practice of the community. Finally, the father-daughter analogy seems to soften the harshness of this incident and punishment by referring to God as 'father' and Miriam as 'daughter.'[82] Although Miriam should be ashamed, and punished, for challenging Moses role as God's most significant leader and prophet, she is ultimately still a member of the community, and an important figure in God's household.

Miriam's punishment was indeed very public and maybe it was so that the entire community would learn what might befall even they sought to challenge Moses and God. however, this even seeing Miriam, a prophetess and leader (at least to some extent) of the community get severely punished , seemingly did not dissuade potential challengers, since the following several chapter in Numbers illustrates many more examples of those rising up against Moses' leadership. I am wary of calling this text a rebellion against Moses, since Miriam and Aaron are not seeking to remove him from his position, but rather, seeking equality for themselves. But God clearly has a different vision for the leadership of the Israelites, and Miriam, the instigator of this challenge needed to be punished in a way that she would never seek to challenge Moses' ultimate leadership again. Her banishment—a result of her shame—does silence Miriam. These are her final words. She is never spoken to nor heard from again. The next time she appears in the Torah is when her death and burial are recorded.

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[82] Eskenazi and Weiss, 861.

Part 4: Miriam in Numbers 20

Genre

Numbers 20:1 records that she dies and is buried. One might call this text a "death narrative" though we are hardly given details surrounding the circumstances of Miriam's death. It is simply a brief announcement, seemingly disjointed from the rest of the verse. Given that Aaron's death is announced in the same chapter as Miriam's, it is logical that they are often compared. Though Moses' death isn't recorded until Deuteronomy 32, since he is the third sibling, it is necessary to look at the conditions of his death and burial as well.

This chapter begins by explaining where in the wilderness the Israelites are. They have arrived in Zin and stayed at Kadesh. At some point shortly after—we are given no detail regarding when this occurred, or how much time had passed—"Miriam died there and she was buried there" (Numbers 20:1). There is no description about how she died, or why, and no detail about her burial. One might assume that she died of natural causes, since there was no mention of Divine punishment resulting in death or any other unusual circumstances.

In stark contrast is the detail given surrounding Aaron's death just twenty-eight verses later. His narrative begins in Numbers 20:22 when the Israelites leave Kadesh and arrive at Mount Hor. Here, God spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, "Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have assigned to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah" (JPS translation). The idiom "gathered to his kin" is one that is used in connection with the deaths of Abraham

(Genesis 25:8), Ishmael (Genesis 25:17), Isaac (Genesis 35:29), Jacob (Genesis 49:29, 33), and Moses (Deuteronomy 32:50). This is a term that is reserved for the forefathers of Israel. It becomes clear that it is intended to describe a time after one has died, but before the burial. It has a sense of being reunited with one's ancestors in an afterlife.[83] Aaron had time to prepare for his death, having been forewarned by God that it was imminent. The text goes on to detail God's instructions to Moses, as to how Aaron should prepare for his death. Aaron and his son Eleazar are to go to the top of Mount Hor, where Aaron will be stripped of his priestly clothing and it will be put on Eleazar. It is on the top of the mountain that Aaron will die. Moses follows these instructions, and we read, "Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days" (Numbers 20:28-29; JPS translation). Not only was Aaron given time to prepare, there was ritual surrounding his death, including a ceremonial passing on the tradition to the next generation. This narrative concludes with a description of the entire community mourning Aaron for the traditional thirty days, a mourning that was absent in Miriam's death announcement.

The details surrounding Moses'. death are even more elaborate than those of Aaron's death, and take place over the final three chapters of the book of Deuteronomy. It begins, similarly to Aaron, with an announcement from God that Moses must ascend Mount Nebo, "and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving the Israelites as their holding. You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend and shall be

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[83] Jacob Milgrom. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 169.

gathered to you kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; for you both broke faith with me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelites people" (Deuteronomy 32:49-51; JPS translation). Deuteronomy 34 gives a full accounting of Moses' death, beginning with his ascent to the top of Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 34:1). In Deuteronomy 34:5-6, we read "So Moses the servant of Adonai died there...He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor" (JPS translation). As in the narrative of Aaron's death, God's instructions were fulfilled entirely. And just like they did for Aaron, the Israelites mourned Moses for thirty days (Deuteronomy 34:8).

In the cases of both Moses and Aaron, successors to their positions were established and announced. Like Miriam, there is no mention of a grave in the burial of Aaron, and Moses' grave is unknown. Neither Moses, nor Aaron was allowed into the Promised Land as a result of their punishment for failing to obey God's instructions when providing water to the Israelites at Meribath-kadesh. Yet, despite their punishment, they are given elaborate rituals surrounding their death and burial. Miriam, however, did not enter the Promised Land, though there is no indication that this was also the result of a punishment. And she, unlike her brothers is given a simple, one verse announcement of her death and burial.

It should hardly be surprising that Miriam's death is given such little attention. Though the death and burial Sarah, the first of the matriarchs is given more detail, there is very little description surrounding the death or burial of any of the other matriarchs. We are never told when Rebekah dies, only that she was buried, along with Leah, Abraham

and Sarah in Ma'arat Ha-machpelah (Genesis 49:31). When Rachel, one of the matriarchs and beloved wife of Jacob died, she too was given just one verse. In Genesis 48:7, Jacob explains, "when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath" -- now Bethlehem" (JPS translation). Each of these significant women in our history is given just a short mention when they died, or were buried. However, I supposed one might find it significant that their deaths are included at all in the Torah, giving indication to just how essential their presence is in this history.

Literary Setting

This chapter opens with the Israelites resuming their wilderness march. For the last eight chapters, since Numbers 12:16 (ironically when Miriam made her last appearance) the Israelites have been encamped in the wilderness of Paran. For the intervening eight chapters we have witnessed scouts being to survey Canaan, Korach's rebellion, and God providing laws for the land and the people. Specifically in the chapter immediately before Miriam's death, God provides detail about ritual and purification laws after coming into contact with a corpse. The beginning of Numbers 19 teaches that *parah adamah,* a red cow without a blemish must be brought by the Israelites to be sacrificed. Rashi comments that reason this section may have been placed close in the text to Miriam's death is "to suggest the following comparison: what is the purpose of the sacrifices? They effect atonement! So, too, does the death of the righteous effect atonement" (JPS translation). Rabbi Pollack goes on to comment that according to Rashi,

because she was so righteous. Miriam's death would bring purification on the people in the same way that sprinkling the red heifer potion brings purification.

Following the one verse announcement of Miriam's death and burial, the Israelites cry out for lack of water (Numbers 20:2). This is a common refrain throughout their journey in the desert. Over and over the people find themselves lacking necessities and they complain to Moses, anxious that they have been brought out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. Each time, God provides what they are asking for. And in this instance, though God is willing to provide the water needed, Moses and Aaron are told how to retrieve the water. "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts" (Numbers 20:8; JPS translation). However, Moses does not follow the exact directions, striking the rock instead of speaking to it (Numbers 20:11). God still supplies the water, but it is because of this disobedience that Moses and Aaron are forbidden from entering the Promised Land.

Although we are told that the people arrived at Kadesh on the "first month" (Numbers 20:1), it is unclear what month and what year it actually was. And this vagueness continues with the text simply saying that Miriam died there. Whether she died within the first days of their arrival, or months later we are unable to determine from this verse. Most commentators conclude that her death occurred in the fortieth year.[84] This conclusion is based on the fact that Aaron died in the "in the fortieth year after the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month" (Numbers

[84] See Milgrom, 164.

33:38).[85] Since Aaron and Miriam die only verses apart, it is likely that their deaths occur in the same year, just months apart. This view is also supported by the fact that the entire generation who had been enslaved in Egypt must have died off by the time the Israelites were to enter the land. In Numbers 20:12 God states, "you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them" (JPS translation). *Ha-kahal ha-zeh*, this congregation, is understood to mean the new generation which is allowed to enter the land.[86] Therefore, it must be the fortieth year, and time for the new generation to approach and enter the Promised Land.

The fact that this verse announces the arrival at Kadesh has caused some confusion for scholars. According to Numbers 13:26, Israel should have already arrived at Kadesh, towards the beginning of their journey. Commentators offer two potential conclusions, attempting to makes sense of this perplexity. The first suggests that after they left Kadesh they returned to it in the fortieth year. Though a logical argument, the detailed itinerary found in Numbers 33 does not support this argument. Deuteronomy supports the second possible conclusion. "Israel reached Kadesh at once but stayed there 'many days' (Deuteronomy 1:46) and then spent thirty-eight years in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 2:14). According to this tradition, the date in this verse (v. 1) would refer to the first day of the third year."[87]

There is textual evidence supporting each of these traditions, evidence that perhaps different authors were at work and their writing was combined in the final redaction of the Bible. However, it cannot be a coincidence that Miriam's death occurs in the same chapter as Aaron. This author wanted to associate her with her brother, whether in life or

[85] Milgrom, 164.
[86] Milgrom, 166.
[87] Milgrom 164.

in death. Based on this association, and her earlier leadership, it seems unlikely to me that she only would have survived for the three years in the desert. I believe that inclusion of her death indicates a desire to somehow recognize who she was to the community. If this is the case, than she must have be a part of the community for a longer time while wandering in the desert. She could not have made her impact in just a few short years.

Intention

Miriam is mentioned in eight different places in the Bible. In some places it is a simple mention of her name, in others it is a more detailed description of her actions and their impact. Although this verse announces Miriam's death and burial it is not the last time Miriam will be mentioned. She is remembered among the Israelites and by God long after her death. Her leadership and her actions are also recorded and recalled in Numbers 26:59, Deuteronomy 24:9, Micah 6:4, and 1 Chronicles 5:29.

The focus of this portion has generally been the lack of water for the Israelites, Moses' disobedience of God, and his punishment that he will not enter the land of Israel. Biblical scholars have long understood the inclusion of this section as a way to explain why Moses did not enter the Promised Land with the people he had led for so long. However, we might also look Numbers 20 with regard to Miriam. Though she is referenced only in the first verse, and it is a brief mention of her death and burial, this announcement deserves some examination. The fact that Miriam's death was even included in the Bible indicates that she was a person of prominence and worthy of some recognition.

Numbers 20:1 is made up of two seemingly disjointed pieces of information. Burns writes, "It is a commonly accepted opinion that different literary strata are reflected in Numbers 20:1."[88] The verse can be divided after the word, *ha-rishon*. As Burns explains, one sign that this originally was two separate verses comes from the change of subject; *b'nai Yisrael kol ha-eidah* (the Israelites, the entire community) and *ha-am* (the people) within the verses. If it was a fluidly written verse, it is more likely that there was be the same subject found through the entire verse. Her reasoning goes further by looking at the verbs: *bo*, occurs regularly in itinerary texts, but *yashev* is never is found in the wilderness itineraries. Furthermore, the information found in the first half of the verse is important information detailing where the Israelites are in their journey, and must be viewed as an itinerary text. However, the same cannot be said for the second half of the verse; it lacks information regarding departure, arrival and the journey. Therefore, concludes Burns, "the notice of Miriam's death and burial at Kadesh, then, must be viewed as a piece of information from a different author than that of the itinerary of Numbers 20:1a with which it has been combined."[89]

Miriam's death received markedly less attention in the Bible, and by the Israelites than that of either of her brothers'. In the reports of their deaths, (Numbers 20:22, Deuteronomy 34), both men die on the top of a mountain, and are mourned by the community for thirty days. Following Miriam's death, the community was far more concerned with their needs than they were with appropriately grieving for her. In Numbers 20:2 we read, "The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (JPS translation). Though the need for water while journeying the

[88] Burns, 116
[89] Burns, 117

wilderness is great, it is unusual and disturbing that there is no mention of any mourning for this woman who helped to lead the people along with her brothers. Perhaps this is an indication that she was not so important a person as we, in contemporary Judaism want her to be. Or perhaps it is a sign that the Biblical redactors thought a simple announcement was all the attention her death warranted.

Most Torah commentators have not focused on the lack of mourning for Miriam, but instead wondered about the cry for water immediately following her death. From her first appearance, Miriam was associated with water. Our introduction to this anonymous sister occurs as she was standing along the river, quietly and protectively watching what would happen to her brother. We encounter her again as the Israelites have successfully crossed the Sea of Reeds, leading the women in singing and dancing. It is immediately following this victory song that the Israelites first realize that they are in the wilderness without water. In Exodus 15:20, Adonai provided sweet water for the people to drink. Is it just a coincidence that this women is consistently associated with water—a life-sustaining substance? The rabbinic tradition (which will be examined in the next chapter) teaches that it is not an accident, but rather, that it is a result of Miriam's virtues that the Israelites are provided with water, nourished and cared for throughout their long journey in the wilderness.

Though we may lament the fact that Miriam's death is recorded in such a terse manner, it is striking that it is mentioned at all. She is one of the few figures that is mentioned continually throughout the wilderness trek (along with Moses and Aaron), while so many others disappeared without mention (for example, Zipporah and Yitro).

Burns notes that this hints at the fact that she must have been a figure "of some significant whose memory was valued in Israelite tradition."[90]

This death notice elevates Miriam's role as a leader in the Israelite community. Simply by including her death in the same chapter as Aaron's death, she becomes more closely associated with Aaron. In this chapter we are given a full accounting of the rationale for why Aaron and Moses will not enter Canaan with the Israelites. By noting her death here, we are given a reason as to why she did not enter as well. It is interesting to realize that the deaths of Miriam, Aaron and Moses coincide with the last three stops on the wilderness journey. Burns believes that this was not an accident, but rather contributes to the tradition that Miriam was a leader among the Israelites in the wilderness.[91]

[90] Burns, 120.
[91] Burns, 120.

Part 5: Miriam in Deuteronomy 24

Genre

The last mention of Miriam in the Torah is in Deuteronomy 24:9. To understand this reference, we need to put the verse in its context. Deuteronomy 24 is a collection of laws—civil, criminal, family—all intended to create a balanced community. These laws are presented in a variety of different ways. Sometimes the Israelites are simply commanded to obey; other times Moses reminds them that if they do not follow the laws they will incur God's wrath; occasionally, although rarely, there is a justification for the laws given; and sometimes the law is tied to an event that has occurred earlier in the Torah. Such is the case with Deuteronomy 24:8-9. This is an example of Moses warning the Israelites to follow his instructions, or they will face the same consequence as Miriam. Miriam is used as an illustration of what happens when one fails to heed God's word, or does something that God disapproves of.

This verse falls within the law collections and clearly is "intended as a directive to the community in handling cases of leprosy." However, as Burns continues to explain, "It does not take the form of a legal prescription."[92] The legal prescriptions that Burns refers to are the "conditional" or "apodictic" laws that are regularly found within Deuteronomy. One example of a conditional law can be found within this Torah portion is in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which describes the law if a man takes a wife and then decides to divorce her. In such a case, if she marries again and is divorced a second time, or widowed, the first husband may not marry her again. We can tell that this is a

[92] Burns, 102.

conditional law because it uses a formulaic expression that begins with the Hebrew word *ki*, an indication that a conditional law will follow. Furthermore, this law sets out certain guidelines, certain condition under which a remarriage may be possible. In contrast, an apodictic law states the law clearly, with no exceptions to the rule, and often little or no explanation. In Deuteronomy 16:19 we read, "You shall not judge unfairly; you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for brides blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just" (JPS translation).

Deuteronomy 24:8-9 follows neither of these models. It is written in a more cautionary style and connected with a historical event, the exodus from Egypt. This event is frequently mentioned and tied into laws that Moses communicates to the Israelites. Deuteronomy 15:12-15 details the laws of regarding the release of debt servants. This passage concludes with a reminder, "Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and your God Adonai redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today" (Deuteronomy 15:15; JPS translation). Another example can be found in Deuteronomy 23:4-7, in which the Israelites are commanded to not to allow Ammonites or Moabites into their congregation. "because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you" (Deuteronomy 23:5; JPS translation). Each of these examples references an event in the history of the Israelites as justification for the implementation of that particular law. However, in Deuteronomy 15, the law regarding the debt servants is also written in a conditional style, beginning with the Hebrew word *ki*, and providing certain circumstances for which the servant must be treated in specific ways.

Deuteronomy 24:8-9 is not written in the same demanding and harsh language with which Deuteronomy 23:4-7 is written. With regard to skin afflictions, Moses is asking the Israelites to be careful, and to obey the instructions of the priests. All three of these passages reference a historical moment, yet Deuteronomy 24 is the only that specifically mentions one person. We read in Deuteronomy 24:9 "Remember what Adonai your God did to Miriam on your way out of Egypt." Though the rescue from Egypt is referenced, this historical event is more about how Adonai punished Miriam in Numbers 12. These two verses fall within a collection of laws, and we certainly can call it a directive. The people are given instructions on what they must do if they are afflicted with leprosy. However, more than it is law, or a directive, it is a word of warning; a cautionary tale of what can happen if you do not obey God, or when you incur God's wrath.

Literary Setting

The book of Deuteronomy is concerned with creating a just society, in which people of different socio-economic backgrounds are all treated fairly. In some cases the laws of this portion seem to flow naturally and topically. Many of the laws have to do with different types of relationships. However, in other cases, laws seem to be inserted randomly and without any thought to their order or flow. Such would seem to be the case with the law regarding skin affliction found in Deuteronomy 24:8-9, at least on the surface. As Rita Burns writes, "Since the wider context contains laws covering broad

areas, it is difficult to be certain that there was a strict principle of organization which brought the passage about leprosy into its present context."[93]

The reference to Miriam is found among last chapters of the Torah, within the portion entitled *Ki Teitzei*. Moses is in the midst communicating God's final exhortations and laws to the Israelites. Deuteronomy 24 is just one chapter in a series of a collection of laws, including laws about family relations, neighbors, clothing, sexual misconduct, and forbidden relationships. Chapter 24 opens by describing certain marriage and divorce laws. Moses then continues by describing laws having to do with objects taken in pawn, kidnapping, skin afflictions, obtaining pledges and paying wages. All of the surrounding verses (Deuteronomy 24:6, 7, 10ff) detail laws designed to protect the vulnerable, in particular the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 details laws regarding forbidden remarriages. These verses make it clear that a man may not remarry a woman if she has been married to a different man in the interim. Continuing the theme of marriage, verse 5 tells us that a newly married man "shall not go out with the army or be assigned to it for any purpose" (Deuteronomy 24:5; JPS translation). A man may be exempted from army service for one year so that he might give happiness to his new wife. One can understand these laws as designed to protect women. A man is able to divorce his wife if she "fails to please him" (Deuteronomy 24:1; JPS translation), seemingly giving the man great power to begin and end a marriage based on his criteria. However, once ended, if the woman decides to move on, marrying someone else, the first husband is unable to reclaim her as his wife, granting her greater power and protection from the man who has set her aside.

[93] Burns, 102.

Similarly, the women were considered in verse 5, by requiring a man to stay home with his bride, seeing to her happiness.

Deuteronomy 24:6 suddenly shifts topic, to deal with a repayment of a loan. This subject will be returned to in verse 10. Verse 6 tells us "A handmill or an upper millstone shall not be taken in pawn, for that would be taking someone's life in pawn" (Deuteronomy 24:6; JPS translation). Jeffery Tigay explains, "To increase the likelihood of repayment, in at least some cases lenders had a right to take property from their debtors to induce them to repay what they had borrowed."[94] However, one could not take a handmill, since this was necessary for making food and without it one would starve. Nor could a lender enter a person's home to seize property (Deuteronomy 24:10). These laws were implemented to protect the debtor, as the more vulnerable party, from humiliation, confrontation or starvation. Deuteronomy 24:7, detailing the punishment for kidnapping, seemingly is unrelated to the surrounding verses. We learn that "If a man is found to have kidnapped a fellow Israelite, enslaving him or selling him, that kidnapper shall die; thus you will sweep out evil from your midst" (JPS translation). The verse immediately preceding verse 7 is concerned with seizure of property, particularly property necessary to live. This verse deals with what happens to someone who kidnaps a person, rather than an object. All of these verses, seemingly unrelated, are connected in that they are concerned with potentially vulnerable members of the community. Therefore, systems are put in place to protect them, and to assure that they will not be taken advantage of. If these systems fail (as in verse 7), the Torah is clear about what the punishment must be.

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[94] Jeffrey Tigay. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 223.

In Deuteronomy 24:8-9, Moses instructs the Israelites to deals with leprosy in the manner according to the teaching of the Levite priests. One explanation for this seeming digressions is that "the requirement in the next law, that a creditor remain outside the house of a debtor whose property he wants to distrain (v. 5), is reminiscent of the requirement that a leper reside outside the camp during his observation period and outside his tent during purification."[95] Often the laws are associated by only a phrase, a key word or an idea. The organization of these laws might lead one to believe that perhaps lepers are also considered a disadvantaged group who also need protecting.

The injunction to remember Miriam is generally read as a reminder of her challenge to Moses, or her gossip about Moses' wife in Numbers 12. But we might examine this connection on a deeper level, and recall that the Israelites did not continue their wilderness trek until Miriam was readmitted to the camp (Numbers 12:15). Perhaps this sign of solidarity also indicates their humane treatment of a woman with *tzaraat* and is intended to serve as an example for future generations of Israelites to follow.

Intention

In Deuteronomy 24:8-9 Moses addresses what the Israelites must do if they become infected with leprosy. These verses, however, presuppose a certain amount of knowledge. They assume that the reader knows something about treatment of leprosy as laid out in Leviticus 13-14. Leviticus 13 details when a person must go to a priest to have their skin affliction examined. Thus we read in Leviticus 13:1, "When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash or a discoloration and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his

[95] Tigay 458.

sons, the priests" (JPS translation). The priest must then examine the skin, determine if the person is impure, and if or how long that person must be isolated from the community. This chapter is full of details regarding how the skin may look, the deeper of the rash, how it might spread, and how the priest must act in every case. This chapter is clearly written as an instruction manual for the priests, and is not designed for the average Israelite. It is not up to them to diagnose their affliction, nor to determine their cure. While Leviticus 13 provides the tools necessarily for diagnosis, Leviticus 14 details the ritual for purification from such a disease. Deuteronomy 24:8 assumes that Israelites are familiar on some level with the process necessary to treat a skin affliction, but reminds them that this disease causes a ritual impurity and must be diagnosed and treated by a priest.

These verses assume that the reader is familiar with another piece of information from earlier in the Torah as well. Verse 9 presupposes that one knows the story of Miriam's punishment which appears in Numbers 12. Though they may not have known the story in the form in which we read it today, some tradition of Miriam's *tzaraat* was known to the Israelites and used as a warning in these verses. Moses does not retell the story, but only alludes to how God punished Miriam, saying, "Remember what Adonai your God did to Miriam on your way out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 24:9; my translation). This reference, spoken immediately after instructing the Israelites on how to treat *tzaraat*, reminds us, as it must have reminded the Israelites of Miriam's severe reprimand. Rita Burns writes, quoting S.R. Driver, "the admonition point(s) the reader not only to how Miriam was suddenly smitten with leprosy but also to the seriousness with which it was

handled."[96] With just one sentence of warning, the Israelites are asked to consider the reason for Miriam's punishment, and how she was isolated from the community until she was healed. The Israelites are taught, and we learn as well from these verses, that "both the disease and its cure are under God's control."[97] It is possible, of course, that other aspects of the Numbers 12 account are intended as the relevant memory. The reference may be less a reminder of the punishment and more a reminder of the need for seven days isolation period. Most interpreters apparently do not follow this line of interpretation.

Deuteronomy 24:9 marks the only time in the Torah that Moses speaks directly about Miriam. His unnamed sister watched over him as he was placed in a basket on the Nile (Exodus 2:4); they both sang the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15); Moses prayed for her when she was stricken with *tzaraat* saying, *El na refa-na la*, "O God please heal her" (Numbers 12:13); and they are named as a trio together with Aaron a few times (Numbers 26:59, Micah 6:4 and I Chronicles 5:29). However, despite these regular interactions, this is the first time that Moses explicitly mentions Miriam by name. Ironically, it is not even to speak to her directly—something which never occurs in the Torah—but only to allude to a troublesome event in her life. Furthermore, this event that Moses reminds the Israelites of is likely the low point in Miriam's story. Surely this would not be how she might have wished her brother and her community to remember her. This is not a glowing memory about Miriam's contributions and leadership. It is a negative warning to the community.

It is necessary to reflect on why this is the only time we see Moses speaking directly about Miriam. Of course it is possible that there were other instances of him

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[96] Burns, 104.
[97] Burns, 104.

speaking about or to his sister that redactors opted not to include in the Torah's final form. However, since we have no evidence of this, we cannot firmly draw these conclusions. In Numbers 12, Miriam was punished for challenging Moses' authority or speaking ill of Moses' wife. Although scholars may dispute the reason behind Miriam's punishment, both explanations are connected to Moses. Perhaps one could understand this reference as a continued sibling rivalry. Miriam criticized him on account of his wife and challenged his authority, so it is plausible to argue that Moses might not want to remember her with high praise. However, it is unlikely that this reference is prompted by such a petty rivalry. More likely, Moses' message does not pertain to Miriam as his sister but as the leader of their community. He was first and foremost a public figure. She too, was a leader of the community, as well as being Moses and Aaron's sister. Her personal story ceases to be a private one but becomes a lesson for future generations, however we understand it. Moreover, she was not immune from consequences for her actions, or from the isolation required for purification. Therefore, no Israelite should expect any special treatment from God or the priests.

These verses provide new information about Miriam, and they also may shed new light on Moses' relationship and interactions with her. It is problematic that only her condition is remembered in these verses, and nothing else is retold about the incident in Numbers 12. Although this was all that may have been relevant to the section and to the law sections, in paring down the story in this way, Miriam's role is reduced to a warning. Yet, Miriam was isolated from the camp for seven days to be purified from leprosy, and she was welcomed back. However, Phyllis Trible writes that Miriam's period outside the camp did not restore her to wholeness. "Miriam remains marked woman, indeed, a

warning for generations to come."[98] She might have remained a warning, but she also remained a part of Israelite history. In referencing her illness, Moses informs us that Miriam and her story remained a significant part of the Israelite wilderness tradition.

[98] Trible, 178.

Part 6: Miriam in Micah 6

Genre

A particularly intriguing reference to Miriam appears in Micah 6:4, a prophetic book, attributed to the 8th century prophet Micah. In Micah 6:4 we read, "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and from the house of slavery I redeemed you and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam" (my translation). This mention of Miriam is part of Micah's message that includes 6:1-5 and is a feature of the larger unit that extends perhaps also to verse 8.

In this book, Micah presents God's word to the people of Israel and Judah. At times throughout this book Micah informs his audience that God has specifically declare, or spoken certain phrases, at other times, Micah's voice becomes intertwined with God's so that it becomes unclear whether it is Micah speaking on his own behalf or on God's. In other words, it is not always possible to determine whether the "I" is intended as Micah or as God. This phenomenon reflects the life of a prophet, however, constantly speaking on behalf of Adonai, often presenting God's words as their own as they remind the Israelites of proper behavior, urging them to return to God.

It is clear, however, that in Micah chapter 6, God is speaking, and asking Micah to represent God's interests to the Israelites. Micah 6:1 begins, "Hear what Adonai is saying." This introduction asks the Israelites to listen to God's speech, which follows as a God's case against Israel. In this passage, written in the first-person and addressing a plural audience, God initiates this case, asking the mountains and the foundations of the earth to listen to this case (v. 2), and summoning Israel to court. This section is an

example of the genre known as "lawsuit speech," found throughout the prophetic books, including in Isaiah 1:2-3, 18-20, 3:13-15, Jeremiah 2:4-13, Hosea 4:1-3, and Malachi 3:5. There are often different purposes for these lawsuit speeches, and they can vary in structure. Generally there is a summons to some natural element. In this case the mountains and foundations of the earth are invoked as witnesses or judges; however, heaven and earth are often called to participate in this kind of legal controversy. Additionally, there is usually a reference to some aspect of Israel's history (the promise to the ancestors, exodus, wilderness, entry into the Promised Land).[99] As James Luther Mays writes, "They have been named 'covenant lawsuit speeches' because these features show that the issue at stake in the controversy is the covenant between YHWH and Israel."[100]

Thus, for example, Isaiah 1:2-3, like Micah 6, begins with the plural imperative *shimu* (plural "hear"), and calls upon the natural elements of heaven and earth to witness God's case. Isaiah pleads on God's behalf, telling the people and witnesses that Israel has sinned, and turned their backs on God. In this lawsuit speech, however, unlike in Micah, there is no appeal to historical events, no reminder off all the ways in which God has saved them. In contrast, Jeremiah 2:4, beginning with the same verb as Isaiah and Micah, does not call on the natural elements, but does remind the Israelites of their salvation for the land of Egypt, their journey throughout the wilderness, and their entry into the Promised Land (Jeremiah 2:6-7). Regardless of whether all of the elements are included in each of the examples, the use of language and theme remains consistent. In each case, God is angry with God's people for turning away, sinning and rebelling

[99] James Luther Mays. *Micah: A Commentary*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 129.
[100] Mays, 129.

against God. This lawsuit speech is one method of God communicating with the Israelites, and using the prophets as messenger. This genre is drawn from the sphere of legal practice in Israel, and uses language and a structure that the Israelites are familiar with so that God's message can be heard and understood.[101] In Micah, the history of redemption that forms the basis of God's accusation against Israel inclines the reference to Miriam.

Literary Setting

Micah prophecies are collected as the sixth book in the collection of the "twelve prophets." His book falls after Obadiah and before Habbakuk. According to Micah 1:1, he prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, and can therefore be placed during the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. Michael Fishbane explains that "the overall structure of the Book of Micah is threefold."[102] The first part (Micah 1:2-3:12) is made up of a series of judgments against Samaria and Jerusalem. This section is contains announcement of disasters that will befall the Israelites as a result of their sinful and deceitful behavior. The second section (Micah 4:1-5:15) shifts tone and focus entirely, becoming more hopeful. In these chapters Micah assures the Israelites that Zion will be restored and offers them consolation. The third section (Micah 6:1-7:20) repeats material from the first two sections. Fishbane suggests that it seems anticlimactic following the doom and restorative sequence that it follows.[103]

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[101] Mays, 129.
[102] Michael Fishbane. *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 563.
[103] Fishbane, 563.

However, Micah 6:4 is found within this third section and deserves a closer reading. Although chapter 6 returns to a note of chiding found within the early chapters of Micah, it leads to a positive note. Perhaps that is what makes God's lawsuit speech so much more dramatic. Following two chapters of a promise of renewal and restoration, God's anger at the Israelites seemingly comes out of nowhere. Chapter 5 includes promises that Israel will be saved by God; they shall defeat their enemies with God guiding them. Micah 5:7 compares Israel to a "fierce lion among flocks of sheep." This chapter concludes with God's anger focused on Israel's enemies not Israel as God says, "In anger and wrath will I wreak retribution on the nations that have not obeyed" (JPS translation).

The previous chapter laid before the audience a hopeful future (Micah 5:1-8) and a dismal one (Micah 5:9-14). Yet, God's fury against the disobedient nations suddenly shifts to the Israelites in chapter 6 as God presents a case before them. Despite God's anger, God does not abandon the Israelites, continuing to call them *ami*-"my people" (v. 3). Following God's recital of past acts of salvation, the people are given the opportunity to respond, wondering how to approach God, how to ask forgiveness for their many sins. God reminds the Israelites of the exodus from Egypt, Balak plotting against them, and the crossing of the Jordan, all without explicit detail. While these events are mentioned regularly in some form throughout the prophetic books, they are not retold extensively. This indicates that these events are a part of the collective memory of the Israelites of this generation. They are clearly aware of the earlier history of their ancestors and it is therefore unnecessary to repeat full accounts of God's miraculous deeds. They may

regularly need reminders of all that God has done for them, but they know the story and the characters.

Micah provides an answer for the people's question as to how to right their wrongs, how to show respect once more for God. He instructs them, "Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God" (Micah 6:8; JPS translation). This is the message that Micah and God seek to impart to the Israelites before the restoration. They need to be reminded what is expected of them as they enter the Promised Land once more. Chapter 5 informs that them that restoration and redemption is coming, but they must return to Adonai first.

Intention

God recounts four saving acts in this passage: the bringing out from Egypt; the appointment of leaders; the blessing by Balaam; and the crossing of the Jordan. Each of these acts refers to this same time period—the period in which Miriam, along with Moses and Aaron, had their greatest authority in leading the Israelites.

Although they have appeared together in other circumstances, Micah 6:4 marks the first and only time Moses, Aaron and Miriam are linked together as leaders of the community. They are mentioned together in Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 5:29. However, these two verses connect them as siblings, not as leaders of the community. In Numbers 26:59 we read, "The name of Amram's wife was Yocheved daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt; she bore to Amram, Aaron and Moses and their sister Miriam." 1 Chronicles 5:29 offers a similar genealogy, "The children of Amram: Aaron, Moses and Miriam. The sons of Aaron: Nadab, Avihu, Eleazar and Itamar."

Micah 6:4 is a significant verse when examining Miriam's role in the Bible, since it is one of two places that she is mentioned outside of the Torah. This is the only time that she is referenced in the prophetic works, which is rather noteworthy, especially when considering that this is the only place that Aaron is mentioned by names within the prophetic books. In fact, within the prophetic corpus Moses is only referenced in Isaiah 63:11-12, Jeremiah 15:1, and Malachi 3:22. Some scholars suggest that Jeremiah 31:4 alludes to Miriam and Exodus 15:20-21, when speaking about timbrels and dancing. Only two other women from the Torah are mentioned by name in the prophetic books: Sarah (Isaiah 51:1-2) and Rachel (Jeremiah 31:14/15).

Miriam is the only woman that is mentioned by named in the Book of Micah. It is more noteworthy that she appears in this verse alongside Moses and Aaron. We read in Micah 6:4, "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and from the house of slavery I redeemed you and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam." The following verse opens with the Hebrew word *ami*, generally translated as "my people." This is usually seen as an introduction to the following verse, as God says, "My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted against you." Oddly, however, some commentators choose to translate the *ami* as *imo* and attach it to verse 4 rather than verse 5. The verse would then read, "I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam with him." Delbert Hillers explains that there easily could have been a scribal error this word to be written incorrectly. Delbert refers to a similar context in Exodus 33:12 in order to validate his argument.[104] Mays suggests making this change so that the rhythm of the passage is

[104] Delbert Hillers. *Micah.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 76.

better balanced.[105] This kind of editing of the text would shift emphasis away from Miriam by centering on a single male leader.

However, the Hebrew is written as *ami* and to translate it in another form changes the entire meaning of the verse. Rita Burns agrees that "The proposed changes in this case are not supported by the ancient versions."[106] In verse 3 God also calls to the Israelites using the term *ami*, therefore it is entirely likely that this term would be repeated to achieve a dramatic and poetic effect. Although it is unusual that Moses, Aaron and Miriam are listed together, that is one aspect of the uniqueness of this verse. This verse makes that clear statement that all three were divinely commissioned and sent by God to lead the Israelites.

This verse is notable for other reasons as well. God simply reminds the people that they were brought out of Egypt and redeemed from slavery. They are given no detail about this act of salvation, which indicates that this historical event is a memorable one in their collective history. Clearly, no detail is needed in order for them to remember all that God has done for them. Similarly, concerning Moses, Aaron and Miriam. God (or the prophet) does not describe what these leaders of the community have done in the past, but explains only that they were sent before the people. The main point being that God sent them to redeem Israel and that they fulfilled their (and God's) mission. All three of them must be well-known in the community at the time, in order for this technique to have been effective. Each of these figures is identified by only one name. In contrast, the figures mentioned in the verse 5 are identified more fully, as they are called Balak king of Moab and Balaam son of Beor. This suggests that their names by themselves

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[105] Mays, 128.
[106] Burns, 108.

may not be familiar and have to be contextualized for their memory to carry Micah's message.

It is most remarkable that Miriam is identified by name alone, without any reference to her father or her husband; this contrasts with the way most women in the Bible are presented. In this verse, she is not even said to be related to Moses or Aaron. As Carol Newsom writes, "Instead, only her own name is given, so that she stands in her own rights as an independent woman."[107]

The appearance of Miriam in this verse, together with Moses and Aaron indicates that she, along with the two men elsewhere (but not here!) identified as her brothers, held a leadership role in the wilderness community. Although there is no specification of her role, this verse links her memory with that of Moses' and Aaron's for generations to come as a leader in the event. As Burns explains this act "is regarded as one of Yahweh's saving acts on behalf of the people of Israel."[108] There is no mention of Miriam's confrontation of Moses, nor of the punishment she receives (Numbers 12). Although this seemed to have been her legacy based on Moses' warning to the people in Deuteronomy 24:9, Micah 6:4 makes it clear that she was remembered for her other qualities as well in the 8th century BCE.

More can be discerned from this reference to Miriam. Miriam is labeled a prophet in Exodus 15:20, and claims this title in Numbers 12: 2 when she (and Aaron) asks, "Has Adonai only spoken through Moses? Surely God has also spoken through us?" Although God responds that there is no prophet comparable to Moses, and no one will have the same relationship with God as Moses did, Micah 6:4 indirectly supports

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[107] Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 230.
[108] Burns, 111.

Miriam's assertion that she is a prophet as well by placing her on par with Moses. God indicates in this verse that Miriam and Aaron were chosen along with Moses for the task of leading the people in the wilderness. The Hebrew used v'*eshlach*, "and I sent" is an unusual choice, explains Fishbane, since this verb "is commonly used in connection with a prophet or divine messenger."[109] God uses this verb as God speak to Moses from the burning bush, and says, "Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free my people, the Israelites, from Egypt" (Exodus 3:10; JPS translation). Other examples of this verb can be found in Exodus 23:20; Numbers 20:14 and Isaiah 6:8. The fact that the word *eshlach* is traditionally associated with prophets or divine messengers and is used here to describe God's commission of Moses, Aaron and Miriam is therefore significant. It validates their claim that God has spoken through them; it supports Miriam's title of prophetess; and it indicates that even though Moses may have been God's favored prophet, God sent all three of them as leaders before the Israelites. This is the reality that was remembered in Micah's time—Moses, Aaron and Miriam were regarded as important figures for the Israelites community to respect, honor and regard as leaders of the wilderness community.

Micah 6:4 further underscores the view that Miriam was in fact a leader specifically belonging to the wilderness period. We learn about her role at that time from Numbers 12, Numbers 20:1 and Deuteronomy 24:8-9; however, this verse which is found outside of the books of the Torah, supports the fact that her story took place during the wanderings in the desert. Micah was written long after the exodus and the trek through the wilderness. As noted, scholars have identified him as an eighth-century prophet.[110]

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[109] Fishbane, 248.
[110] Burns, 112; Fishbane, 562.

Yet, even so long after she was thought to have lived, Miriam remained a significant part of Israel's memory as one of its most important leader for the formative event in Israel's foundational story. Her memory did not rest on the fact that she was related to Moses and Aaron as a sister; she was remembered for her own acts, and her own leadership. Although what has been preserved of her tradition may be minor, she left a lasting legacy that has not been forgotten.

Chapter Two: Miriam in Rabbinic Texts

Miriam is named seven times in the Bible. In addition, we first meet her as the unnamed sister of Moses in Exodus 2. However, throughout history, most Bible scholars, and rabbinic commentators have concluded that this young girl watching over her brother is the same Miriam that is named in seven other places throughout the Torah. Despite our recent desire to elevate her into a female role model, Miriam's presence in the Bible is limited. It would seem that the biblical authors knew, or chose to include relatively little about her. The stories we are told about Miriam, and the brief allusions made to her in a few verses provide for us a very fragmented description of this woman and her life. We are able to analyze the text and draw our own conclusions about who Miriam was and what some of her roles among the Israelites must have been, but only to a limited extent.

Although her relative position in the Bible is somewhat unclear, the numerous rabbinic references to her indicate that the rabbis viewed her as an important figure within their tradition. They sought to fill in some of her background, to explain who she was, and what she did that deemed her worthy of the title prophetess.

According to rabbinic traditions, Miriam's childhood occurred during a tumultuous time for the Israelites living in Egypt. Some interpreters relate her name, coming from the Hebrew word *mar*, meaning "bitter" to the experiences of the Israelites in Egypt. We read in the Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, "the period of the most bitter servitude lasted exactly eighty-six years, beginning at the time Miriam was born. Why, in fact, was she named Miriam? Because, as R. Isaac said, Miriam means "bitterness," as in the verse, "And they made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar" (Exodus 1:14)."[111]

The first time Miriam appears in the biblical text, she is the unnamed sister of the infant Moses. The rabbis had several difficulties with her appearance at this point in the

[111] Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, piska 5.

narrative and sought to explain away the inconsistencies and confusions. First, they wanted to link this story to the previous one which details how the midwives saved the lives of male Israelites babies. To connect these two stories, they reinterpreted the account of the midwives identifying the little known Shiphrah and Puah as the better known Yocheved and Miriam. This midrash is told in several places, however in the Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b we read,

> And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives... (Exodus 1:15). Rav and Shmuel disagree. One said: A mother and her daughter, and one said: A daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. According to him who said a mother and her daughter, they were Yocheved and Miriam; and according to him who said a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, they were Yocheved and Elisheva.[112]

Elisheva is the woman who will become the wife of Aaron later in the Torah. But eventually, rabbinic literature rejects the idea that the midwives might have been Yocheved and Elisheva, preferring instead to further elevate Yocheved and Miriam's status amongst the Israelites. The Talmud continues with an explanation of why these women might have been called Shiphrah and Puah in addition to their other names.

> A beraita supports him who said a mother and her daughter, as it says in the beraita: Shiphrah is Yocheved. And why was she called Shiphrah? Because she beautifies the newborn. According to another opinion: Shiphrah—because the Children of Israel increased and multiplied in her days. Puah is Miriam. Any why was she called Puah? Because she cried out to the child and brought it forth. According to another opinion. Puah—because she used to declaim with divine inspiration and say: In the future my mother will give birth to a son who will redeem Israel.[113]

Miriam is portrayed through these midrashim as a woman who works with her mother to save and take care of newborn Israelites children. She is identified here as one who prophesies the birth of the redeemer of Israel. The midwives are generally considered to be heroic within the narrative of the Israelites slavery in Egypt. It was their disobedience

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[112] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b; Exodus Rabbah 1:13.
[113] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b; Exodus Rabbah 1:13.

of Pharaoh's command that allowed infants to live, and another generation of Israelites to survive. By attributing this role to Miriam, the rabbis have given her the credit of being one who saves lives, and deemed her worthy of the highest praise.

Miriam not only worked to save the next generation of Israelites, but she also was responsible for the success of her parent's marriage. According to the rabbinic texts, Amram, Miriam's father, decides to divorce his wife, Yocheved because of the hardship imposed by slavery. The Talmud teaches us that Amram was the greatest man of his generation;[114] as a result of being a leader, after his separation from his wife, all the Israelite men began divorcing their wives. There are variations on this story in different rabbinic collections. Some explain that Amram was despondent after Pharaoh's decree to kill any male children, and felt that divorce was the only way to avoid the birth and death of a son.[115] Another tradition suggests that Amram (the head of the Sanhedrin) and his court ordered the Israelites to cease all sexual relations. This order resulted in widespread divorce within the community.[116]

Regardless of the reason for his separation from his wife, this action upsets Miriam. She felt compelled to intervene and save her parent's marriage. In reference to his decision to leave, Miriam declared,

> Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's because Pharaoh has only decreed against males but you have decreed against males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas you have decreed concerning this world and the World to Come. In the case of the wicked Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in your case, because you are righteous, it is certain that your decree will be fulfilled.[117]

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[114] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a.
[115] Yalkut Shimoni 1:165; Exodus Rabbah 1:19; Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a.
[116] Pesikta Rabbati, piska 43:4.
[117] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a; Exodus Rabbah 1:13.

In the Talmudic variation of this account, it appears that Amram was impressed by his daughter's words and recognized the truth in them, for he returned to his wife, and all of the Israelite men followed his example.

In addition to adding detail about Miriam's life, this midrash also serves to explain an inconsistency in the biblical text. In Exodus 2:1-2 we read, "And a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite daughter. And the woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. And she saw that he was good and she hid him for three months." These verses imply that Moses was the first born son for this man and woman. In verse 4, though, we learn that he had an older sister. If we use the rabbinic texts to understand this narrative, Miriam was born to Amram and Yocheved during their first marriage. Amram divorced and remarried Yocheved, and they had another child—Moses. Moses was the first child of their second marriage. Therefore, though he does have an older sister, the biblical text was not entirely remiss in its suggestion that Moses was the first born.

In the story of Miriam and Amram, Miriam is represented as being thoughtful, and devoted to her family. She was courageous enough to stand up to her father, criticizing him for what she believed was inappropriate behavior. It was as a result of this reunion of her parents that Moses was born. Her prophecy regarding the birth of Moses as redeemer of the Israelites is often linked with her insistence that her father return to her mother. Numbers Rabbah 13:20 explains "that the sister of Aaron had prophesied and told her father to return to his wife, for it was destined for a son to come forth from her who would redeem Israel." She was aware that the preservation of their marriage was critical to the freedom and survival of the Israelites. Although she is called

a prophet in Exodus 15:20, it is never explicitly clear in the Bible what she did to earn this title. With these kinds of midrashic additions, the rabbinic texts fill in this gap in the narrative, explaining that Miriam had prophetic visions since childhood, most importantly that regarding Moses.

There are many rabbinic texts that understand Miriam as prophesying that Moses would be Israel's savior. Greenberg notes that there are four different statements within the rabbinic texts used to describe her prophecies.[118] The most common being "My mother is destined to give birth to a son who will save Israel."[119] When Moses was born, and her prophecy seemed to be fulfilled, Miriam's parents were thrilled and Amram expressed his affection by kissing her on the head.[120] However, when it became necessary to abandon Moses on the Nile River, it seemed to her parents that her prophecy was an empty one. In their sorrow, Amram struck Miriam on the heading saying, "Where now is your prophesy?"[121] Determined to discover what would happen to her brother, Miriam stood on the shore of the river. Read through the lens of the biblical text her observation appears to be motivated by family loyalty. This midrash suggests that she was also moved by her desire to see her prophecy fulfilled. Amram and Yocheved doubted their son would survive, much less be the savior of the Israelites. However, Miriam trusted in her prophetic abilities. Greenberg writes, "As a statement confirming Miriam's prophetic role, this verse is interpreted by the rabbis to indicate that she was waiting for confirmation from God that her prophesy would be fulfilled."[122] Exodus

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[118] David Greenberg. *The Rabbinic Portrayal of Miriam.* (New York: Hebrew Union College Thesis work, 1978 88.
[119] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b; Midrash Proverbs 14:12; Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a; Exodus Rabbah 1:22.
[120] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b.
[121] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b.
[122] Greenberg, 33.

Rabbah 1:22 further explains, "'And his sister stood afar 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). .. "From afar", hinting at: "From afar the Lord appeared unto me" (Jeremiah 31:3).[123] From these rabbinic texts we learn that even as a child Miriam had a vested interest in the survival of her brother and of Israel.

In Exodus 15:20 Miriam is called both a prophetess and Aaron's sister. Seeking to connect these two labels, Rashi explains, "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.'"[124] This prophecy is realized, and celebrated as Moses, Miriam and Israel sing *Shirat Ha-yam*, the Song of the Sea, praising God for rescuing them from bondage. In Exodus 15:20, we are told that all the women went out dancing, with timbrels in their hands. The rabbis noted that it is unusual to have such instruments when fleeing slavery and wandering in the desert. They speculated as to where these timbrels may have come from. Rashi teaches, "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."[125] Miriam is regarded as a righteous woman, a leader of the women devoted to God. Furthermore, this passage indicates that her prophetic abilities were not limited to her childhood. Perhaps she prepared the women with their timbrels because she knew that God would redeem them.

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[123] Exodus Rabbah 1:22.
[124] Michael Carasik, ed. *The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot: Exodus*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 118; Also found in Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12b.
[125] Carasik, 118; Also found in Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Beshallah, parshah 10.

Numbers 12 offers Miriam's most controversial story in the Bible. She has been interpreted in this text in many different ways: As the discussion of the biblical text has shown, interpreters sometimes see Miriam in Numbers 12 as the jealous sister, desirous of her own power; she can be viewed as a gossip, eager to spread rumors about her sister-in-law; sometimes is portrayed as a sympathetic sister-in-law, critical of her brother; and in some cases she is criticized as a competitive woman, not wanting to share her role as a leader amongst the women with anyone else. The biblical text is vague about what Miriam's true complaint and motivations were, so the rabbinic texts pick up where the biblical text left off, creating their own explanations as to who this woman was.

There are many different understandings of Miriam in this text, if we analyze it through rabbinic literature. Yet, while this text provides ample opportunity for the rabbis to condemn Miriam, rebuking her for her challenge to Moses, and her criticism of his wife, they do so only mildly. Even here, in her most controversial text, the rabbis try to understand Miriam's motivation in a mostly positive light, although there certainly are examples of the rabbis expressing their disapproval of her actions.

Numbers 12:1 opens, "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses concerning the Cushite women who he had taken as his wife: for he had married a Cushite woman." Previously in Exodus 2:21 we learned that Moses married a Midianite woman named Zipporah. Is this Cushite woman the same person, or can this phrase be understood to mean something different? Ibn Ezra suggests that this wife was indeed Zipporah, and *cushite* is an adjective, meaning "dark-skinned."[126] Sifre Bamidbar supports Ibn Ezra's understanding but gives it a different nuance: that "just as a Cushite has differently

[126] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, ed. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 859.

colored skin, so Zipporah was distinguished in her beauty from among all women."[127] In rabbinic tradition, this woman is understood to be Zipporah, and the rabbis therefore, find it necessary to explain why Miriam and Aaron might have been talking about her.

In one of the most well-known rabbinic traditions regarding this verse Miriam is portrayed as a woman concerned about the needs of her sister-in-law. Rashi writes,

> And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses'—How did Miriam know that Moses had separated himself from his wife? R. Nathan answered: Miriam was with Zipporah when it was told to Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp' (Numbers 11:27). When Zipporah heard this, she exclaimed, 'Woe to the wives of these if they have anything to do with prophecy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband has separated from me! It was from this that Miriam learnt about it, and she told it to Aaron.[128]

Avot de Rabbi Nathan recounts this midrash as well and elaborates, with Miriam saying,

> The Divine word came to me yet I separated not from my husband. Aaron said: The Divine word came to me, yet I separated not from my wife; yea the Divine word came to our forefathers; yet they separated not from their wives. But since he prides himself on the prophetic heights he has attained and withdraws from society, he separated himself from his wife.[129]

This midrash, which indicates that Miriam spoke on behalf of her sister-in-law, not against her, seeks to connect the two comments made by Miriam and Aaron. Rather than viewing them as individual verses, from separate traditions that were at some point redacted together, the rabbis linked their remark about Moses' wife and their challenge to Moses together. In this text Miriam and Aaron criticize Moses' withdrawal from the duties of everyday life, accusing him of secluding himself unnaturally and for holy purposes. They argue that God speaks to them as well, and yet they are still able to have relationships with their spouses. This is an especially interesting twist, since there has

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[127] Sifre Bamidbar piska 99.
[128] Rashi on Numbers 12:1 quoted in Nehama Leibowitz. *Studies in Bamidbar*. (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1995), 130.
[129] Avot de Rabbi Nathan, chapter 9 as quoted in Leibowitz, 130.

been no mention in the biblical text of Miriam ever having a husband, which I will examine further below.

Although they are not entirely critical of Moses, there is no high praise from the rabbis towards Moses for his need to remain separate in order to be ritually pure. Miriam's words may have been spoken in a resentful tone, but she is seen as having good intentions. Miriam is concerned that her brother has abandoned his wife. Just as she sought to reunite her father and her mother as a child, she once again would like to see this couple back together. Devora Steinmetz writes,

> The early midrashim on Numbers 11 and 12 suggest that Miriam was concerned with Moses' separation from Zipporah specifically because this implies Moses' abdication as a father. And, if Moses refuses the role of father, his leadership will come to an end with his death—his son will not succeed him. Once again, Miriam seeks a way to compel a truant husband to rejoin his wife and to father children, or more exactly, to be a father to his children.[130]

Although the rabbis recognize that she was not innocent in this chapter, they seek to reinterpret her actions in a more positive light. They suggest that while she participated in *lashon ha-rah*, perhaps her intentions were not entirely destructive.

For Miriam's sins in Numbers 12, she is punished with leprosy. Some commentaries suggest that she was punished for speaking against her younger brother at all, since he was her superior.[131] Most rabbinic texts, however, imply that her punishment was a result of her gossiping. Rabbi Judah b. Levi teaches, "Anyone who is so arrogant as to speak against one greater than himself cause the plagues to attack him. And if you do not believe this, look to the pious Miriam as a warning to all slanderers."[132] Her punishment is referenced frequently in the rabbinic texts, as a reminder to those who are reading what might befall them if they gossip. Naomi Graetz

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[130] Devora Steinmetz, "A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash," *Prooftexts* 8.1 (1988), 49.
[131] Sifre Bamidbar piska 99.
[132] Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:9.

explains that the rabbis regard gossip as characteristic of women. She writes, "They reason that malicious gossip is to be associated with women who have nothing better to do with their time."[133] An example of this bias is found in Deuteronomy 6:11, "Women possess the four following characteristics: They are greedy, inquisitive, envious and indolent...The rabbis add two more characteristics: They are querulous and gossips. Whence do we know that they are gossips? For it is written, 'And Miriam spoke.'"[134] Ecclesiastes Rabbah explicitly connects Miriam's punishment with slander. "R. Manni interpreted the verse as alluding to Miriam...Miriam spoke slander with her mouth but all her limbs were punished."[135]

Although gossip is often understood to be the reason for Miriam's punishment within rabbinic texts, there is another explanation as well. Sifre Bamidbar sets forth an analogy:

> This matter can be compared to a human king who had a royal administrator in a (foreign) state. And the people of that state had spoken against him. The king said to them: "You have not spoken against my servant but against me. And if you will say that I am not known through his actions, this is more severe.[136]

This parable compares Moses to the servant, emphasizing how unique his role was. He was not simply the leader of the Israelites, but the representative of God. To challenge him was to challenge God. Thus Miriam did not speak out merely against her brother, but against God. For this crime, a punishment was necessary. Miriam is depicted as a righteous, honorable woman throughout most of the rabbinic texts. However, because of her gossip, and her criticism of Moses as the spokesman for God, she remains for the rabbis the symbol of what will happen if one engages in *lashon ha-ra.*

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[133] Naomi Graetz. "Did Miriam Talk Too Much?" *All the Women Followed Her.* (San Bruno: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001) 150.
[134] Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:11.
[135] Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:1.
[136] Sifre Bamidbar, piska 103.

In Numbers 12, as a result of her leprosy, Miriam was shut out of the Israelite camp for seven days. After this period of isolation from her friends and family, she was allowed back into the camp, and the Israelites continued on their journey (Numbers 12:15-16). The rabbis questioned who examined and diagnosed Miriam's condition. Generally this was a task for the Kohen/priest, however, there is no indication in the biblical text that Aaron acted in this capacity in this situation. Therefore, the rabbis teach that God acted as the Kohen/priest, announcing that she had leprosy, shutting her out of the camp, and then declaring that she was ritually clean seven days later, permitting to return to the community.[137] It was a great honor that God served as the Kohen for Miriam, suggesting that God did speak to Miriam.

Her status within the community and before God is underscored by the fact that they waited for her before continuing their trek in the wilderness. Sifre Zuta teaches that God decreed "Let Moses and Aaron and the Shekinah and the ark...wait for her seven days until she will become purified."[138] Miriam had served the Israelites with loyalty in the past, and therefore, she was deserving of their respect and devotion in her time of need. A second explanation for Israel's waiting makes reference to Miriam's childhood actions in Exodus 2. The Talmud explains, "There she waited a short while [for Moses], here [the Israelites waited for her] seven days."[139] Because as a young girl Miriam waited by the river, watching over Moses, Miriam was rewarded with Israel's waiting seven days for her.

Miriam has long been associated with water. The first time she is introduced, she is found standing next to the Nile River; her next appearance comes as the Israelites are

[137] Leviticus Rabbah 15:8.
[138] Sifre Zuta to Numbers 12:15.
[139] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11a.

crossing the sea and she leads the women in song, dance and praise. Several times, just a few verses after Miriam is mentioned in the text, the Israelites begin complaining due to the lack of water (Exodus 15:23; Numbers 20:2). Miraculously, God provides water and food for them, easing each of their complaints (Exodus 15:25; Numbers 20:11). A tradition arose in rabbinic sources, explaining Miriam's unique association with water by indicating that as a result of her merit, a well followed the Israelites around the desert, sustaining them on their journey. The Talmud teaches, "The well of water which the Israelites had along with them in the desert was given them for the sake of Miriam...When Miriam died, the well vanished, as it is written (Numbers, 20. 1): "Miriam died there, and was buried there"; and immediately afterwards it says: "And there was no water for the congregation"[140] Based on this text, Rashi and Ramban suggested that it was because of Miriam's merit and righteousness that the Israelites had the well during the forty years in the desert.[141] God supplied a mobile well to the Israelites as a reward for the good deeds of Miriam. However, when Miriam died, the water supply ended. The rabbis interpret this to mean that Israel was reliant upon Miriam for their very survival. Furthermore, the well was a sign from God of Miriam's importance to Israel.

Mishnah Avot 5:9 teaches that the well was one of the ten things created on the eve of the first Shabbat. This miraculous well is the same well, according to the rabbis, that appeared to water Abraham's flocks, and from which Rebecca drew water for

[140] Babylonian Talmud Taanit 9a.
[141] Rashi and Ramban on Numbers 20:1 (as quoted in "Blood and Water, Death and Life" by Rabbi Audrey Pollack. *The Women's Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, ed. Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003).

Eliezer and his camels.[142] Placing the well into the Patriarchal and Matriarchal period, the rabbis attach greater significance to Miriam. As a result of her righteousness, and her deep connection to God, she is linked with past and future generations.

In Micah 6:4 we read, "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and from the house of slavery I redeemed you and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam." Based on this verse, and understanding that God sent all three to be leaders of the community, Midrash Aharon extrapolates, "God provided Israel with three sustainers...Moses, Aaron and Miriam...And it was because of their merit that the Israelites were sustained in the wilderness."[143] The Talmud supports this opinion, stating, "Three good leaders were given to Israel, and they are: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; and three good gifts were given through them, namely: the well of water which the Israelites had along with them in the desert was given them for the sake of Miriam; the 'pillar of cloud which led them by day was given them on account of Aaron, and the Manna was given them for Moses' sake."[144] Framing it in this way, the Talmud not only indicates that Miriam was responsible for the sustenance of the Israelites, but it designates her as a chosen leader of the Israelites, alongside Moses and Aaron.

Genesis Rabbah understands Miriam's role as a divine leader as one that had been fated. Genesis 29:1-2 tells of Jacob's journey, "Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners. There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large" (JPS translation). Not only is this well considered to be Miriam's well, the same one that would later supply water to the Israelites in the desert,

[142] Genesis Rabbah 54:5; Genesis Rabbah 60:5.
[143] Midrash Aharon, as quoted in Greenberg, 40.
[144] Babylonian Talmud Taanit 9a.

but the "three flocks of sheep" refer to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, who serve as shepherds of God flock, Israel.[145] In these rabbinic texts, Miriam is credited as being a leader, on equal footing with her brothers. She is portrayed as one of the three sustainers, and redeemers, hand chosen by God to serve the Israelite community.

There is no mention in the Bible of Miriam having a husband or children. Unhappy with the idea that a woman might not be married, or perhaps as a reward for her good deeds, the rabbis ascribe her a husband and a distinguished lineage. We learn from the Talmud,

> And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses" (Exodus 1:21). Rab and Samuel disagree. One said they are the priestly and Levitical houses, and the other said they are the royal houses. One who says they are the priestly and Levitical houses: Aaron and Moses; and one who says they are the royal houses: for also David descended from Miriam, as it is written: "And Azubah died, and Caleb took unto him Ephrath, who bore him Hur," (1 Chronicles 2:19). And it is written: "Now David was the son of that Ephrathite etc." (1 Samuel 17:12).[146]

This rabbinic text uses seemingly unrelated biblical verses (1 Chronicles 2:18-20) which record the genealogy of Israelites, as its basis for giving Miriam this legacy. Using textual errors, and the ambiguous definition of the Hebrew word *holed*, the rabbis work this verse to interpret it the way that fits their meaning. This sugya of Talmud continues,

> And Caleb the son of Hezron begat children of Azubah his wife and of Jerioth.' and these were her sons: Jesher and Shobab and Ardon" (1 Chronicles 2:18)... Conclude, therefore, that Azubah is identical with Miriam; and why was her name called Azubah? Because all men left her [*'azabuhah*] at first. 'Begat!' But he was married to her! — R. Johanan said: Whoever marries a woman for the name of heaven, the text ascribes it to him as though he had begotten her. 'Jerioth' — [she was so named] because her face was like curtains. 'And these were her sons' — read not *baneha* [her sons] but *boneha* [her builders]..."And Ashhur the father of Tekoa had two wives, Helah and Naarah" (2 Chronicles 4:5). Ashhur is identical with Caleb; and why was his name called Ashhur? Because his face was blackened through his fasts. 'The father'- he became a father to her. 'Tekoa'- because he dedicated his heart to his father in heaven. 'Had two wives' — [this means] Miriam became like two wives. 'Helah and

[145] Genesis Rabbah 60:5.
[146] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b.

> Naarah' — she was not both Helah and Naarah, but at first she was Helah [an invalid] and finally Naarah [a young girl].[147]

None of the verses used to create this midrash mention Miriam, and only one of them refers to Caleb. However, linking them together, and reinterpreting them in a traditional rabbinic manner, the rabbis manage to explain that David is a descendant of Miriam. It is necessary, therefore, to ask, what the rabbis are saying about Miriam in their effort to prove that she was not only married, but that a great Israelite king can trace his roots back to her. Devora Steinmetz suggests one answer to this question might be that "the establishment of kinships, then, seems a fitting reward for Miriam, the midwife, according to this midrash, who guarantees a next generation and the figure who saves the infant Moses and makes sure that he is nurtured to be a leader of his people."[148] In this Talmudic passage Miriam's continuous reversal of fortune is emphasized. She had been deserted and sickly, and then she was youthful and fruitful. Miriam had suffered, and yet this text suggests that despite her sorrow and abandonment, it was appropriate that kings descend from her. By associating Miriam with this prestigious ancestry, the rabbis reward a woman attributed with leading and saving the Israelites.

Steinmetz notes that several midrashim about Miriam have parallel strands. This text identifies Miriam as Azubah, one who was deserted. Ironically, Miriam is portrayed in rabbinic texts as one who reunited husbands with their wives. She sent her father back to her mother, and she worried about Zipporah when Moses separated himself from her. Steinmetz writes, "The three midrashic stories are structurally parallel; they describe

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[147] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b-12a.
[148] Steinmetz, 43.

exactly the same relationship between three different, but related, husbands and wives."[149]

Although the rabbis may acknowledge that she was "one of the saviors," many of the rabbinic texts describe her interacting only with family members. Steinmetz writes, "She assists her mother in birthing the next generation, she compels her father to beget the nations' redeemer, she marries to for the purpose of having children and gives rise to kingship, and she talks with her sister-in-law and her brother about her concern for the continuity of leadership."[150] She certainly works for the benefit of the greater good, and on behalf of the Israelites, but Steinmetz would argue that in rabbinic literature there are not many examples of Miriam operating outside her familial world.

Perhaps this is an influence of the era during which the rabbis were writing. As Naomi Graetz writes, "To the rabbis, Miriam is a perfect role model, except for one thing: She is not married and does not have any children."[151] They were far more comfortable with women remaining at home and within their "proper place in society." Although they may have respected Miriam as a leader of the Israelites, it was far more sensible for them to portray her as a righteous married woman, devoted to God, her community, and the progenitor of a significant line. This was a woman whom the rabbis could encourage their wives and daughters to look to as a role model.

Miriam's death and burial in the Torah is recorded in one verse, "The Israelites, the entire community, came to the wilderness of Zin on the first month, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and she was buried there." However, her death is given far more attention in rabbinic literature. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana explains that "the

[149] Steinmetz, 51.
[150] Steinmetz, 57-58.
[151] Graetz, 146.

death of Miriam atoned for Israel's sins."[152] Even after her death Miriam serves the Israelites, advocating for them before God. Rabbinic texts seek to enhance the description of her death and burial, so that it was equal to that of Moses and Aaron. The rabbis teach, "Six there were over whom the Angel of Death had no dominion, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam."[153] It is significant to note that Miriam is the only woman listed among these six, and that her death is ranked along with the patriarchs and her brothers. Referencing Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34:5, this passage continues, "R. Eleazar said: Miriam also died by a kiss."[154] As Greenberg explains, this expression indicates that God was "actively involved in the burial of the truly righteous."[155] The rabbis chose to elevate Miriam's status in death to equal that of Moses' explaining that God treated them equally, drawing out their lives in the same tender manner. Even more notable than the rabbis praise of Miriam, is their attribution of prophetic status to her that is comparable to Moses and to Aaron. The Talmud tells us, "Where did Moses die? In the portion of Reuben, for it is written: And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto mount Nebo...It was called Nebo because three prophets [nebi'im] died there, viz. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."[156]

The Bible presents a fragmented picture of Miriam, depicting a few scenes from selected moments in her life. She seems to be an important leader of the Israelite community, sister to Moses and Aaron, and labeled a prophetess. She leads the women in song and dance praising God. Yet she also is remembered for having been divinely punished with leprosy. While the Bible offers a vague portrait of Miriam, rabbinic texts

[152] Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, piska 26.
[153] Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 17a.
[154] Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 17a.
[155] Greenberg, 72.
[156] Babylonian Talmud Sotah 13b.

seek to understand more deeply, who she was and what she should be recognized for. However, the rabbinic texts are not entirely consistent either. The rabbis recognize that Miriam played a critical role in the survival of the Israelites. She is portrayed as one of the midwives that saved infant Israelite boys, undeterred by Pharaoh's decree that every male child born must be killed. She watched over her brother protectively, anxious to make sure that he would live and that her prophesy that he would redeem the Israelites would come to fruition. Even as a young girl she was confident, determined and full of trust in God.

In these accounts, the rabbis regularly see Miriam as a righteous woman, seeking to do what is best for her family and for her community. She reunited her father and her mother, so that they might have a son that would save the Israelites. Even Miriam's most negative story in the Torah, criticism of Moses and his wife, is reinterpreted so that she is understood as a sympathetic sister-in-law. Although the rabbis condemn her for her slanderous actions, and hold her up as a warning for what might happen to one who gossips, we are also told that even as she was punished, she was honored by God and the Israelites.

Consequently, there is a tendency to want to see Miriam in the rabbinic texts as all-good. It is because of her merit that the Israelites had water in the desert throughout their journey. She is considered one of the "three redeemers" with Moses and Aaron, seemingly placed in an equal position. And Miriam is rewarded by the rabbis for all her virtue with an extraordinary genealogy.

I believe that the rabbis appreciated all that Miriam did within the Bible. I appreciate how they chose to expand her story, given her more details, portraying her as

a loyal, devoted woman. Yet I also believe that the rabbis had ulterior motives in how they choose to interpret Miriam's story. Miriam is shown through rabbinic literature to be extraordinarily faithful to her family, her community and to God. Once removed from political and public roles, she becomes the ideal female role model for the rabbis to emphasize for the communities of their era. The rabbinic texts highlight Miriam's actions within her family—showing her watching over her brother, reuniting husbands and wives that she is related to. The midrashim that illustrate her acting within the community show her working only for the best interests of Israelites or as a leader of the women (ex, serving as a midwife, leading the women in song and dance in the Song of the Sea). The rabbis do not dispute that Miriam was a prophetess. In fact, they underscore this characteristic, explaining the rationale for the title, and detailing further her relationship with God. The rabbis supported her having a deep connection with God.

In instances when Miriam failed to fit their criteria of a perfect female role model the rabbis managed to remedy the situation. Biblical Miriam is never associated with a husband or children, so they rabbis give her one. Having a single woman who is a leader of the community does not reflect their view of proper behavior for women in society. When Miriam speaks out in Numbers 12, the rabbis both reinterpret this passage, and they criticize her behavior—a message to members of their community, particularly female members, that slander is unacceptable behavior. Even Miriam, a righteous Biblical leader, was punished for engaging in this conduct.

In the rabbinic texts Miriam is exalted and given significant attention that goes beyond the biblical depictions. She is shown as constantly working for the betterment of the community and the survival of the nation. However, the way in which she is

portrayed in rabbinic literature—working from within her family and among the women—shows the bias of the rabbis, and the influence of their era. Nevertheless, within these texts, Miriam is clearly shown to be a righteous woman who is devoted to her family and the Israelites. The rabbis understand her to be a prophetess, a woman deeply connected to God.

Chapter Three: Deborah in the Bible

Part 1: Deborah in Judges 4

Genre

Deborah, the woman of Lappidot, stands out in the book of Judges as the only woman who is also a judge, the only judge who is also a prophet, and a composer of Israel's victory song. The report about Deborah appears in Judges 4-5: Judges 4 offers a prose account of her story; and Judges 5 reproduces a poem credited to her, expressing the meanings and significance of the events in which she takes the lead.

In Judges 4, Deborah is introduced sitting under the Palm of Deborah, judging Israel (*shoftah*), and making decisions as they came before her (verses 4-5). Deborah is an unusual figure in the Bible, since she is the only female judge. She does not only judge (*shoftah*) but she is also described as a *neviah* (prophetess) and can be seen as a potential military leader. In Judges 4:6-7 Deborah summons Barak, saying ""Behold, Adonai the God of Israel has commanded: Go, and draw toward Mount Tabor and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and Zebulun. And I will draw to you, to the wadi Kishon, Sisera, Jabin's army commander and his chariots and his troops and I will deliver him into your hands" (my translation). Barak is reluctant to do as Deborah commands, saying, "If you will go with me, I will go, and if you will not go with me, I will not go" (Judges 4:8; my translation). Deborah assures Barak that she will indeed be there with him (Judges 4:9). This account can be identified as a "call narrative." Although there are some differences from other examples found within this genre, the many similarities make it worth examining more closely.

As Daniel Block explains, "Call narratives typically begin with a personal encounter between the person called (in this case, Barak) and Yahweh or his messenger (here, Deborah)."[157] Generally we see God calling the person and providing him or her with specific instructions on what he or she must do. Often, this person protests the call, insisting that he or she is not equipped to fulfill this mission that God is sending him or her on. These cases are sometimes called "protested call narratives." However, God reassures the individual that he or she will indeed be able to accomplish all that is being asked of him or her, and he or she will experience God's constant presence. Famous "call narratives" include the call of Moses in Exodus 3-4 and (useful for our purpose) the call of Gideon in Judges 6. The "call narrative" of Judges 4 is less about Deborah being commissioned to become a prophet but rather her summoning Barak. This particular twist on call narratives portrays her as the one who calls, acting as God's messenger.

The call narrative in Judges 4 follows this model of a person addressed by God's messenger. Deborah appears in the narrative at exactly the same moment as the angel of Adonai appears in Judges 6, another example of a call narrative. The first three verse of Judges 4 detail what happened after Ehud died. The Israelites were once again being oppressed by the Canaanites, led by King Jabin and his army commander Sisera. We read, "The Israelites cried out to Adonai; for he had oppressed Israel ruthlessly for twenty years" (Judges 4:3; JPS translation). It was at this moment of desperation that Deborah in introduced into the story. Similarly, in Judges 6 we are told that the Israelites had offended Adonai, and were delivered into the hands of the Midianites (Judges 6:1). Again, "the Israelites cried out to Adonai on account of Midian" (Judges 6:7). Just after

[157] Daniel Block. "Why Deborah's Different." *Bible Review*. 17.3. (June 2001). 50.

Oosh-mohr tzay-tay-noo, oo-voh-ay-noo,
l'-chai-yeem ool-shah-lohm,
May-ah-tah v'-ahd oh-lahm.

May we always feel protected
because You are our merciful Ruler.
Guard us always and everywhere,
And bless us with life and peace.

***Hashkivaynu* – Shelter Us**

הַשְׁכִּיבֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשָׁלוֹם, וְהַעֲמִידֵנוּ מַלְכֵּנוּ לְחַיִּים.

Hahsh-kee-vay-noo Ah-doh-nai Eh-loh-hay-noo l'-shah-lohm,
v'-hah-ah- mee-day-noo mahl-kay-noo l'-chai-yeem.

Grant, O God, that we lie down in peace, and raise us up,
O Guardian, to life renewed.

Praise to You, O God of peace,
Whose love is always with us,
Who protects God's people Israel,
And protects Jerusalem in love.

(Repeat chorus.)

V'shamru

וְשָׁמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת
לְדֹרֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם. בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹת הִיא
לְעוֹלָם, כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְיָ אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ,
וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפַשׁ.

V'-shahm-roo v'-nay Yees-rah-ayl eht hah-Shah-baht, lah-ah-soht eht hah-Shah-baht l'-doh-roh-tahm b'-reet oh-lahm. Bay-nee oo-vayn b'-nay Yees-rah-ayl oht hee l'-oh-lahm, kee shay-sheht yah-meem ah-sah Ah-doh-nai eht hah-shah-mai-yeem v'-eht hah-ah-rehtz, oo-vai-yohm hahsh-vee-ee Shah-vaht vai-yee-nah-fahsh.

The children of Israel shall keep Shabbat, observing the Shabbat throughout the ages as a covenant for all time. It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days, Adonai made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day God ceased from work and was refreshed.

Introduction to the Amidah

Please rise.

אֲדֹנָי

שְׂפָתַי תִּפְתָּח

וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתֶךָ.

Adonai s'-fah-tai teef-tach oo-fee yah-geed

t'-hee-lah-teh-chah.

Eternal God, open my lips, that my mouth
may declare your glory.

***Avot v'Imahot* – Our Ancestors**

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ וֵאלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ: אֱלֹהֵי
אַבְרָהָם, אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק, וֵאלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב. אֱלֹהֵי שָׂרָה, אֱלֹהֵי רִבְקָה,
אֱלֹהֵי לֵאָה וֵאלֹהֵי רָחֵל. הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא, אֵל עֶלְיוֹן,
גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים טוֹבִים, וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל, וְזוֹכֵר חַסְדֵי אָבוֹת וְאִמָּהוֹת,
וּמֵבִיא גְּאֻלָּה לִבְנֵי בְנֵיהֶם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ בְּאַהֲבָה: מֶלֶךְ עוֹזֵר
וּמוֹשִׁיעַ וּמָגֵן. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מָגֵן אַבְרָהָם וְעֶזְרַת שָׂרָה.

Bah-rooch Ah-tah Ah-doh-nai, Eh-loh-hay-noo vay-loh-hay ah-voh-tay-noo v'-ee-moh-tay-noo: Eh-loh-hay Ahv-rah-ham, Eh-loh-hay Yitz- khahk, Vay-loh-hay Yah-ah-kov. Eh-loh-hay Sah-rah Eh-loh-hay Reev- kah, Eh-loh-hay Lay-ah, Vay-loh-hay Rah-chayl. Hah-ayl hah-gah-dohl hah-gee-bohr v'-hah-noh-rah, Ayl ehl-yon, goh-mayl chah-sah-deem toh- veem, v'-koh-nay hah-kohl, v'-zoh-chayr chas-day ah-voht v'-ee-mah- hoht, oo-may-vee g'-oo-lah leev-nay v'-nay-hem, l'-mah-ahn sh'-moh, b'- ah-hah-vah. Meh-lech oh-zayr oo-moh-shee-ah oo-mah-gayn Bah-rooch Ah-tah Ah-doh-nai, mah-gayn Ahv-rah-ham v'-ehz-raht Sah-rah.

Back cover

***G'vurot* – God's Strength**

אַתָּה גִּבּוֹר לְעוֹלָם אֲדֹנָי, מְחַיֵּה הַכֹּל אַתָּה, רַב לְהוֹשִׁיעַ. מְכַלְכֵּל
חַיִּים בְּחֶסֶד, מְחַיֵּה הַכֹּל בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים. סוֹמֵךְ נוֹפְלִים, וְרוֹפֵא
חוֹלִים, וּמַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים, וּמְקַיֵּם אֱמוּנָתוֹ לִישֵׁנֵי עָפָר. מִי כָמוֹךָ,
בַּעַל גְּבוּרוֹת, וּמִי דּוֹמֶה לָךְ, מֶלֶךְ מֵמִית וּמְחַיֶּה וּמַצְמִיחַ יְשׁוּעָה?
וְנֶאֱמָן אַתָּה לְהַחֲיוֹת הַכֹּל. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְחַיֵּה הַכֹּל.

Ah-tah gee-bohr l'-oh-lahm Ah-doh-nai, m'-chai-yay hah-kohl Ah-tah, rahv l'-hoh-shee-ah. M'-chahl-kayl chai-yeem b'-cheh-sehd, m'-chai-yay hah- kohl b'-rah-chah-meem rah-beem. Soh-maych nohf-leem, v'-roh-fay choh- leem, oo-mah-teer ah-soo-reem, oo-m'-chai-yaym eh-moo-nah-toh lee- shay-nay ah-fahr. Mee chah- moh-chah, bah-ahl g'-voo-roht, oo-mee doh- meh lahch, meh-lech may-meet oo-m'-chai-yay oo-mahtz-mee-ahch y'- shoo-ah? V'-neh-eh-mahn ah-tah l'-hah-chai-yoht hah-kohl. Bah-rooch Ah-tah Ah-doh-nai, m'-chai-yay hah-kohl.

Back cover

אַתָּה קָדוֹשׁ וְשִׁמְךָ קָדוֹשׁ, וּקְדוֹשִׁים בְּכָל יוֹם
יְהַלְלוּךָ סֶּלָה. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, הָאֵל הַקָּדוֹשׁ.

Ah-tah kah-dohsh v'-sheem-chah kah-dohsh, ook-doh-sheem b'-chohl yohm y'-hah-l'-loo-chah seh-lah. Bah-rooch Ah-tah Ah-doh-nai, hah-ayl hah-kah-dohsh.

You are holy, Your name is holy,
and those who are holy praise You every day.
Blessed are You, Adonai, the Holy God.

(Please be seated.)

We live in two worlds: the one that is, and the one that might be. Nothing is ordained for us: neither delight nor defeat, neither peace nor war. Life flows, and we must freely choose. We can, if we will, change the world that is, into the world that may come to be, as we were taught from of old:

Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from deceitful speech.

> *Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it;

> *loving all human beings, and bring them to the Torah.*

The whole Torah exists only to bring peace, as it is written:

> *Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.*

Let justice dwell in the wilderness, righteousness in the fruitful field,

for righteousness shall lead to peace; it shall bring quietness and confidence for ever.

Then all shall sit under their vines and under their fig trees,

and none shall make them afraid.

Silent Prayer

***Mi Sheberach* - Prayer for Healing**

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה לְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ
Mee sheh-bay-rahch ah-voh-tay-noo,
m'-kohr hahb'-rah-chah l'-ee-moh-tay-noo.

May the Source of strength, who blessed the ones before us.
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing,
and let us say: Amen.

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אִמּוֹתֵינוּ, מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ
Mee sheh-bay-rahch ee-moh-tay-noo,
m'-kohr hah-b'-rah-chah l'-ah-voh-tay-noo.

Bless those in need of healing with *r'fuah sh'leimah*,
the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit,
and let us say: Amen.

Back Cover

Martin Luther King, Jr.
1929-1968

"We Shall Overcome ..."

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We'll shall overcome someday.

We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

Let us adore
The ever-living God,
And render praise
Unto You
Who spread out the heavens
And established the earth,
Whose glory is revealed in the heavens above,
And whose greatness
Is manifest throughout the world.
You are our God; there is none else.

וַאֲנַחְנוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים, לִפְנֵי
מֶלֶךְ, מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא.

Vah-ah-nahch-noo kohr-eem oo-meesh-tah-chah-veem
oo-moh-deem, leef-nay meh-lehch, mah-l'-chay
hahm-lah-cheem, hah-kah-dohsh bah- rooch Hoo.

We therefore bow in awe and thanksgiving before the One who is Sovereign over all, the Holy One, blessed be God.

***Kaddish Yatom* – Mourner's Kaddish**

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא. בְּעָלְמָא דִּי בְרָא כִרְעוּתֵיהּ,
וְיַמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתֵיהּ בְּחַיֵּיכוֹן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוֹן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית
יִשְׂרָאֵל, בַּעֲגָלָא וּבִזְמַן קָרִיב, וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Yeet-gah-dahl v'-yeet-kah-dahsh sh'-may rah-bah. B'-ahl-mah dee v'-rah cheer-oo-tay, v'-yahm-leech mal-choo-tay b'-chai-yay-chohn uv-yoh-may- chohn u-v'-chai-yay d'-chohl bayt Yees-rah-ayl, ba-ah-gah-lah oo-veez- mahn kah-reev, v'-ee-m'-roo: Ah-mayn.

Let the glory of God be extolled, and God's great name be hallowed in the world whose creation God willed. May God rule in our own day, in our own lives, and in the life of all Israel, and let us say: Amen.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלַם וּלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא.

Y'-hay sh'-may rah-bah m'-voh-rahch l'-oh-lahm ool-ahl-may ahl-mai-yah.

Let God's great name be blessed for ever and ever.

יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, וְיִתְפָּאַר וְיִתְרוֹמַם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא, וְיִתְהַדַּר וְיִתְעַלֶּה
וְיִתְהַלַּל שְׁמֵהּ דְּקֻדְשָׁא, בְּרִיךְ הוּא, לְעֵלָּא מִן כָּל בִּרְכָתָא וְשִׁירָתָא,
תֻּשְׁבְּחָתָא וְנֶחֱמָתָא דַּאֲמִירָן בְּעָלְמָא, וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Yeet-bah-rahch v'-yeesh-tah-bach, v'-yeet-pah-ahr v'-yeet-roh-mahm v'- yeet-nah-seh, v'-yeet-hah-dar v'yeet-ah-leh v'-yeet-hah-lahl sh'-may d'-koo-d'-shah, b'-reech hoo, l'-ay-lah meen kohl beer-chah-tah v'-shee-rah- tah, toosh-b'-chah-tah v'-neh-cheh-mah-tah dah-ah-mee-rahn b'-ahl- mah v'-ee-m'-roo: A-mayn.

Beyond all the praises, songs, and adorations that we can utter
is the Holy One, the Blessed One, whom yet we glorify,
honor, and exalt. And let us say: Amen.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא, וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל-כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Y'-hay sh'-la-mah rah-bah meen sh'-mai-yah, v'-chai-yeem ah-lay-noo v'-ahl kohl Yees-rah-ayl, v'-ee-m'-roo: Ah-mayn.

For us and for all Israel, may the blessing of peace and the promise of life come true, and let us say: Amen.

עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם בִּמְרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Oh-seh shah-lohm beem-roh-mahv, Hoo yah-ah-seh shah-lohm ah-lay-noo v'-ahl kohl Yees-rah-ayl, v'-ee-m'-roo: Ah-mayn.

May the One who makes pace in the high heavens make peace for us and all Israel, and we say: Amen.

Closing Song

עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם בִּמְרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם
עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאִמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Oh-seh sha-lom beem-roh-mahv,
hoo yah-ah-seh shah-lohm ah-lay-noo (2 x's).

Yah-ah-seh shah-lohm, yah-ah-seh shah-lohm
Shah-lohm ah-lay-noo v'-ahl kohl Yees-ra-ayl (2 x's).

Last time: *V'ahl kohl hah-oh-lahm.*

May the One who causes peace to reign in the high heavens,
cause peace to reign among us, all Israel, and all the world,
and let us say: Amen.

Music by Michael Hunter Ochs