Abstract

This thesis, “Through Their Eyes, In Their Heart: The Rabbinic Handling of Biblical Miriam” analyzes texts from the classical rabbinic period, circa the second through seventh centuries C.E. It approaches the traditions about Miriam from the perspective of uncovering how the rabbis interpret and accommodate a biblical heroine who does not fit into their gendered, hierarchical worldview. Three main trends emerge. The rabbis mold Miriam to fit their expectations of a woman, both the positive aspects as a nurturing wife and mother and the negative aspect of someone who gossips. The rabbis limit her to more familiar and comfortable roles, but within those limits they expand on her character, elevate her and make her beloved. Finally, the rabbis seem to embrace her as a communal leader, even redeemer of the Israelites, even though this role runs counter to their own hierarchical paradigm.

Through Their Eyes, In Their Heart

The Rabbinic Handling of Biblical Miriam

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A Note on Translations

I use the Soncino translations of the Babylonian Talmud in this work, sometimes with slight modifications. Likewise, translations for The Jerusalem Talmud come from Jacob Neusner's *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*; translations of *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael* from *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* by Jacob Lauterbach; most translations of *Genesis Rabbah* and *Exodus Rabbah* from *The Midrash*, also from the Soncino Press in the 1930s; *Sifre Deuteronomy* from *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, translated and edited by Reuven Hammer. All biblical quotes that do not appear in the above works are based on the JPS 1985 translation, *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*. All other translations are mine, with thanks to Professor Lewis Barth, unless otherwise noted.

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INTRODUCTION

Miriam appears only six times in the Hebrew Bible, yet she is perhaps the major female character of the generation of the Exodus. [1] The Bible tells us little about her, although it calls her a prophetess when it first mentions her by name in Exodus 15:20. It never explicitly describes or explains why she merits the title prophet. She plays a major role in some key stories of the Exodus, but she does not fit into a woman's role of wife or mother in any of these stories.

The rabbis had a strong patriarchal and hierarchical mindset, in which a woman's place was at home as a wife and mother, and not as a communal leader. I am interested in how the rabbis handle the conundrum of Miriam. Their treatment of her is complex but surprisingly positive and relatively empowering.

Biblical Sources for Miriam

Exodus sets the stage for Israel's redemption by God at the hands of Moses with a story in Exodus 1-2 of Pharaoh's oppression and of resistance to Pharaoh by courageous and unnamed women. Pharaoh decrees that all male Hebrew newborns must be killed, [2] drowned in the Nile. [3] The women who resist him include two "Hebrew midwives" (who may have been Hebrews, or may have been Egyptian or non-Hebrew midwives who served the Hebrew women); [4] a "daughter of Levi"[5] gives birth to a son and hides him for three months, then puts him in a basket to float in the Nile rather than drown him[6]; the sister of the infant who watches over the floating infant, [7] and then convinces his rescuer to hire the infant's mother as its nursemaid; [8] and a daughter of the Pharaoh who sees the floating infant, rescues him and decides to raise him as her son, naming him Moses[9]. None of these women are named, and all of them are involved in rescuing Moses and ensuring that he survives to redeem the

Israelites. This is a kind of counter-narrative, in which the heroes, the people who have the courage to subvert power, are women. Many of these women are even non-Israelite women, including the person who names Moses.

Tradition assumes that the sister of Moses is Miriam, since the only named sister the Bible ascribes to Moses is Miriam.[10] In Exodus 15:20, immediately after the Israelites have fled across the parted Sea of Reeds, and the waters have come crashing down on the pursuing Egyptians, Miriam appears as a leader, singer and dancer: "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them: 'Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.'" After Moses leads the men in song, Miriam leads the women in celebration of God's victory and Israel's redemption. The women's participation is truncated—the Bible does not include their song. Since the one line Miriam sings is almost identical to the opening line of Moses' song[11], the Bible implies that the women sang the same song as the men.

Miriam does not appear again until Numbers 12, in which she and her brother Aaron challenge Moses' power. This story is a little mysterious, since the objection of Miriam and Aaron at one moment seems to be about Moses' Cushite wife, and the next moment about prophecy and power. It may a pastiche of two different sources.[12] God is enraged against Miriam and Aaron, rebukes them from the cloud covering the Tent, and punishes Miriam with *ṣara'at*, usually translated as "leprosy." Aaron pleads with Moses, Moses prays to God, and God heals her but insists she remain exiled from the camp seven days, saying, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut up out

of the camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted."[13] Once Miriam re-enters the camp, the Israelites resume their travels.

Miriam appears briefly three more times. The Bible records her death in Num. 20:1; Deut. 24:9 makes a cryptic comment, "Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt" while discussing leprosy; and Micah 6:4 mentions Miriam as one of the three leaders God gave the Israelites when God redeemed them from Egypt: "In fact, I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."

The biblical image of Miriam is confusing and sketchy, although clearly she mattered to the ancient Israelites and the biblical authors. According to Ex. 15:20 and Num. 12:2 she was a prophet, and according to both these accounts and Micah 6:4 she was a leader. That she appears in the Bible at all demonstrates her importance. Still, almost none of these biblical appearances indicate a normative female role for Miriam, either in biblical or rabbinic worldviews.

The Ground on Which I Stand

This study is a product of its time and place. In particular, I bring both a feminist lens to this thesis and a critical awareness of the binary, gendered worldview of the rabbis. The rabbis at least named people who did not fit easily into either the male or female label.[14] But the worlds from which they emerged[15] and the world they imagined in rabbinic texts was binary: male-female, and patriarchal.

Critical and feminist readings of rabbinic literature have made explicit the patriarchal worldview of the rabbis. As Shaye Cohen writes,

> Classical rabbinic Judaism has always been, and in many circles still is, a male-dominated culture, whose virtuosi and authorities are males, whose paragon of normality in all legal discussions is the adult Jewish male, whose legal rulings in many areas of life (notably marriage and ritual observance) accord men greater privilege than women, and whose values define public communal space as male space.[16]

I take as a starting point this androcentric world-view reflected in rabbinic literature. I also have the privilege of studying at a point in time when the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered equality movement has moved from activism to academia, and from the margins of liberal Jewish life into its institutions, as the Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation in the Reform Movement demonstrates. [17] Like the feminist movement before it, the LGBT movement has recovered voices that reflect LGBT experience from the corpus of Jewish literature. And like feminist scholars, the LGBT community readers have contributed a further tool for reading the rabbis, offering critiques of the gendered paradigm of the rabbis as well as uncovering ways the rabbis avoided, inverted or played with dominant, non-Jewish gendered views.[18]

The rabbis were aware that women, slaves, minors and alternatively-gendered individuals were not full participants in their society. They often tried to justify or nuance this marginalization, of women especially.[19] Many scholars have studied how the rabbis have handled these populations, and the differences and similarities in their positions. This thesis has no need to prove the rabbis' bias in which they themselves are the ideal and only full participants; rather, I use tools from feminist and LGBT scholarship to examine how the

rabbis handle someone who challenges their paradigm. Before embarking on this analysis I will examine first the rabbinic worldviews I assume in this work.

The Rabbinic Paradigm(s)

The rabbinic texts I analyze in this work mostly emerge in the second through the seventh centuries of the Common Era. The rabbis who contributed to them came from many different periods and cultural contexts.[20] The rabbis imagined a holy Israel, living out its covenant with God. The world they created with their laws and stories was both practical and imagined.[21] They used law—*halakhah*—and stories—*aggadah*—to uncover and realize the meanings of the word of God as inherited from Scripture and Tradition. This ideal world, however, although it had God at its heart, was the product of men. In the rabbinic lens, the rabbi, the *haver*, was in clearest focus. As Jacob Neusner writes, "The classical documents of the Judaism of the dual Torah, ca. 200-600 C.E. [=A.D.]—that is, the Judaism set forth by rabbinic literature and normative from antiquity to our own time—derive entirely from men. They moreover set forth a system that is for all practical purposes dominated by men."[22] Strongly influenced by the heavily patriarchal worlds of the Mediterranean and Near East of late antiquity, the rabbis created a paradigm in which the fullest realization of a human being was the free, male Jew—and the only full Jew was a free male.[23]

The rabbis conceived of their world through gendered lenses. By this I do not mean only that the Jewish *haver* was in clearest focus; I also mean that they thought in terms of male-female. Neusner captured this in his analysis of *Mishnah, Tosefta* and the Talmuds using the term "androgynous," by which he does not mean neither male nor female, but rather each gender at different times:

> . . . [T]he Judaism of the dual Torah is a masculine formulation of an androgynous religious structure and system. Androgyneity is serial: now feminine, in the end of days, masculine. God wants holy Israel now to embody traits defined as feminine, woman to the nations' ravishing man, so that, in the world that is coming, Israel may find itself transformed into man—but man still with woman's virtues.[24]

Many scholars, including Neusner, understand this intentional self-feminizing—as a form of deference, suffering, even an explanation of humiliation—as a road to understanding why the rabbis subordinated and disempowered women. Mayer Gruber writes, "Feminist theory most cogently suggests that it is no wonder that they sought to banish women from these few areas in which, under the Roman-Byzantine and Parthian and Sassanian yoke, they could feel like powerful men rather than powerless little boys."[25] Both Neusner's and Gruber's analyses reveal an underlying way of looking at the world that drove the rabbis' understanding: men are powerful and "on top," women are subservient, and male-female is not only the major means of categorizing human beings but of understanding the universe, both the physical and metaphysical.

This hierarchical, gendered view of the universe is expressed in the *Babylonian Talmud Niddah* 31b, in this explanation of the symbolic nature of married, heterosexual copulation:

> R. Dostai son of R. Jannai was asked by his disciples: Why does a man go in search of a woman and no woman goes in search of a man? This is analogous to the case of a man who lost something. Who goes in search of what? He who lost a thing [his rib] goes in search of what he lost. And why does the

> man lie face downwards [during sexual intercourse] and woman face upwards towards the man? He [faces the elements] from which he was created and she [faces the man] from whom she was created. And why is a man easily pacified and a woman is not easily pacified? He [derives his nature] from the place from which he was created and [she derives hers] from the place from which she was created. Why is a woman's voice sweet and a man's voice not sweet? He [derives his] from the place from which he was created and she [derives hers] from the place from which she was created. Thus it is said, "Let me hear your voice; / For your voice is sweet / And your face is comely" (Song of Songs 2:14).[26]

We see in this text a strong hierarchical construct of the universe in which God is on top, man beneath God, and woman beneath man. Man (in the form of a Jew) is female to God's male, and woman is female to her husband's male. In this construction, the rabbis use gender to make comprehensible a complex structure of the universe.

Beyond this fundamental construction, the documents of the rabbis express diversity. Within any work, many sources are typically quoted with competing interpretations or rulings, and different documents often have different perspectives as well. As a result, rabbinic works do not express a simple paradigm. The rabbinic paradigm is complicated by multiple understandings of what being a human may look like, what values matter most in living a good Jewish life, and what an ideal Jewish society should look like. The rabbis differ on the roles and rights of women, as well. For instance, early Palestinian texts permit women to initiate divorce while works based on *Mishnah Yebamot* 14:1 forbid it.[27] Despite this diversity, every rabbinic work consistently draws a picture of a male-dominated world in

which women are both a necessary complement to the male and a threatening force that needs to be controlled. Judith Baskin explains this dichotomy as a comprehension of women as fundamentally different.

> Given this multivocal literary structure it is not surprising to find that a diversity of outlooks are expressed concerning women and their activities. What unites these views, however, whether expressed as legal ordinance, anecdote, folklore, or midrashic expansion of a biblical text, and whether reflecting biblical, Greco-Roman, or Persian influences and milieus, is the conviction that "women are a separate people" (*B. Shab*. 62a), a created human entity essentially different in physical characteristics, innate capacities, and social function from men.[28]

As Baskin notes, rabbinic Judaism grew out of both Greco-Roman Palestine and Persian-influenced Palestine and Babylonia. These milieus were patriarchal, as was the biblical world. Yet the rabbis had models for expanded roles for women that they consciously chose not to enact—both biblically and contemporaneously.

Bernadette Brooten has demonstrated that women had leadership roles in the ancient synagogue, even attaining the title, "head of the synagogue."[29] In *Silencing the Queen*, Tal Ilan demonstrates that the Mishnah canonized a reduction of the public roles of women from eighteen[30] in biblical times to four: midwife, public mourner (women who wailed at a funeral), hairdresser and innkeeper.[31] Thus, notes Baskin, " . . . rabbinic efforts to confine women's activities to the domestic domain may have been as much a reaction to unwelcome alternative patterns in the Jewish milieu as to concerns about the negative impact of the non-Jewish world encountered in the public marketplace."[32]

As mentioned above, the rabbis had diverse and different perspectives on women, and some of them can be traced to different places and times. Boyarin has used the Beruriah traditions to illustrate changing attitudes toward women, not only in the time strata studied here, but also during geonic and later medieval times. Early Palestinian literature clearly indicates that women may study Torah, as indicated in part by a statement of *halakhah* uttered by Beruriah and upheld by Rabbi Yehoshua.[33] Boyarin shows how the stories that grew up around Beruriah in the Babylonian Talmud showed her both moral and scholarly[34]. However, by contrasting Beruriah with her lascivious, light-minded sister who becomes a prostitute, yet passes a test of morality when Beruriah sends her husband R. Meir to rescue the sister, the Babylonian Talmud suggests that Beruriah is the opposite of her sister and therefore would *fail* a moral test.[35] Rashi's later story of Beruriah's ignominious fall when seduced by her husband's student finishes the Babylonian Talmud's set-up. Before Rashi, literature of the geonic period assuaged Beruriah as a threatening Torah scholar by turning her "into the ideal wife and mother (Midrash Mishle 31:10)."[36] Thus we have an anomalous but accepted female Torah scholar in early rabbinic Palestine, followed by a highly anomalous female Torah scholar who is both celebrated and subtly condemned in amoraic and Talmudic Babylonia, a threatening woman transformed into a wife and mother in geonic times, and a woman who fails the ultimate test of morality in medieval Europe. In general, Palestinian texts have more roles and power available to women than those from the more restrictive Babylonian milieu. But texts from both areas limit women; both protect women; and both have texts that empower women in certain domains.[37]

While many scholars have shown that the rabbis empowered women in various ways, as well as increasing protections for women when society and law disempowered them,[38] as

time went by the rabbis also consistently removed women from three important areas: "prayer, study of Torah, and divorce."[39] The rabbis thus limited women's presence in the key areas of power. As Baskin says, "Rabbinical *halakhah*, committed to strictly limiting women's presence in the communal domains of worship, study, and leadership roles, deliberately disempowered women in areas of ritual participation and personal status issues and consciously rejected other social models which sanctioned women's participation in community life."[40] In other words, the rabbis removed women from communal life, limited their role to the domestic realm, and restricted women's escape from the home by removing their power to initiate divorce.

Although this was a slow process, all strata of rabbinic literature celebrate the exemplar of the modest mother and wife at home. *Babylonian Talmud Masechet Shabbat* 25b says, "Our Rabbis taught: Who is wealthy? He who has pleasure in his wealth: this is R. Meir's view. . . R. Akiba said: He who has a wife comely in deeds."[41]

As Baskin expresses this structure,

> Rabbinic Judaism was determined to localize wives' activities in the domestic sphere of family and family-based economic activity where they could facilitate the more culturally valued religious, intellectual, and communal endeavors of their husbands. Nor did the sages hesitate to express their compassion, appreciation, and need for those significant women in their lives who fulfilled the expectations of their society and gracefully yielded to male dominance.[42]

Boyarin further argues in *Carnal Israel* that the rabbis had a pseudo-sexual relationship with Torah and Torah study, and the influx of women into that world might threaten that

relationship.[43] Judith Romney Wegner traces the exclusion of women from the communal sphere to two sources. She explains that women were essentially the property of a man—husband or father, his chattel in terms of sexuality. Therefore in areas in which women's sexuality might be tempting to other men, the men controlled her and limited access to her.[44] Acknowledging that this protection of women's sexuality did not extend to women not under the control of a man or a possible sexual object (a widow or divorcée, for instance), Wegner goes to the heart of the rabbinic fence placed on the public domain: "The self-identification of an in-group ('us') automatically places all others in an out-group ('them')."[45]

As Wegner and Boyarin suggest above, women and their bodies were sources of sexual enticement that needed to be controlled. Limiting women to the home, to domestic chores and domestic concerns, was an attempt to control women's sexuality.[46] By limiting women's domain, the rabbis made space to celebrate women and their sexuality, but only within the walled-in area permitted to women by the rabbis.

Even within this controlled environment, however, the rabbis were still suspicious of women. Women in all-female groups, the rabbis worried, might tend toward lasciviousness or witchcraft. Baskin explains,

> The polygynous and hierarchical nature of rabbinic society meant that female relatives, co-wives, and maidservants occupied a domestic world of women to which men had limited access. Given this consciousness of female propinquity, there was always a rabbinic assumption that women's first loyalties were to each other and that such allegiances might lead them to dupe and deceive men.[47]

The rabbis, although diverse in opinions, were suspicious of female scholars and forced women into the ideal space of home, wifehood and motherhood. Women within that space were generally celebrated and appreciated (although the rabbis were still somewhat suspicious); women without that space were regarded as threatening and found controls and restrictions added to their lot. How then, will the rabbis accommodate Miriam, a biblical heroine who is clearly in the public domain at times, seems to appear as a scholar with access to God (in the Numbers 12 episode), and has neither a husband or children?

Miriam in the Rabbinic Lens

In the pages that follow, I approach the traditions about Miriam from the perspective of uncovering how the rabbis interpret and accommodate a biblical heroine who does not fit their female role. As an important character in the Bible, the rabbis therefore must elaborate on Miriam.

The first chapter of this work, "Miriam in the Mold," studies the expected ways the rabbis interpret Miriam. They fit her into female roles that they condone. They associate her with gossip, *lashon har'a*, often the symbolic stand-in for the rabbis for the unstable threats that result from women associating together.[48] Interestingly, they also hold Miriam up as a righteous woman, whose offense of *lashon har'a* is so mild that it acts as a proof that *every lashon har'a* offense would be punished since Miriam was punished. The rabbis also transform her into a virtuous, beautiful wife and mother. In this chapter we begin to see the rabbinic pattern of limiting Miriam's place only to expand on her righteousness and leadership role. In this case, they fit her into paradigmatic female roles, one of which is very negative. But within the role of a gossip, Miriam acts as a virtuous woman, even a model to others.

The second chapter, “A Challenging Prophetess,” examines the traditions of Miriam’s prophethood and prophecy, and the parallel tradition of Miriam rebuking Moses after she had outgrown her prophecy. We see the rabbis restrict the period of Miriam prophesying to her childhood. They imagine her as someone who rebukes the powerful who abandon God’s law. They sometimes infantilize her, and sometimes portray her as a wise young person, courageous enough to stand up to the strongest person in society. Miriam does not prophesy in all the stories in which she rebukes, and vice versa, but these characteristics are often combined. In this chapter we again see the rabbis limit Miriam, and within that limitation celebrate her and even amplify the positive aspects of her character.

Chapter 3, “A Redeemer in Israel,” looks at a pattern that seems to be in opposition to what emerged in the preceding two chapters. I analyze traditions connecting Miriam to a well that sustained the Israelites in the desert, traditions that call Miriam “righteous” or “redeemer,” and traditions that see her as a peer of Moses and Aaron. In these texts Miriam is exalted to the level of communal leader and even co-redeemer of the Israelites, along with Moses and Aaron. Nonetheless, they place Miriam at the bottom of the sibling hierarchy. Still, these texts cherish Miriam, and depict her as beloved by the rabbis and their communities.

I attempt here not only to study Miriam in the rabbinic lens but to understand how a community deals with a prominent person who does not fit into its paradigm. Miriam challenges how the rabbis understood women. After all, how they deal with her may help us understand how contemporary Jewish communities handle such challenges, what methods of accommodation honor both the community and the challenger, and perhaps what methods communities should avoid. The rabbis are famous for their concordant celebration and

denigration of biblical women, as well as silencing historical and contemporaneous women.[49] The texts examined in this work reveal tools of both limiting and celebration that the rabbis use in imagining Miriam.

CHAPTER ONE

Miriam in the Mold:

Midrashic Efforts to Fit Miriam into the Female Paradigm

The rabbis lived in a gendered world, and they canonized their ideal of that world in the Mishnah and Talmud. The books of midrash, apparently produced in large part by the same rabbis, use imagination, story-telling and close reading of Scripture to make sense of the Bible as fitting into that world-view.

Even in biblical literature it is clear that Miriam has been silenced. She is called a prophet, but we never read of her prophecy. She clearly is a leader, but the reader catches only glimpses of her leadership. In midrashic literature, rabbis undertake to explain the silenced and inexplicable parts of the Bible, and Miriam clearly falls under their purview. But to recover her as a prophetess and a leader threatens to clash with their gendered world.

In the rabbi's patriarchal world real and imagined, the women's sphere is restricted to reduce women's threat to the rabbis' ordered world. As much as possible, the rabbis limited a woman's role to that of wife and mother, and her location to the home. Even when it came to matters of procreation—certainly the province of motherhood and home—the rabbis strove to keep the man as the source of authority and power, rereading the commandment to be fruitful and multiply as directed only at the male despite the plural language of the commandment in Genesis.[1]

It is understandable, then, that rabbinic literature would use midrash to fit Miriam into familiar female molds. They do this in a several ways. They transform her into an ideal woman, making her the wife and mother of important and virtuous men. They also use her as

a prototype for that ugly fault associated with women: gossip. And they often limit the purview of Miriam's leadership at the same time as they explicate it.

Wife and Mother

Miriam in the Bible is repeatedly associated with two men: Moses and Aaron. Glaringly absent is any mention of husband or children. This contrasts with the two other named female prophets in the Bible, Huldah and Deborah, who both have husbands.[2] In both the biblical and rabbinic mindset Miriam is an aberration. Women in the Bible are almost always associated with their father, husband or children. The matriarchs, for instance, were significant *because* of their husbands and offspring. For modern scholars, Miriam's lack of a named husband or children indicates her importance as a leader. For the rabbis, it presents a problem. As Leila Bronner writes, "The rabbinic mind tends to define women as belonging to men . . ."[3]

In limiting women's domain to the home—and limiting her access to a Torah education—the rabbis compensated by asserting that a woman can earn merit by supporting her husband and sons in becoming pious, learned men. The Babylonian Talmud conveys this in a series of aphorisms, "Rab said to R. Hiyya: Whereby do women earn merit? By making their children go to the synagogue to learn Scripture and their husbands to the study-house to learn Mishnah, and waiting for their husbands till they return from the study-house" (B. Berakhot 17a). A virtuous woman has a virtuous husband. Pious sons are rewards for their mother, and redound to her credit. Thus we read of Rahab in *Numbers Rabbah* 8:9,

> "The woman, however, had taken the two men and hidden them**"** (Josh. 2:4). What reward did she receive? Some of her daughters were married into the priesthood and bore sons who stood and performed service upon the altar and

> entered the Sanctuary, where, uttering the Ineffable Name of God, they would bless Israel. These sons were: Baruch, the son of Neriah, Seraiah, the son of Mahseiah, Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, and Hanamel, the son of Shallum.

A woman's greatness is defined by the greatness of her husband and male children.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that we find the rabbis assigning Miriam a virtuous husband and great descendants. They marry her to Caleb, and then make her the ancestress of King David. This tradition appears in both *Sifre Numbers* 78 and in *B. Sotah* 11b and 12a. Both texts are confusing to the modern reader. They make convoluted efforts to associate Miriam with Caleb's wives and place Miriam and Caleb as the ancestors of David (*Sif. Num.* 78 exerts a similar effort on behalf of Yocheved).[4] Each take as their starting point Exodus 1:21, "And because the midwives feared God, He established households (houses, בתים) for them." Both texts assume that the two midwives were in fact Yocheved and Miriam. Sotah 11b[5] begins

> "And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses." Rab and Samuel [differ in their interpretation]; 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" (I Chron. 2:19), and it is written, "Now David was the son of that Ephrathite . . ." (I Sam. 17:12)

Here we find Miriam married to one of the most righteous men that fled from Egypt: Caleb, one of only two people of the generation who merited entering the Holy Land. And

Miriam's *reward* in this text is that one of her descendants will be King David. To understand the import one need simply refer to *Sifre Deuteronomy* that states that Israel received two great leaders: David and Moses.[6]

If the intimation that a woman's merit and reward are both tied up in her children is not clear enough, the Talmud proceeds to state this explicitly. In its explanation of how Miriam is actually *all* of Caleb's wives (and not just Ephrat) *B. Sotah* 12a says[7]: " 'And these were her sons' — read not *baneha* [her sons] but *boneha* [her builders]. 'Jesher' [he was so called] because he set himself right [*yishsher*].[7] 'Shobab' — [he was so called] because he turned his inclination aside [*shibbeb*].[8] 'And Ardon' — [he was so called] because he disciplined [*radah*] his inclination."

Sifre Numbers 78 and *B. Sotah* 11b present similar images of Miriam as a wife and mother. But the Babylonian Talmud goes further than the midrashic work in using Caleb's wives to develop Miriam's character. In this further passage from *B. Sotah* 12b Miriam is beautiful:

> "And Ashhur the father of Tekoa had two wives, Helah and Naarah" (I Chron. 4:5). Ashhur is identical with Caleb; and why was his name called Ashhur? Because his face was blackened [*hushheru*] through his fasts. 'The father'- he became a father to her. 'Tekoa'- he fixed [*taka'*] his heart on his Father in heaven. 'Had two wives' — [this means] Miriam became like two wives. 'Helah and Naarah' — she was not both Helah and Naarah, but at first she was Helah [an invalid] and finally Naarah [a young girl]. "And the sons of Helah were Zereth, Zohar and Ethnan" (I Chron. 4:7). 'Zereth' — [Miriam was so called] — because she became the rival [*zarah*] of her contemporaries

> [in beauty]. 'Zohar' — because her face was [beautiful/shining] like the noon [*zoharayim*]. 'Ethnan' — because whoever saw her took a present ['*ethnan*] to his wife. (*B. Sotah* 12a)

Here the rabbis imagine Miriam as incredibly beautiful. After the incident in Numbers 12, she undergoes a miraculous healing that makes her like a young maiden again.[8] Her husband is rewarded for waiting patiently for her while she was an outcast. Then the passage goes further, first saying that she exceeded all of her contemporaries in beauty, and following this with the ambiguous statement that "whoever saw her took a present to his wife." The word for present, *'etnan*, Jastrow defines as "harlot's hire."[9] The Soncino Talmud explains that the men's "passion was aroused by the sight of Miriam."[10] Bronner believes that this passage is an example of the rabbis rendering a biblical character beautiful to indicate her spiritual beauty.[11] However, this passage suggests that beautiful women can be threatening to the proper social order by inciting lust in men not their husbands. Nonetheless, it presents Miriam as a desirable wife.

The rabbis have moved Miriam from an ambiguously single woman to one who is not only married and a mother, but married to one of the greatest men of her generation, and mother-several-times-removed to a man as great as her brother Moses. To comprehend her as a great woman, the rabbis imagine her in their paradigm: married to an important and virtuous man, and mother of important, virtuous and scholarly people[12]. With this pedigree, the rabbis are more comfortable with Miriam as a leader. Now she almost fits their understanding of the proper world order.

Miriam of the Evil Tongue

So the rabbis make Miriam a virtuous matron. But as positive as the rabbis can be about women, and biblical women especially, women also scare them. Not one of the Bible's female protaganists escapes some kind of condemnation[13], and Miriam is no different. The rabbis often associate women with what they call "light-mindedness," *galut r'osh*. Light-mindedness is the flaw in women that for the rabbis typified women's difference from men and represented what men feared most. Light-mindedness was the root of both gossip, *lashon har'a*, and sexual immorality. It led women into idleness and to adultery.[14] In many ways, light-mindedness encapsulates all of the rabbis concerns about women. And Miriam came to be the proto-typical biblical example of *lashon har'a*.

In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses. Their protest is confusing. One moment they seem to be concerned with his domestic matters, perhaps out of bigotry. The next moment their concern seems to be their right to power as prophets.

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: 'He married a Cushite woman!' They said, 'Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?'" (Num. 11:1-2; NJPS/TNK)

This episode presents many problems at the level of simple reading, let alone the close reading the rabbis do in midrash. Some modern scholarship suggests that this episode is a pastiche of two documents, [15] but the rabbis must make sense of the received text. First of all, what were Miriam and Aaron complaining about? Were they upset about Abraham's apparently African wife? And if so, is this woman a different wife than Zipporah? Or were they demanding greater respect and power? Second of all, why do their complaints incense God? And once incensed, why does God not kill them (as God had just done to the Israelites

who had whined for meat in Num. 11)? Further, why does God only punish Miriam and not Aaron with leprosy? Finally (although these questions by no means exhaust the issues Numbers 12 raises), why are Miriam and Aaron's speech introduced with the feminine singular verb ותדבר?[16]

The rabbis read Miriam and Aaron's transgression in Numbers 12 as challenging Moses and engaging in *lashon har'a*. In most readings, this *lashon har'a* seems to be slander, but it might also embrace gossip or be merely the misuse of speech inherent in challenging God's chosen chief prophet.

The double fact that Miriam was punished and not Aaron, and that Miriam and Aaron's speech is introduced with the *feminine* singular verb, gave the rabbis the opportunity to associate Miriam specifically with the sin of *lashon har'a*, "evil tongue," or gossiping. This association is assumed in most texts dealing with the episode, and Miriam's exemplification of a female gossip is made explicit *Genesis Rabbah* 45:

> And the rabbis say, four character traits are said of women: they are unable to resist tasting temptation; they are eavesdroppers; they are laggards; they are of jealous disposition.
>
> Unable to resist temptation, as is expressed (Gen. 3:6), "[And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise,] she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat . . ."
>
> Eavesdroppers (Gen. 28:10): "[And He said, 'I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round; and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.'] And Sarah heard [in the tent door, which was behind him]."

> Laggards (Gen. 18:6): "[And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said:] 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal[, knead it and make cakes].'"
>
> Of a jealous disposition, as it is written (Gen. 30:1), "[And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children,] Rachel envied her sister."
>
> Rabbi Yehudah bar Nehemiah says, also querulous and gossipers.
>
> Querulous (Gen. 16:5): "And Sarai said to Abram, 'My wrongs be upon you!'"
>
> Gossipers (Num. 12:1): "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses."

This misogynistic text skewers women. No parallel texts about men are as negative.[17] This text also uses the major female heroes of the Torah as exemplars for female sinfulness. While some of the proof texts flow naturally, Abraham's adjuration to Sarah in Gen. 18:6—typically read as indicating what an exemplary host he was—here instead becomes proof that Sarah would have moved slowly if Abraham had not commanded her to hurry. Clearly in this text the authors had preconceived ideas of women's faults, and maneuvered biblical characters to fit their notions. In the case of gossip, both Aaron and Miriam engage in an identical act in Num. 12, but Rabbi Yehudah attributes the fault entirely to Miriam and uses that to prove that women in general are gossipers!

The rabbis consistently associate women with gossip. They are concerned about women's gossip, regarding it as the gateway to licentiousness and witchcraft.[18] Because the above passage needed biblical support for women as gossips, Miriam becomes the rabbinic exemplar of a gossip.

In the rabbis' defense, if Miriam was the source and instigator of "speaking against Moses" this could explain why the Bible introduces Miriam and Aaron's opposition with a

feminine singular verb and why only Miriam is punished with leprosy. The fact that the Bible opens the verse with Miriam, a woman, followed by Aaron, a man, may indicate that the Bible was trying to convey this message. But this interpretation, biblically evident or not, fits so perfectly into the rabbinic world-view that Numbers 12 comes to be paradigmatic for gossip. Thus the woman in the trio of heroic leaders of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, comes to exemplify what the male rabbis perceived as the heart of woman's flawed personality: light-mindedness.

The Babylonian Talmud connects this episode and Miriam's shame with her association as Caleb's wife. Part of the passage from *B. Sotah* 12a, in which the rabbis explain how Miriam is all of Caleb's wives, include this explanation:

> Conclude, therefore, that Azubah is identical with Miriam; and why was her name called Azubah? Because all men forsook her [*'azabuhah*] at first.[19] "[And Caleb the son of Hezron] *begat* [children of Azubah his wife]" (I Chron. 2:18)[20] But he was married to her! — R. Johanan said: Whoever marries a woman for the sake of heaven, the text ascribes it to him as though he had begotten her.

In this passage that reconciles the biblical story of Miriam in Numbers 12 and the rabbinic belief that Miriam married Caleb, we find Miriam a rejected, scorned woman. She is so undesirable for marriage that the Babylonian Talmud asserts that Caleb deserves merit for marrying her "for the sake of heaven." Not only do the rabbis diminish her as an undesirable woman, they reduce her to the level of a child. She becomes not her husband's wife but his daughter.[21] The rabbis have painted a picture for us of a light-minded, gossiping child in a woman's body.

Miriam Redeemed

Yet almost at the instant that Miriam comes to exemplify the deplorable trait of women to gossip the rabbis begin to redeem her. *Sifre Numbers* 99 explains that Miriam and Aaron spoke harshly about Moses. The next interpretation supports my above explanation for how the rabbis came to read Miriam as dominating the Num. 12 story, and then immediately fits her into the role of a righteous woman.

> "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses." (Num. 12:1) There is no "speech" in any place [in Scripture] that it does not refer to harsh speech. And thus Scripture says (Gen 42:30), "The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us. . . ," "And the people spoke against God and Moses" (Num. 21:5). Thus there is no speech in any place that is not harsh language.
>
> . . . "And Miriam and Aaron spoke [ותדבר] against Moses:" This teaches that the two of them spoke against him, but that Miriam started in the speech. [This indicates] that Miriam was not accustomed to speaking before Aaron, but rather out of the need of the hour.
>
> And like this you [find that Scripture] says, "[Jeremiah instructed Baruch, 'I am in hiding; I cannot go to the House of YHWH.] But you go and read aloud [the words of YHWH] from the scroll which you wrote at my dictation...'" (Jer. 36:[5-]6) And Baruch was not accustomed to speaking before Jeremiah except for the need of the hour.[22]

This midrash begins by affirming that Miriam and Aaron likely acted wrongly in speaking against Moses, for they spoke harshly to God's prophet and chosen leader of the Israelites. The midrash continues by placing Miriam at center stage in the affair, saying that

she “started in the speech.” However, suddenly we find the midrash explaining that the Bible would not have phrased the verse this way unless Miriam’s behavior was unusual *for Miriam* (as opposed to women in general). The passage continues by presenting its readers with a picture of Miriam as a righteous woman. It even parallels her to Baruch, Ezra’s scribe.

Clearly the rabbis are offended at the notion that a woman would speak against a man, let alone against Moses. Yet they hurry to assert that Miriam normally behaves like a modest woman, showing deference to men. They further paint a picture of a righteous woman who was willing to break normal protocol “because of the need of the hour.” Like a good, modest woman, Miriam does not normally speak against Moses, but something impels her, as a virtuous woman, to do so in this instance.

This reading of Miriam appears much more often in early midrashim than the picture of a gossip in *Genesis Rabbah* 45. The idea that Miriam acted out of some noble purpose reappears elsewhere in *Sifra Metzora* 8, *Sifre Numbers* 99 and 105, in *Sifre Deuteronomy* 1 and 275, and *Sifre Zuta* 12. Each version differs, within the books and between them. But they all have in common Miriam’s concern that Moses has separated from his wife and is not fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Another entry in *Sifre Numbers* 99 tells two versions of this:

> "*And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses*." How did Miriam know that Moses had separated himself from [the commandment of] being fruitful and multiplying, except because she had seen that Zipporah did not adorn herself in women's ornaments. She said to her, "What is with you, that you are not adorning yourself in women's ornaments?" She [Zipporah] said to her,

> "Your brother is not strict about the matter." Therefore Miriam knew, and she spoke to her brother [Aaron], and the two of them spoke against him [Moses].
>
> (Rabbi Nathan says, Miriam was at Zipporah's side at the time when it says [Num. 11:27], "And the boy ran [and told Moses, saying, 'Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!']." When she [Zipporah] heard, she said, "Woe to the wives of these ones!" Therefore Miriam knew and she spoke with her brother and the two of them spoke against him.)

In the first version, Miriam notices that Zipporah is not making herself up for her husband, and inquires why. Zipporah responds obliquely that adorning herself doesn't matter because her husband is not keeping the commandment of being fruitful and multiplying. In other words, Moses has chosen not to be sexually intimate with his wife. The second reading has the same import, but in this case, when Zipporah learns that other men are prophesying she is dismayed into an exclamation of horror. Miriam understands from what Zipporah says that Moses has chosen not to be sexually intimate with her, and Zipporah understands that this is a result of Moses' prophethood. In both instances, Miriam approaches Aaron with her knowledge, and together the two of them protest against Moses' abandonment of the commandment.

These readings of Numbers 12 address many of the questions raised by that biblical episode, and the second version even connects some of the events of Numbers 11 with the following chapter. In this general interpretation, Miriam and Aaron are not betraying bigotry against Moses' black wife, but rather are impelled to speak to Moses because of how he *treats* his wife. Thus, the questions of both who the woman is and what Aaron and Miriam complain about her are both resolved.[23] Further, these readings connect the siblings' two

statements. Aaron and Miriam are not whining for more power; they are saying, “We are prophets, yet do not separate ourselves from our spouses. What right does Moses then have to do so?”

In fact, many of these texts that assume Miriam is a gossip not only seek to redeem her; they present her as the most mild of *lashon har‘a* offenders. Many of these texts are earlier than Genesis Rabbah. *Sifre Numbers* 99 in yet another entry reads

> Indeed words are a matter of *kal v'homer*, for just as Miriam who did not intend to speak against her brother to shame [him] but rather to make him praiseworthy, nor to reduce fruitfulness and fertility but rather to increase, and [who spoke] privately [lit., between her and herself] was so punished, [so too] one who intends to speak against his fellow to shame him, and not to praise him, and to reduce fruitfulness and fertility and not to increase, [and who spoke] publicly [lit., between him and others] and not privately, how much the more [will he be punished]![24]

Leila Leah Bronner argues that the rabbis seek to show biblical women as paradigmatic, either as ideals of womanhood or the opposite.[25] Although very early on Num. 12 becomes the paradigmatic episode of gossip, and Miriam the paradigmatic gossiping women, the rabbis in these early midrashim are already pushing against this negative view. By making this a case of *kal v’homer*, reasoning from little to great, they do not overturn an interpretation of Num. 12 that appears to have become assumed even at this early date. Instead they reread the episode to present a picture of Miriam as virtuous in spite of her sin of *lashon har‘a*. Note that in this *Sifre Numbers* text the passage uses the previous interpretation of Numbers 12 to assert that Miriam only spoke to make Moses a better person, more

"praiseworthy" by pushing him to keep God's commandment. Further, the rabbis assert, she spoke privately, not publicly. She shows concern for the peculiarly female domain of fertility. Her sin, in this reading, is lack of deference as a woman in speaking out. If she had been a man, her protest may have been acceptable. But in the earlier text the rabbis validate her concern about Moses' adherence to the law. They do not dispute the biblical condemnation of Miriam, but instead, in the above passage, point out that if even a righteous person who speaks for good reasons and with good motives is punished for *lashon har'a*, how much more so will someone who does not speak for good or with good motives.

Sifre Zuta 12 has a similar passage. It too reads Num. 12 as an example of *kal v'homer*. This below passage concludes a discussion where *Sifre Zuta* 12:9 asserts that both Aaron and Miriam were punished for speaking against Moses, but God chose not to publish it in the Bible. It concludes

> And are not these matters an instance of *kal v'homer*? Just as these who spoke against their brother who was younger from them and did not speak of his shame but rather to compare him to the rest of the prophets are so punished, [so too] those who speak of the shame of his fellow in his presence how much the more so! And thus [Scripture] says, "Remember what YHWH your God did to Miriam" (Deut. 24:9), that she sinned by the mouth and all her organs suffered.

Again, we find the rabbis assuming that Num. 12 is the paradigmatic incident of *lashon har'a*. In this discussion, however, the rabbis are so troubled that Aaron is not also afflicted with leprosy that they assert that God actually punished Aaron but chose to hide the punishment. In this reading, then, the responsibility for the sin does not rest on Miriam's

shoulders alone, and she escapes branding as *the* female gossip. Like *Sifre Numbers* 99, *Sifre Zuta* 12:9 believes that Miriam and Aaron were not speaking for Moses' shame, and points out that in their (second) protest, Aaron and Miriam compare Moses to the other prophets. This suggests that *Sif. Zut.* 12 also understands Aaron and Miriam to be asking Moses to live up to the full responsibility of a prophet. Further, this text addresses the rabbis' anxiety about deference, both the deference owed by women to all men and the deference owed by men to other men of greater stature. In this reading, Aaron and Miriam were punished for a lack of deference—but it was the most mild and understandable lack, because they were speaking about their younger brother. Finally, *Sifre Zuta* explains the mystifying comment in Deuteronomy 24:8-9, "Take heed in the plague of leprosy, that thou observe diligently, and do according to all that the priests the Levites shall teach you, as I commanded them, so ye shall observe to do. Remember what the LORD thy God did to Miriam, by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt" (JPS 1917) Although both verses have to do with leprosy, it is unclear what the auditor is supposed to understand from the command "remember what the Lord did to Miriam." *Sifre Zuta* 12 explains that Deuteronomy intends to say, "Take heed in the plague of leprosy, that you observe diligently the commands against *lashon har'a* . . . Remember what God did to Miriam as you came out of Egypt. If even Miriam could be punished for *lashon har'a* with leprosy so surely will you if you are not diligent."

Thus *Sifre Zuta* 12:9 asserts that usually people commit the sin of *lashon har'a* by saying words that bring shame to others, words that insult. Numbers 12 becomes a warning to all who would speak out against others in both *Sifre Zuta* 12:9 and *Sifre Numbers* 99: if Miriam (and Aaron) who spoke for such virtuous reasons, not to shame but to improve, and

in a way that showed relative deference (in private/to a younger brother) was punished, how much more so will the normal person be punished for speaking against others.

In fact, the justifications and explanations the rabbis make for Miriam suggest her action was righteous. She was gently correcting a wrong, after all. Of course, the winner in this struggle is Moses, not Miriam. The rabbis in *Sifre Numbers* 100 and *Sifre Zuta* 12:8 paint a picture of a humble Moses—in contrast to Aaron and Miriam's challenge—who was commanded by God, mouth to mouth, to avoid procreation, unlike all other prophets and patriarchs.[26] In this, the rabbis capture the thrust of the biblical text that emphasizes Moses' uniqueness. As Elaine Phillips writes of Num. 12,

> As the biblical chapter unfolds, its compelling message is that Moses was the prophet and authority figure *par excellence*. After Miriam and Aaron explicitly challenged his singular position as God's prophet, claiming that God had also spoken through them (Num. 12.2), the major part of God's direct communication to them was his commendation of Moses as unique among His prophets (Num. 12.6-8).[27]

Whether Miriam's challenge is inappropriate because she is a woman is unclear from the immediate context; the bigger issue is that she and Aaron challenged *Moses*. Although modified, Miriam's fault is still an issue of deference: she and Aaron did not show the proper deference to Moses. This may imply that her fault was heightened because she was female. Nonetheless, These passages describe the *reasonableness* of her challenge, and her close, older-sister relationship with Moses. Instead of emphasizing Numbers 12 as an incidence of a woman not showing proper deference to a man, the rabbis emphasize Miriam's virtuous motives and the un-paralleled holy nature of Moses.[28]

In these midrashic texts, the rabbis struggle against the negative portrayal of Miriam *in the Bible*. While on the one hand Numbers 12 dovetails perfectly with the rabbinic trope of women as gossips, on the other hand it is a difficult text and presents the biblical heroine Miriam in a negative light. The rabbis choose to portray Miriam as a virtuous woman even as they accept the biblical condemnation of her.

Concerned for Family and Fruitfulness

In many of the above passages we find a Miriam who speaks out against Moses because she is concerned he is not keeping the commandment of being fruitful and multiplying. The rabbis transform Miriam and Aaron's complaint about the Cushite woman into a concern for the female realm, the family and home, and specifically with perhaps the most important commandment about home life: to be fruitful and multiply. Devora Steinmetz points out that the rabbis consistently associate Miriam with a concern for the continuity of family.[29]

The rabbis raise the commandment to be fruitful and multiply found in Gen. 1:28 to one of the primary responsibilities of a Jew, as the Bible's first commandment. However, beginning in the Mishnah the rabbis limit the commandment to men.[30] Yet it is the primary concern of women, since the rabbis limited women's domain to the house alone. As Judith Baskin explains,

> Rabbinic Judaism perceived the female body and female activities in domestic terms. Just as 'House' or 'household' becomes a euphemism for 'wife' in rabbinic discourse, so rabbinic social policy preferred that all nubile women be married and that all married women be confined to supportive familial roles, where they could provide for their husband's needs and nurture children

> at the same time. Contact with other men was severely limited. When a woman crossed the boundary from the internal to the public realm she potentially endangered not only herself, but the entire structure of rabbinic sexual politics.[31]

A woman's role was to be a married woman at home, and the purpose of marriage was procreation.[32] Yet women were not responsible for procreation. Their role was supportive, a nurturer and vessel. Despite this, in reality women's most important activities concerned the realization of the commandment to be fruitful and multiply.

In the aggadic interpretations of Numbers 12 of *Sifre Numbers, Sifra, Sifre Deuteronomy* and *Sifre Zuta* (and later *Exodus Rabbah*) we find Miriam operating outside of a woman's sphere. However, the rabbis make her motivating issue *exactly* the most important concern of the domestic realm: procreation. And Miriam learns about Moses' failure from being around Zipporah. In other words, we see Miriam with women and concerned about women's issues.

This fits with Steinmetz' argument that the rabbis paint a consistent picture of Miriam as concerned with family continuity. The rabbis pick up on Moses' absence as a father in the biblical text.[33] As Steinmetz notes, "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."[34]

The midrashic texts have thus painted a picture of Miriam: she takes a leadership role to rectify her brother's failure to live up to his responsibilities both to the commandment to be fruitful and multiply and to care for his children. Miriam begins this insurgence as a result

of information she learned from spending time with other women. She challenges Moses when it appears his wife did not have the courage to do so.

The rabbis have revealed a Miriam who leads women and concerns herself with women's concerns. When women's issues need to be addressed in the male sphere, Miriam steps out of the women's world. This image of Miriam may fit with Exodus 15:20, "And Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances" (JPS 1917). In this verse, we find Miriam leading women, apparently in the "public sphere," in front of the men. Miriam is a leader. But she is not a leader of all Israel; she is limited to being a leader of women—an interpretation that fits well with the received biblical text.

We also find texts that minimize the role of women in the Exodus, and thereby Miriam's importance as a leader of women. *Exodus Rabbah* compares the celebration at the shores of the Red Sea to Psalm 68:26, "First come singers, then musicians, amidst maidens playing timbrels." The rabbis in *Ex. Rab*. 23 interpret Ps. 68:26 as God saying to the angels at the moment the Israelites attain their freedom, "Let the Israelite (men) sing first. Then you can go. Oh, and the women may sing in-between." In this interpretation, God values the men's celebration as that of a precious son; the women—and angels!—are afterthoughts. The rabbis echo the throw-away lines of Ex. 15:20-21, where the women only receive two verse of attention after the men's song dominates the first 19 verses.

Exodus Rabbah is a relatively later text. It is interesting that earlier texts do not seem to contain the same level of diminishment of Miriam and her leadership. Indeed, the most surprising aspect of the traditions about Miriam that reduce her or fit her into a negative stereotype of women is how mild they are. Similar female biblical characters receive much

harsher treatment. Judith Baskin notes, ". . . admirable biblical women are represented in negative terms because their actions question rabbinic Judaism's construction of appropriate female roles. Thus, B. Megillah 14b criticizes the judge Deborah and the prophet Huldah for arrogance in their dealings with men . . ."[35] The rabbis do criticize and silence Miriam. However, they rarely go as far as condemning her, and in the vast majority of texts they strive to show Miriam as a righteous leader and woman in the very texts that present her as a negative female stereotype. The rabbis viewed Miriam as a virtuous woman. We shall look at how they expand this and interpret her prophet-hood in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

A Challenging Prophetess

The Bible calls Miriam a prophet—but it never records her prophecy. Immediately after the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds to freedom, Moses leads the Israelite (men) in singing, and then that, "Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took her timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels" (Ex. 15:20). It fell to the rabbis' lot to imagine Miriam's actual prophecy. In aggadic tales the rabbis describe Miriam as a prophet who not only foretells the future but who challenges misused power and violations of God's laws, and who leads the people. In other words, the rabbis create a prophet who would fit comfortably among the corpus of exhortative, visionary prophets of the Hebrew Bible—and one who speaks to modern readers for the same reason. The rabbinic Miriam's position as prophet is all the more striking because she *is* a woman.

The Child Prophet

Predicting Moses' Birth

Rabbinic literature has a strikingly consistent understanding of the period of Miriam's prophecy: every text relates that she was a prophet only when she was a child. The Babylonian Talmud (*B. Megillah* 14a) reads

> Our rabbis taught: 'forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied to Israel . . . . 'Seven prophetesses'. Who were these? — Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther. . . . 'Miriam', as it is written, *And Miriam the prophetess the sister of Aaron* (Ex. 15:20). Was she only the sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses? — R. Nahman said in the name of

> Rab: [She was so called] because she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron [only] and said, "My mother is destined to bear a son who will save Israel." When he was born the whole house was filled with light, and her father arose and kissed her on the head, saying, "My daughter, thy prophecy has been fulfilled." But when they threw him into the river her father arose and slapped her on the head, saying. "Daughter, where is thy prophecy?" So it is written, *And his sister stood afar off to know* (Ex. 2:4); to know, [that is,] what would be with the latter part of her prophecy.

Miriam the prophetess here is a child-prophetess, in more ways than one. The text states that Miriam's prophecy occurred only when she was the sister of Aaron, and not of Moses—only in her young childhood, that is. The Talmud also twists the sense of Exodus 2:4, "And his sister stood afar off to know what would become of [the infant floating on the Nile]." In the simple meaning, she watches over the baby in the basket out of concern for the baby or love for her mother. In this story, however, Miriam watches over Moses out of concern for herself: she wants to prove that she was correct in her prophecy. Not only is her prophecy *limited* to the time when she was a child, but she acts like a child. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* in Tractate *Shirata* 10 makes this point clearly, writing, "But she still *grasped on* to her prophecy . . ."[1] She seems almost petulant, resenting punishment at her father's hand and determined to prove that she is right.

This *aggadah* about Miriam infantilizes her. Her prophecy occurred as a child, about a child, and she behaved childishly about it. Further, this portrays her watching over baby Moses as a *selfish* act. She does not do it out of love for her mother, care for her infant brother, or concern for the fate of Israel (that she had declared would come through the

infant), but out of a desire to be vindicated.[2] This is despite the fact that Miriam watching over Moses is attributed to her as a virtue in the Mishnah (*M. Sotah* 1:9), for which she is rewarded by the Israelite camp waiting for her when she had leprosy. By portraying this act as a selfish one, the Talmud diminishes Miriam, insinuating that her good deed was a childish and selfish deed—and perhaps her *only* good deed if this is indeed the deed that is rewarded by the Israelites.

Probably this midrash conflates several earlier strands, for the idea that the whole house was filled with light when Moses was born[3] and that Miriam prophesied that her mother would give birth to a redeemer of Israel appear as separate *midrashim* in *B. Sotah* 12a and 11b, as well as in other texts. Nonetheless this version captures the intent of many *midrashim* about Miriam and her prophecy.

Every text about Miriam's prophecy occurs in her childhood. Not all diminish her, however. *B. Sotah* relates the aggadic *midrash* quoted above, but it also contains many other aggadic *midrashim* about her as a child and prophet with more positive images of Miriam.

B. Sotah 11b states that the two midwives in Exodus 1 are either Yocheved and Elisheva[4] or Yocheved and Miriam. They identify Miriam with Puah, and use the midwives' names to flesh out the characters of Yocheved and Miriam.[5]

> *And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives* . . . etc. (Ex. 1:15). Rab and Samuel [differ in their interpretation]; one said they were mother and daughter, and the other said they were daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. According to him who declared they were mother and daughter, they were Yocheved and Miriam; and according to him who declared they were daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, they were Yocheved and Elisheva. There

> is a tannaitic teaching in agreement with him who said they were mother and daughter; for it has been taught: 'Shiphrah' is Yocheved; and why was her name called Shiphrah? Because she straightened [*meshappereth*] the limbs of the babe. Another explanation of Shiphrah is that the Israelites were fruitful [*sheparu*] and multiplied in her days. 'Pu'ah' is Miriam; and why was her name called Pu'ah? Because she cried out [*po'ah*][6] to the child and brought it forth. Another explanation of Pu'ah is that she used to cry out through the Holy Spirit and say: "My mother will bear a son who will be the savior of Israel." (*B. Sotah* 11b)

The rabbis have made the midwives who served the Israelites into the most important Hebrew women in that part of the Bible. The term for the midwives in Exodus 1 is ambiguous; it might mean "Hebrew midwives" or "midwives to the Hebrews." By making these two women Yocheved and Miriam, the rabbis simultaneously develop the characters of Yocheved and Miriam and keep the righteous midwives safely Israelite and not foreigners.

By declaring that Miriam was one of the midwives, the rabbis have Miriam take on a normal female role: that of midwife. And Miriam's prophecy is in the realm of women—about the child her mother will bear. Giving birth is a bloody, violent, miraculous and mysterious forcing forth of life. And Miriam's prophecy is in the realm of life: this new life I am helping my mother deliver will give life, eventually, to the Jewish people. So the rabbis associate Miriam with a powerful but solidly traditional and acceptable role for a woman, based around that most-important female function of giving birth to the next generation.

The rabbis make a strong argument for Miriam's nature here. She is concerned with Israelite life. As we saw in the preceding chapter and will see in the discussion of Miriam's

Well in the following chapter, this characteristic flows through many rabbinic texts on Miriam. Devora Steinmetz argues that the rabbinic portrayal of Miriam is of a woman concerned with "the continuity of family" and leadership[7]. The picture emerging from the *midrashim* on the midwives is of a girl concerned not merely with her family's continuity, but the continuation of the entire people.

The tannaitic source *B. Sotah* refers to may be the text found in *Sifre Numbers* 78. Discussing the dictum that God draws close to those who draw close to God by keeping the Torah, *Sifre Numbers* brings forth Miriam and Yocheved. The text argues that the midwives in Exodus 1 were in truth Yocheved and Miriam, as proof that there were righteous ones who drew close to God in ancient times in Israel. It continues,

> 'Shiphrah:' this is Yocheved; Pu'ah: this is Miriam. 'Shiphrah:' who was fruitful and multiplied; 'Shiphrah' who repaired/straightened the limbs of the infant; 'Shiphrah:' for Israel was fruitful and multiplied in her day.
>
> 'Pu'ah:' who would cry out (*po'ah*) and weep (*bokhah*) over her brother, as it says, *And his sister awaited afar off to know what would become of him* (Ex.2:4).
>
> *And he [Pharaoh] said, "In your delivering the Hebrew women"* (Ex. 1:16); *And the midwives feared God [and did not do as the king of Egypt told them; they let the boys live* (Ex. 1:17).[8]

The last two biblical quotes come as support of the initial dictum. The midwives feared God and acted righteously, breaking Pharaoh's commandment—and thereby keeping God's commandment to not take human life.

This text uses the same line from Exodus 2 that *B. Sotah* 11b associated with Miriam's prophecy. The line in *Sif. Num.* 78 that Miriam "would cry out and weep over her brother" is ambiguous. Neusner in his translation suggests that cry out, *po'ah*, is a synonym with "weep:" "she would moan and weep for her brother . . ."[9] However, *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13 uses the same word, *po'ah*, to mean that Miriam/Puah stood up to Pharaoh and cried out/declared to him that he would regret his decrees. If *po'ah* in the passage from *Sif. Num.* 78 means "moan" or "weep," then Miriam watched over her infant brother out of love. And if *po'ah* means "cry out" or "declare," this suggests that the rabbis imagined Miriam prophesying at Moses' birth that he would be Israel's savior ("declare over him"), and that her waiting to know what would become of him was connected to her prophecy. Rather than watching over him solely out of concern for her prophecy, she cries over him. This is not fear that she would be proved wrong; this is fear that her infant brother would die and her people would remain enslaved.

Simply by stating that Miriam is one of the midwives, the rabbis have developed a picture of Miriam that is both prophetic and compassionate. Steinmetz writes, "Miriam, with the help of her mother, nurtures the child, and she alone is able to recognize the future greatness of the child even before he is born. These are the traits which the Talmud sees in the young girl who watches over her brother, and these are what the Talmud sees in the midwife Puah who refuses to obey Pharaoh's decree."[10]

Rebuking Her Father

Yet another version of Miriam's prophetic nature as a child exists in many rabbinic sources. In this tradition, Miriam's father divorces her mother when Pharoah issues his decree that all male Israelite infants must be drowned. Miriam challenges her father on his

decision, convincing him to take her mother back.[11] The rest of the Israelites follow Amram's[12] example, also taking back their wives.[13] In some versions, Miriam prophesies that her mother will bear a redeemer of Israel; in others she uses rational arguments to convince her father to remarry her mother.

This tradition also appears among the many Miriam-traditions related in *Tractate Sotah* 11a-13a. It appears as an explanation for Ex. 2:1-2, "A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son . . ." This son, apparently born right after the marriage of the Levite couple, is Moses, yet Moses has older siblings. Aaron and Miriam may be children by previous marriages, but nothing in the Bible suggests this. The rabbis reconcile this idiosyncrasy. They state that Amram divorces his wife when he hears of Pharaoh's decree that male newborns will be killed to prevent this happening. However, he remarries Yocheved at Miriam's instigation. *B. Sotah* 12a explains

> *And there went a man of the house of Levi*. Where did he go? R. Judah b. Zebina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed 'Every son that is born you shall cast into the river', he said: In vain do we labor. He arose and divorced his wife. All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him, 'Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's; because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas you have decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas you have decreed concerning this world and the World to Come.[14] In the case of of the wicked Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in

> your case, who are righteous, it is certain that your decree will be fulfilled, as it is said, *You shall also decree and it shall be fulfilled* (Job 22:28).

Miriam uses three arguments to convince her father that his deed is worse than Pharaoh's, culminating with the statement that decrees made by righteous people are fulfilled while decrees made by evil people may be frustrated. Miriam appears here as a *haver*, a scholar able to make arguments based on biblical texts and rabbinic rules of logic. As other biblical, righteous women occasionally do in rabbinic literature, she uses knowledge and rabbinic hermeneutics to prevail.[15] In the tannaitic source, Miriam challenges her father because she understands that he is not acting righteously. According to R. Judah b. Zebina, Amram actually seeks out counsel from his young daughter. [16] In either version, Miriam is wise. Although she does not prophesy, her rebuke of a leader resembles the act of a prophet.

The prevalence of this story emphasizes its importance to the rabbis. Yet the story seems to undermine the gendered hierarchy the rabbis valued so highly. Miriam, as not only a female, but a child, challenges a male, Israelite leader. Later traditions only emphasize this dichotomy. Exodus Rabbah states that Amram was the *R'osh Sanhedrin*, head of the Sanhedrin, an anachronism that gives Amram the highest position in the institution that prefigured the rabbis' scholarly world. [17] *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13 further embroiders this account of Miriam, adding that she challenged Pharaoh as well as her father:

> Another explanation of Puah: because she (Mriiam) lifted (*hofi'ah*) Israel up to God. Another explanation of Puah: she lifted up her face against Pharaoh and turned up her nose against him, saying 'Woe unto this man when God comes to exact his retribution.' Whereupon Pharaoh became so angry that he sought to slay her. Shiphrah—because she smoothed over (*meshapereth*) her

> daughter's words and pacified [the king] for her. For she said to him: 'Do you take notice of her? She is only a child and knows nothing.'

In this midrash, Miriam challenges the tyrant, the most powerful person in the land. Her mother saves her from punishment by reminding the Pharaoh that Miriam is only a child "and knows nothing." She convinces Pharaoh that, as a child, Miriam is beneath Pharaoh's notice.

Women do not usually challenge men as the righteous party or utter wise words in rabbinic Judaism. But occasionally they do, and usually they do so in an ironic fashion, often rebuking of those in power. As Judith Baskin writes,

> Women do utter words of wisdom in rabbinic stories, but generally such stories are related in a tone of surprise. These are the exceptions that prove the rule. Often the woman's wit serves either to confirm a rabbinic belief about female character, such as a woman's higher degree of compassion for others, or it delivers a rebuke to someone in need of chastisement. To be bested by a woman is humiliation indeed.[18]

Perhaps Miriam challenging her father was less threatening *because* she was a child. As a woman, her challenge of the highest male authority may have been threatening. But as a child, she might safely challenge adults—out of ignorance—in a way that a grown woman challenging men would be too threatening. On the other hand, a child challenging a leading male Israelite may act to heighten the hierarchical space between Miriam and her father, thereby emphasizing the prophetic role of rebuking those in power. Either way, that Miriam's father listened to a mere female child redounds to his credit.

It is interesting that in most stories in which Miriam rebukes a leader that leader is not only Israelite but a respected, male family member. Something important is happening in these stories, and it is not simply an ironic narrative or an interesting tale of a wise—or foolish—child. Let us return to the stories surrounding Numbers 12 and see what we can learn from juxtaposing these two sets of traditions.

The Rebuker

In the previous chapter I wrote that the majority of the stories around Numbers 12 present Miriam in a positive light despite making her the paradigmatic character associated with *lashon har'a*, evil speech. These stories require re-evaluation in light of the childhood rebukes associated with Miriam. There are common themes found in both sets of stories. Both present Miriam rebuking a leader of the Jewish people, and a member of her immediate family. In both cases, Miriam rebukes a man for not cohabiting with his wife. I showed earlier that the rabbis created *midrashim* on Numbers 12 so that, while Miriam is wrong to rebuke Moses, she would have been correct to rebuke *any other man* who behaved as Moses did. These stories seem to demonstrate the rabbinic virtue of *tokhahah*, appropriate rebuke.

The rabbis develop the commandment of *tokhahah* from Lev. 19:17, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke (*hokhei-ah tokhiah*) your fellow and not bear sin on his account." The Talmud greatly develops what the commandment of rebuke means. Tractate *Shabbat* of the Babylonian Talmud explains, "Anyone for whom it is possible to protest the wrongdoing of a member of his or her household and does not protest is held accountable for [the wrongdoings of] the members of his household. So too in relation to the members of his city; so too in relation to the whole world."[19] *Baba Metzia* 31a elaborates, "Why does Leviticus 19:17 include the command, 'you shall *surely rebuke*'? . . .

This implies rebuking under all circumstances." Ruth Sohn explains that this means every person must rebuke someone who breaks a commandment or causes harm, even if that person is greater in position.[20] Tractate *Arakhin* defines the time appropriate for *tokhahah* as, "If one sees his fellow engage in offensive behavior . . ."[21] Thus *tokhahah* is a commandment to rebuke someone if he or she breaks one of God's commandments or engage in offensive behavior—even if that person is someone owed deference.

Miriam's behavior both in the *lashon har'a midrashim* and the stories of her challenging her father to remarry her mother is that of a person engaging in *tokhahah*. She knows God's commands, and she sees someone in her household disobeying God's commandment. So she rebukes this person. In both story traditions as the rabbis have communicated them to us, Miriam challenges her father or Moses in private. In other words, she rebukes in such a way that it is most likely to be understood.

In Numbers 12, Miriam learns that Moses is not being intimate with his wife. Perhaps Miriam was concerned about the morale of the people and the encampment. If Moses' wife was not happy and not attending to her appearance because of Moses' neglect of her, then might this type of behavior become contagious, upsetting the morale of the entire camp? Might other men model themselves after Moses, and begin separating from their wives? Moses' behavior could affect the behavior of the entire camp and lead to not only Moses breaking the command to reproduce, but all of Israel breaking it. This seems the very occasion for which *tokhahah* might have been commanded.

In both *Sif. Num* 99 and *Sif Zut*. 12, Miriam consults first with her brother Aaron, and then the two of them apparently speak to Moses. Only the last part is not clear in the various traditions—was she speaking privately, in the sense that she protested for only God to hear?

Or did she protest directly to Moses? If Miriam spoke directly to Moses, then she was fulfilling the commandment of *tokhahah*. Whether or not she spoke to him, the rabbis make clear in many texts that Miriam spoke only to improve Moses' behavior.[22]

Similarly Miriam challenges her father to remarry her mother. She sees her father letting Pharaoh's command frighten him into breaking God's commandment to reproduce, and calls him on it. But rather than saying, "God commanded you to be fruitful and multiply, and you are not doing so," she marshals arguments that acknowledge his worry. Again we find Miriam rebuking in such a way that she would be heard.

She rebukes male relatives who are leaders of the people. The *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13 version of her childhood rebuke of her father makes him the leader of the Israelite people *par excellence* in his generation, as Moses is in the next. Her challenge is not simply a concern for the behavior of her father or brother; it is a concern for the welfare and continuation of the entire Israelite people.

Although this is not technically prophecy, Miriam's actions resonate with and reflect the prophetic role. Gunther Plaut described it this way:

> We tend to think of [prophets] primarily as people who foretold the future. Such foretelling was indeed an important part of their message, but they were not soothsayers or fortune-tellers. Their message was usually: "*If* you continue on your current paths and disregard God's ways, *then* disaster lies ahead. But," they would continue, "if you turn from your evil ways you will live and enjoy God's favor."[23]

Miriam's prophecy that her mother will bear a redeemer of Israel foretells the future. But her rebuke of her father is the act of a prophet. In essence she holds up two futures to him for the

Israelites, one doomed and one redeemed. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote of the prophets, "The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions."[24]

In the Numbers 12 stories Miriam does not challenge beliefs, but she challenges Moses, a person who is practically an institution "endowed with supreme sanctity." Her courage—her hubris—in doing so seems the act of a prophet. Her ignorance of God's private command to Moses, however, shows that she acts not as a prophet but as an individual moved by the prophetic urge. The strong parallels between the two episodes of rebuke in the rabbinic versions of her life heighten both her concern for God and Israel and the fact that she does *not* act as a prophet as an adult. Reading Numbers 12 simply, Miriam and Aaron appear as prophets, for they assert "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" (Num. 12:2). In God's angry rebuke of the siblings, God does not deny their prophecy but emphasizes instead the difference in the kind of prophecy that Moses experiences and that Aaron and Miriam experience:

> "Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!" (Num. 12:6-8)

Although her actions seem motivated by similar impulses, the adult Miriam no longer has her "ear inclined to God," as Heschel puts it[25]. She is not a prophet but a righteous leader.

If Miriam is only a prophet as a child, then her threat to the establishment was only as a child. As an adult she acts as a powerful woman—but merely as a woman, part of the women's world and her family. Nonetheless, painting Miriam as a practitioner of *tokhahah* further imagines a character who is not only virtuous but pseudo-prophetic in her behavior. This is a remarkable elevation of a female character.

Filled with *Ruah HaKodesh*

One major and ancient tradition about Miriam's prophecy has yet to be addressed. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmae*l, *Shirata* 10, merges many of the stories addressed above with this additional tradition.

> *"And Miriam the Prophetess . . . took"* But where do we find that Miriam prophesied: It is merely this: Miriam had said to her father: "You are destined to beget a son who will arise and save Israel from the hands of the Egyptians." Immediately, *"There went a man of the house of Levi and took to wife . . . and the woman conceived and bore a son . . . And when she could no longer hide him,"* etc. (Ex. 2:1-3). Then her father reproached her. He said to her: "Miriam! What of thy prediction?"
>
> But she still held on to her prophecy, as it is said: *"And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him"* (ibid. v. 4.). For where the expression "standing" (*yezibah*) appears, it means simply the presence of the Holy Spirit, as in the passage: *"I saw the Lord standing beside the altar"* (Amos 9:1). And it also says: *"And the Lord came and stood"* (I Sam. 3:10). And it also says: *"Call Joshua and stand"* etc. (Deut. 31:14)[26]

In the remainder of the passage (not quoted here), the *Mekhilta* continues to associate each word of Ex. 2:4 ("And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him) with a verse in the Hebrew Bible that tells of an experience of or action by God. Both *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* and *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 15:20, as well as *Midrash Proverbs* 60:14, state that "standing" really means *ruah hakodesh*, the Holy Spirit, and then continue to elaborate for each word. In each of these works, this statement follows Miriam prophesying that Moses would redeem Israel—and then Moses is thrown into the river. The clear meaning of these texts is that Miriam was not only concerned about her prophecy but filled with the presence of God as she watched over the infant in the river.

Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 1:9 brings in this interpretation of Ex. 2:4 into a different context. Following the mishnaic statement that all of Israel waited for Miriam when she had leprosy because she had waited for Moses by the river, the Jerusalem Talmud states,

> Said Rabbi Yochanan: This verse is of the Holy Spirit (*b'ruah hakodesh*), as it says, "*And his sister stood . . .*" (Ex. 2:4) [parallels Amos 9:1,] "*I saw my Lord standing by the altar.*"[27]
>
> "*his sister*" [clearly has to do with *ruah hakodesh*, since "sister" also appears in Prov. 7:4:] "*Say to Wisdom*[28]*, 'You are my sister.'*"
>
> "*afar off*" [indicates the presence of *ruah hakodesh* because Jer. 31:3 has to do with the appearance of God:] "*The Lord appeared to me from afar*."
>
> "*to know*:" "*for the whole earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord*" (Is. 11:9)
>
> "*what would become of him*:" "*Surely the Lord does nothing without revealing His secrets to His servants.*" (Amos 3:7)

It is not immediately clear whether this passage intends that Miriam was experiencing prophecy as she stood by the riverbank, or if this verse is a gateway into a mystical interpretation of the Bible. Examining other places where the term *ruah hakodesh* appears in reference to a verse may help. *Midrash Samuel* 19:5 does something similar with I Sam. 16:11, when God instructs Samuel regarding which of Jesse's sons would be the future king. The midrash begins, "Said Rabbi Levi, this verse is of the Holy Spirit (*b'ruah hakodesh*) . . . ." *Tosefta Sotah* 13:2 clearly understands *ruah hakodesh* to mean prophecy: "When the last prophets, Hagai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit—*Ru'ah Ha-Kodesh*—ceased out of Israel."[29] As Max Kadushin explains, "In this statement, *Ruah Ha-Kodesh* stands for God's utterance through the medium of a prophet, in effect, for prophecy."[30] We can thus conclude that the three *midrashim* and the Jerusalem Talmud all indicate that Miriam was in a state of prophecy as she watched over Moses.

The Babylonian Talmud does something different with this tradition. Like the *Yerushalmi*, it separates the interpretation of Ex. 2:4 from the actual statement of Miriam's prophecy. It also changes the language of the introduction, as well as the attribution: "*And his sister stood afar off.* R. Isaac said: The whole of this verse is spoken with reference to the *Shechinah*."[31] The change in language introducing this text may seem small, but the implications may be great. "With reference to the *Shechinah*" shifts the understanding of the verse from one about Miriam to one about God. It suggests that Ex. 2:4 is a mystical verse, present so that the reader might gain insight into God. According to Kadushin, in rabbinic parlance, the term *Shechinah* may refer either to a prophetic experience or to a normal mystical experience.[32] If Kadushin is correct in this context, then the verse may still be about Miriam, and may either carry the same weight as the *Yerushalmi* and *midrash* texts—or it

may suggest that Miriam was experiencing a mystical, but not prophetic, moment. Whichever way it is read, the Babylonian Talmud's inclusion of this old tradition about Miriam's prophecy separates it from Miriam and obfuscates the meaning. And although the Babylonian Talmud relates the same preceding story that appears above in *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Shirata* 10—as well as the other *midrashim*, the Talmud separates the commentary on Miriam's prophecy from the *aggadah* about her prophecy. The commentary on Ex. 2:4 appears in *B. Sotah* 11a, while the story of her prophesying Moses' birth appears in Tractate *Megillah* and in *B. Sotah* 12a.

Rabbinic texts have mixed takes on Miriam as a prophet. All of them believe she only prophesied as a child. Some, like the Babylonian Talmud, diminish even that period of prophecy by presenting her as a petulant child in the moment of her prophesying. Others imagine a prophet with the courage to challenge the highest leader in order that God's commandments and the salvation of Israel would prevail. In the latter case, Miriam's prophethood is limited only to have her character empowered.

The rabbis use her subordinate gender to challenge authority, and in so doing raise her profile and level of authority. The import of Miriam as a child-prophet depends on the preference of a text's contributors or redactors. In the hands of *B. Megillah*, the fact that Miriam was a prophet only as a child diminishes Miriam's prophethood, and perhaps thereby fits her more comfortably into a woman's place. On the other hand, Miriam's childhood prophecy may do the exact opposite in other texts. It may paint the picture of a precocious, righteous young girl, already challenging those in power; and of a loving sister, filled with the spirit of God as she watches over an infant who holds in his hands the redemption of Israel.

CHAPTER THREE

A Redeemer of Israel

In texts examined in the previous two chapters, Miriam appeared not only as a challenge to authority misused; she appeared as a leader. That Miriam has a leadership role amongst women becomes clear in the course of several texts, especially in her encounters with Zipporah in the Numbers 12 aggadic material and in the biblical verse in which she leads the women in song and dance (Ex. 15:21). But might Miriam also be a leader of the Israelites?

Miriam's Well

Biblical Roots

The strongest indicators that Miriam was regarded as a leader for the whole community of Israelites are the rabbinic texts about Miriam's Well. The tradition of a well associated with Miriam is ancient, appearing already in *Tosefta Sotah* 11:1 and 11:8 and *Sifre Deuteronomy*, chapters 26 and 305. The tradition may have arisen out of patterns in the biblical text. Almost all stories of Miriam in the Bible are connected to or next to a mention of water. When Exodus 2:4 introduces us to Moses' sister, she is watching over the infant in the river. The next mention of her, in Ex. 15:20, appears in the celebration at crossing the Sea of Reeds, when she leads the women in song and dance, celebrating their freedom. Finally, and most significantly for the well traditions, Miriam's death is immediately followed (in terms of biblical verses) by a lack of water, in Num. 20:1-2.

In addition, there is a strong resonance between Miriam's name and water. The letters of her name can be parsed to mean bitter sea, *mar yam*. The Bible drives home this resonance

by the close proximity between the first appearance of Miriam's name and the words "bitter water."

> And Miriam (*MiRYaM*) sang unto them: Sing ye to the LORD, for He is highly exalted: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea (*RaMaH BaYaM*).
>
> And Moses led Israel onward from the Red (*Mi-YaM*) Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water (*MaYiM*).
>
> And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah (*MaYiM Mi-MaRaH*), for they were bitter (*MaRYM*). Therefore the name of it was called Marah (*MaRaH*). (Ex. 15:21-23; JPS 1917)

The words associated with water in these first verses repeat the letters of Miriam's name—often in the order of *mem-reish* and *yud-mem*. The word for water, *mayim*, resembles Miriam's name: it is missing only the *reish*. The word for sea, similarly, is the end of Miriam's name, *yam*. In verse 23, the phrase "of the waters of Marah" seems calculated to draw the readers attention to the repetition of *mem*. Finally, the unvocalized word for "bitter" (as in, "bitter water") is *identical* to Miriam unvocalized. A similar assonance exists in Numbers 20 (although not as powerfully), when the waters that eventually appear in the episode following Miriam's death are called the waters of contention, *mei merivah* (*MeY MeRYBaH*). The word Meribah (contention) begins with the first three of the four letters of Miriam's name.[1]

The Well Traditions and Their Significance in Early Rabbinic Texts

These constant associations in both story and literary device between Miriam and water in the Bible result in a firm association between Miriam and water in rabbinic texts. *Tosefta Sotah* 11:1 clearly states this association. "As long as Miriam was alive, there was a well supplying Israel [with water]. After Miriam died, what does it [Scripture] say? 'And Miriam died there . . . and there was no water for the community' (Num. 20:1-2) because the well had departed."

The suggestion that Miriam was the *source* of water for the Israelites in the desert has powerful implications. Water is necessary to survival—and none know this more powerfully than desert-dwellers, for whom drought is a constant threat. David Greenberg points out that the association of Miriam with water is not simply about physical survival but spiritual salvation.[2] She assures the salvation of Israel by making sure that the infant survives the river and finding an Israelite nursemaid (his mother) for him. Her celebration after crossing the Sea of Reeds was a sort of spiritual sustenance to the Israelites. And the water in the desert was, according to the rabbis, more than just physical sustenance. Unlike most wells, Miriam's Well was pure. They imagined it as a kind of rolling rock, and therefore the water within it counted as "living water," necessary for purification: "Rab said: A moveable well is clean, and that is Miriam's well" (*B. Shabbat* 35a). Greenberg writes, "Basic to the idea of the well's motion is the notion that its very presence provided a never-ceasing means of purification before God. Therefore, it was an ever-present vehicle for personal redemption in the event of impurity. To associate Miriam with this well is to say that her presence was, in itself, a means for Israel's salvation."[3]

The complex of stories around Miriam's well tends to have three things in common. First, Miriam is associated with Moses and Aaron, each of whom have a daily miracle during the Exodus associated with him. Second, the three siblings are identified as community leaders. And third, the three leaders are identified as righteous or meritorious. Not all traditions contain all these three, but these three themes repeat regularly.

Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael has two versions of this tradition. The first citation (*Vayassa'* 5) is the simplest version of the well tradition, "Miriam died and the Well was withdrawn. Aaron died and the Clouds of Glory[4] were withdrawn. Moses died and *manna* was withdrawn."[5] In this simple version we see the three siblings associated with each other, and each one associated with a daily miracle the Israelites experienced while wandering in the wilderness. The miracle associated with each character disappears at her or his death. *Tosefta Sotah* 11:1 has this tradition in *midrash* form

> As long as Miriam was alive, there was a well supplying Israel (with water). After Miriam died, what does it [Scripture] say? "And Miriam died there . . . and there was no water for the community" (Num. 20:1-2) because the well had departed. As long as Aaron was alive, a pillar of cloud led Israel. After Aaron died, what does Scripture say? "[And Aaron was 123 years old when he died in Mt. Hor.] And the Canaanite king of Arad who dwelt in the Negev heard [the coming of the Children of Israel]" (Num. 33:39-40). And the hands of this same evil one were made [powerful] and he came and made war against Israel, and they said, "Where did the guide go, who was going to conquer the land for you?"[6]

Of the three miracles the rabbis associate with three siblings (the well, the pillar of cloud, and manna), only the well is not named in the Bible. The invention of the well may have been a rabbinic attempt to explain how the Israelites had water when the biblical text does not explain this (as it does for food, with manna and quail). The concept of a rolling rock may have emerged out of Ex. 17:6, in which Moses strikes a rock at Masah-Meribah[7] in order that the Israelites have water. Since this immediately follows escaping Egypt, since the next incident in which the Israelites lack water immediately follows Miriam's death, and since the Israelites apparently not only have water but pure water for sacrificial rites in the interim, the invention of Miriam's well as a rolling rock was likely a natural *midrash*. This raises the question of what came first in the traditions about the well. Was the well associated with Miriam because three miracles were associated with the three siblings? Or were the Pillar of Cloud and manna associated with Aaron and Moses because Miriam already had a tradition of a miraculous well associated with her? Whatever the source, the three siblings were permanently bound together in the rabbinic mind, and therefore in *aggadot* about them.

In the above-quoted texts, Miriam, Aaron and Moses seem to be on equal footing. But many texts apparently have a hierarchy. Unlike *T. Sotah* 11:1, this next text assumes the existence of a well in the wilderness, associated with Miriam. Continuing with the rest of the *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael Vayassa'* 5 text, we read

> R. Yehoshu'a says: Miriam died and the Well was withdrawn, and returned by the merit of Moses and Aaron. Aaron died and the Pillar of Cloud was withdrawn, and the two of them returned by the merit of Moses. Moses died and the three of them were withdrawn and did not return; and the sorrow[8] did not cross the Jordan with them.[9]

This text implies a hierarchy, in which Moses is the apex of the three siblings. Moses' merit was so great that all *three* of the miracles returned for the Israelites as long as he was living. Miriam was great, and Aaron was greater, and Moses was greatest. This hierarchy may be reinforced by the consistent order in which the three siblings appear in almost all texts. They are either listed as Miriam, Aaron and Moses (building up to Moses) or Moses, Aaron and Miriam (descending from Moses).

The following text from *Tosefta Sotah* 11:8 epitomizes these traditions.[10]

> Rabbi Yosah Bar Yehudah said: When the Israelites went out from Egypt, three good community leaders were appointed for them. These are they: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Because of their merit three gifts were given to them: the pillar of cloud, manna, and [the] well. The well because of the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud because of the merit of Aaron; manna because of the merit of Moses. Miriam died, the well was cancelled, and (then) returned because of the merit of Moses and Aaron. Aaron died, the pillar of cloud was cancelled and the two of them returned because of the merit of Moses. Moses died and all three were canceled and did not return, as it says, "But I lost the three [shepherds] in one moon" (Zechariah 11:8).

Tosefta Sotah 11:8 contains a hierarchy implied by death order and merit. However, all three siblings are called "good community leaders" (*parnasim tovim*), and each sibling "merits" a miracle that is a gift for the Israelites. When each leader died, the gift he or she merited for the Israelites disappeared, but was returned to the Israelites because of the merit of the remaining siblings. And the final *midrashic* verse communicates the triple loss the people must have felt at Moses' death.

In *T. Sot*. 11:8, the loss of Moses to the community is that much more painful not only because the Israelites lost their leader and prophet, Moses, and not only because they lost the gifts of manna, the pillar of cloud and the well (which would have ended once the people entered the Holy Land, anyway). The loss of Moses was made more painful because the Israelites were hit with the finality his death represented. No longer would they wander under the care of their shepherds, every physical need cared for. No longer would they have the prophetic vision of these three leaders. They were on their own.

While implying a hierarchy these texts also imagine the Israelites *depending* on three leaders in their travels through the desert. The sustaining miracles symbolize the leaders' importance to the people. And the astonishing fact is that one of these sustaining, essential leaders was a woman: Miriam.

The Three Righteous Redeemers

I noted above the tendency to associate Miriam, Aaron and Moses together.[11] When this triple-association appears, it emphasizes either the righteousness or the importance—or both—of all three biblical characters. This threesome fits into a rabbinic pattern of connecting a series of biblical characters: the patriarchs; the matriarchs; the twelve sons of Jacob; the seven female prophets; Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Often, the rabbis ascribe miracles to Miriam that Aaron and Moses experience, demonstrating the power this character-grouping exerted over their imagination. This extended passage from *B. Baba Bathra* 17a illustrates both the tendency of the rabbis to group biblical characters, and the tendency to extend to Miriam miracles of the righteous that Aaron and Moses merit.

> Our Rabbis taught: There were three to whom the Holy One, blessed be He, gave a foretaste of the future world while they were still in this world, to

wit, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham [we know] because it is written of him, *[The Lord blessed Abraham] in all* (Gen. 24:1), Isaac, because it is written, *[And I ate] of all* (Gen. 27:33); Jacob, because it is written, *[For I have] all* (Gen. 33:11).[12] Three there were over whom the evil inclination had no dominion, to wit Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, [as we know] because it is written in connection with them, *'in all,' 'of all,' 'all.*[13] Some include also David, of whom it is written, *My heart is wounded within me* (Ps. 109:22). And the other authority? — He understands him to be referring here to his distress.

Our Rabbis taught: Six there were over whom the Angel of Death had no dominion,[14] namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob we know because it is written in connection with them, *'in all,' 'of all,' 'all'*;[15] Moses, Aaron and Miriam because it is written in connection with them [that they died] *By the mouth of the Lord* (Num 33:38; Deut. 34:5)[16]. But the words 'by the month of the Lord' are not used in connection with [the death of] Miriam? — R. Eleazar said: Miriam also died by a kiss, as we learn from the use of the word 'there' [in connection both with her death] and with that of Moses.[17] And why is it not said of her that [she died] by the mouth of the Lord? — Because such an expression would be disrespectful.

Our Rabbis taught: There were seven over whom the worms had no dominion, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and Benjamin son of Jacob. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [we know] because it is

> written of them, *'in all,' 'of all,' 'all.'* Moses, Aaron and Miriam because it is written in connection with them, *'By the mouth of the Lord.'* Benjamin son of Jacob, because it is written in connection with him, And to Benjamin he said, *The beloved of the Lord, he shall dwell thereon*[18] *in safety*.[19] Some say that David also [is included], since it is written of him, *My flesh also shall dwell [in the grave] in safety*.[20] Another interpretation, however, explains this to mean that he is praying for mercy.

This text explores supernatural deaths. First, it uses the fact that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have the word "all," *kol*," describing them (Abraham: Gen. 24:1 "God had blessed Abraham in all;" Isaac: Gen. 27:33 to Esau, after Jacob's deceit, "I have eaten of it all;" Jacob: Gen. 33:11 to his brother Esau, "Please accept my gift, for I have all."). These three got "a foretaste of the taste of heaven." The word *all* indicates a foretaste of heaven, since the World to Come is perfect and people want for nothing. Moses, Aaron and Miriam die by a divine kiss—a prophetic experience only granted to the righteous.

Here we see the tendency of the rabbis to group biblical characters together. In this text one group of righteous is piled onto another. This is also an excellent instance of the rabbis corralling Miriam into an experience that applies to Moses and Aaron. In the process, the rabbis not only make Miriam's death a miraculous, intimate experience of God, they categorize her amongst the rare, exalted ranks of the righteous. Miriam is the only woman who appears in this text. In fact, the rabbis use Miriam's gender to *explain* why she belongs in this category even though the Bible does not use the phrase "by the mouth of YHWH" for her death. Babylonian Talmud tractate *Moed Katan* 28a explains that the Bible *would* have

used this phrase but chose not to because it would have been disrespectful to say that God (imagined as male) kissed a woman.

Baba Bathra 17a suggests that Moses, Aaron and Miriam died by a Divine Kiss because they were righteous. This is further suggested by texts that state that Moses' death atoned for the sins of Israel, since Aaron and Miriam's deaths are compared here to Moses'. In fact, both tractate *Yoma* of the Jerusalem Talmud (*J. Yoma* 1:1) and *B. Moed Katan* 28a treat Miriam's death as paradigmatic for deaths of the righteous that atone for Israel's sins.

In some texts, her gender seems forgotten because of her place in the righteous triad. *Exodus Rabbah* labels Miriam, Aaron and Moses as redeemers, the balance to three evil decrees issued by Pharaoh.[21] Miriam is introduced with the normal, male form of the noun "redeemer:" *go'el*.[22] In *Sifra Zuta* 12:1 when Miriam and Aaron object to Moses separating from her wife, *Sifra Zuta* has them declaring, "Moses is arrogant! For the Holy One Blessed be He does not speak with him alone, but rather has already spoken with many prophets, and with us, and we have not separated ourselves from our *wives* (*minn-shoteynu*) as he has separated, as it says, *Has YHWH spoken only through Moses?* (Num. 12:2)" In the process of classing Miriam with her brother-prophets, Miriam grammatically becomes a man, with a wife instead of a husband.

Why did the rabbis feel it necessary to include Miriam with Moses and Aaron? Admittedly, they are siblings, and all three appear as leaders in the Bible. But biblical references to and stories about Miriam are relatively rare. An impetus for this tradition may be found in Micah, the only book in the Hebrew Bible after the Five Books of Moses to mention Miriam. In chapter six of Micah, God "testifies" against Israel, arguing that God had redeemed Israel, but Israel pays meaningless homage without acting righteously. "My

people! What wrong have I done you?/ What hardship have I caused you?/ Testify against Me. In fact, I brought you up from the land of Egypt,/ I redeemed you from the house of bondage,/ and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam" (Mic. 6:3-4).

Moses, Aaron and Miriam appear as part of God's redemption. The mention of all three of them together likely sparked the rabbis' own grouping of the three siblings as leaders and redeemers of Israel. Evidence that the rabbis did understand Micah as an impetus for describing Miriam as a leader comes from *Sifre Deuteronomy*:

> *[Remember what the Lord thy God did unto Miriam] by the way* (Deut. 24:9)—at the time of your confusion—*as ye came forth out of Egypt* (Deut. 24:9)—at the time of your redemption. This verse was connected with Miriam in order to show you that the banners did not journey forth until Miriam went before them, as it is said, *And I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam* (Mic. 6:4). (*Sif. Deut.*, 276)[23]

According to this remarkable *midrash*, the Israelites refused to travel until Miriam led them. Numbers 10:11-28 details the movement of the Israelites; Miriam does not appear. The rabbis interpret "I sent before you" to mean "led you in the wilderness." Perhaps since the Bible does enumerate how Moses and Aaron led the people, the rabbis invented this tradition to explain that Miriam literally led the people during their wandering in the wilderness.

The development of the well tradition strengthened the image of Miriam as a leader and redeemer in the rabbis' imagination. In contrast to the prophetic stories, in which Miriam's leadership is limited to her childhood, these texts refer to Miriam who was somehow a leader throughout the Exodus. Commenting on the *B. Shabbat* 35a tradition that Miriam's well was a well of living water, David Greenberg writes, "Basic to the idea of the

well's motion is the notion that its very presence provided a never-ceasing means of purification before God. Therefore, it was an ever-present vehicle for personal redemption in the event of impurity. To associate Miriam with this well is to say that her presence was, in itself, a means for Israel's salvation."[24]

The confluence of Micah 6:4, the grouping of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and the Miriam's well traditions produces an image of Miriam as a righteous person, a sustainer, a *community* leader, even a redeemer. These positions are unparalleled in the rabbinic imagination for a woman.

Miriam the Righteous Beloved

The texts we have examined imagine Miriam as a redeemer, sustainer and leader. The texts around her death hint at the desolation Israel may have felt at her death. Other rabbinic texts develop Miriam as a beloved character. This mishnaic text that connects Miriam's punishment with her righteousness also hints at a special relationship between her and Israel. "So too [does the principle of measure for measure operate] for the good. Miriam waited a short while for Moses, as it is said, *And his sister stood afar off* (Ex. 2:4); therefore Israel was delayed for her seven days in the wilderness, as it is said, *And the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again* (Num. 12:15)." (*M. Sotah* 1:9)[25]

In the Mishnah, this text begins a series of texts that demonstrate that those who do good are rewarded with good.[26] Miriam is the only female example;[27] she is also the only example that conveys any negative information about her character. In a text on the reward for good deeds, the rabbis connect the most positive biblical story of Miriam—watching over Moses—with the most negative biblical story of Miriam—her rebellion against Moses and

punishment by God. In so doing, the rabbis limit the perception of her as righteous and meritorious.

Although later texts use the same tradition, many have a more positive spin. First, this tradition often appears in commentary in Numbers,[28] so that the jumping-off point is not a good deed of Miriam's but rather one for which she is punished. Second, later texts elaborate on her reward, such as this one from *Sif. Zut* 12:15.

> *And the people did not journey until Miriam was re-gathered*. (Num. 12:15) To here, as it says, *And his sister waited at a distance* (Ex. 2:4): Miriam waited one hour to know what would become of her brother, said God, "Moses and Aaron and the Shekhinah and the Ark and Israel will wait for her seven days until she becomes clean." Therefore it says, *In expelling her, in sending her, You shall judge her* (Is. 27:8)[29]. By the measure that one chooses to measure will he be measured.

Sifre Zutta 12:15 uses Miriam to demonstrate the principle that a person will be treated as s/he chooses to act. The reward that it ascribes to Miriam is remarkable. In saying "Israel waited for Miriam," the presence of the leadership and the ark is implicit, since they are part of the camp. But *Sif. Zut*. elaborates, so that the reader feels the full honor of her brother-leaders Moses and Aaron, the Ark of the Commandments, and God's very presence waiting for her. And by emphasizing that this reward is a result of her conscious actions, *Sifre Zutta* 12:15 sends the message that Miriam was righteous, even if she is being punished.

Other texts about Miriam's leprosy emphasize her special relationship with God. *Sifra Numbers* 106 reads, "*Let her be shut [outside the camp]* (Num. 12:14): The Holy One, Blessed Be He, shut her [outside], the Holy One, Blessed Be He, made her impure, and the

Holy One, Blessed Be He, made her pure."[30] Although *B. Zevachim* 101b-102a clarifies that this tradition arose to explain what priest examined her and declared her clean, *Sif. Num*. makes no indication of this. The emphasis in *Sif. Num*. is God's close care of Miriam, even while he punishes her.

These texts leave an impression of a woman who was beloved by God and the people, even when she was punished. Another tradition emphasizes how precious Miriam was to the people by asserting that the people returned to Hazeroth, which they had already left, in order to wait for her while she had leprosy. These texts use a convoluted interpretation of Num. 12:16 to have the Israelites change course for the sake of Miriam. [31]

Even the rabbinic argument for Miriam's beauty, which we examined in Chapter Two as a method of fitting Miriam into the rabbinic paradigm of a woman, suggests that Miriam was beloved by the rabbis. Leah Bronner points out that the rabbis make biblical women beautiful to make them even more dear. She writes, "Although there are some dissenting voices and counterattitudes evident in Midrash, . . . the rabbis generally consider physical beauty as a good thing. In fact, they create a blessing to recite upon seeing a beautiful woman, something to be appreciated, celebrated, and enjoyed—a gift from God."[32] Shulamit Reinharz traces this back to the Bible and forward to Western culture in general.

> . . . [T]he Bible and much of Western culture frequently equate beauty with goodness. Several admired matriarchs—Sarah and Rebekah, for example—are beautiful, even 'very beautiful.' In fact, one term for beauty in the Bible actually uses forms of the word *tov* (good), further promoting such associations. Thus, kindly Rebekah is *tovat mar'eh* ('exceedingly beautiful,'

> Genesis 24:16). And Esther is touted for her beauty, which enables her to carry out later virtuous deeds.[33]

As participants in and visionaries of a patriarchal society, rabbis view women as objects of sexual desire and supporters of home and family. A desire for female beauty would be natural. In fact, the rabbis, says Bronner, add the description of beauty to biblical women to make them more attractive.[34] Transforming Miriam into a beauty fits her into the rabbis' image of a righteous woman; it also indicates that the rabbis held Miriam in affection. Miriam is beloved.

Thus, in the texts examined in this chapter, the rabbis transform Miriam from a confusing biblical persona—a character who was clearly held dear by ancient Israelites, but most of whose actions have disappeared from the text—into a beloved leader and redeemer of Israel. The Bible may have imagined her as a leader of women. In fact, her role as leader of women may explain her absence from it, for the community she primarily represents is of secondary status and of rather little concern both to the Bible and the rabbis. But in rabbinic texts she is not only the particular leader of the large community of women; she is also a beloved leader and redeemer for all Israel. She marches out before the Israelites when they travel—almost like the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire God used to show the Israelites where to go![35] The community returned and waited for her when God had expelled her outside the camp. And God's own presence ministered to her when she had leprosy and purified her, and kissed her soul away from life and into death.

Miriam is part of a triumvirate of leaders and redeemers of Israel. These three were the human hands of God, creating the kind of people the Children of Israel would become. Many texts display a hierarchical understanding of the three siblings, with Miriam holding

the lowest place. But Miriam's place was still that of a pillar in an important, transformative and prophetic family for Israel. The rabbis do not speak of her nearly as much as they do of Aaron, let alone Moses. But they raise her profile. She holds her own with her brothers, and the Israelites and the rabbis hold her in their hearts in return. In their portrait of her the rabbis expand on the biblical text, and in doing so the seem to capture the precious position Miriam once held for the ancient Israelites, only alluded to in the Bible.

Conclusion

In the three previous chapters we have seen three patterns of treating Miriam in rabbinic texts. The rabbis molded her to fit the traditional role of a woman in both positive and negative aspects, as a wife and mother, and as a gossip. They constrain her prophecy by limiting it to the time of her childhood, while at the same time giving her the characteristics of a prophet throughout her life. Finally, they almost break their own gendered mold by calling Miriam not only "righteous" and "beloved" but "redeemer."

In general, the rabbinic portrayals of Miriam are authentic to the biblical text. Like the Bible, the rabbis are uncomfortable with her power and role as a prophet. They hold her culpable for the Numbers 12 incident. They read her as a leader of women, and expand beyond the Bible a bit as to what that might have looked like. On the other hand, they take seriously Miriam's portrayal as a prophet and redeemer in different biblical texts, ascribing prophetic characteristics to her and raising her to the position of communal leader and sustainer.

Indeed, the rabbis heightened and enhanced Miriam's role as as a prophet, as someone who challenged power, and as someone who redeemed the Israelite people. In many of these texts, she is equal (or almost equal) to Moses and Aaron. This elevation veers away from the normal rabbinic treatment of powerful biblical women. I am not the first to notice this. Bronner writes, "Though the sages are discomfited by women leaders, the case of Miriam begs the rule."[1] She continues, "The one instance of rebuke against her comes in connection with her criticism of Moses, which is used as an example of women's talking too much. In general, however, they portray Miriam as a fearless leader who stands up and defends Israel against destruction by her enemies."[2]

Miriam may be part of a wider pattern. Baskin notes that in rabbinic writings the women of the Exodus period were remarkable righteous. She writes, "According to the rabbinic sages, these admirable sisters [the daughters of Zelophohad] epitomized the females of the wilderness generation who consistently outshone their male contemporaries in their faith in God and in their personal courage."[3] She cites *Numbers Rabbah* 21:10, in which the women refuse to participate in the golden calf, or to listen to the spies' negative report. She also includes the daughters of Zelophohad in this trend, for *Sifre Numbers* 133 presents these women as wise and faithful. Baskin concludes that the women of the wilderness "constitute a counter-discourse based in the biblical text that calls into question the general rabbinic distrust of independent female behavior."[4]

In other words, in their treatment of Miriam—and perhaps of the women of the wilderness as well, the rabbis provide us with a model for stretching beyond one's limited frame. They do mold Miriam into their ideal woman. But they also *embrace* her as a redeemer, and accept her as a prophet.

The main means the rabbis use to grapple with Miriam is to limit her into a role they understand, or to one that is less threatening, and then try to empower her or redeem her *within* that limited role. In some texts this diminishes Miriam. In others it adds depth to her character.

As I suggested in the Introduction, part of the purpose of this work is self-discovery and growth. Mayer Gruber acknowledges that this is the purpose of much scholarship on rabbinics. He says,

> The often unarticulated goal of these researchers is to find out how the system believed to contain Torah, the word of God, can be made to work for the

> liberation and spiritual advancement of both women and men. . . . Jewish scholarship on Rabbinic literature, especially with respect to the role of women in the religion(s) represented by and expounded in the literature, is clearly confessional. It seeks to understand, to deconstruct, and ultimately to reconstruct a living religious tradition, in which not a few Jewish women and men show that they have a very clear stake.[5]

I wonder what we can learn about our own communities from the rabbinic treatment of Miriam. Like the rabbis, Western Jews exist in a gendered paradigm, and people who do not fit our pre-conceived notions of correct human roles challenge us. Sometimes they are threatening, and our response is to demean and diminish them. I believe a positive step beyond that response is the rabbis' main treatment of Miriam. Within the limits of power placed on people because they threaten a community's worldview, that same community can make space to *empower* that person. Perhaps an example of this is activism for the marginalized group from which they come, just as Miriam was seen as a leader of women and stood up for women who did not have courage to speak for themselves. Importantly, the rabbis did not make Miriam a perfect heroine even though they *did* regard her as righteous. She had faults and she sinned, and yet her strength was exemplified even in the moment of her transgression in challenging Moses. Our culture often ascribes inhuman perfection to those who challenge our paradigms in order to accept them; instead, I encourage us to embrace the rabbis' approach to Miriam in which they recognized her humanity and accepted her as a whole, virtuous, and flawed person.[6]

Finally, I hope we can eventually reach the level not only of acceptance, but of embracing those who challenge our community as the rabbis achieved in their treatment of

Miriam. They loved her as a sustainer, a leader, even a redeemer. They celebrated her as a voice of conscience speaking to power. I hope that we challenge ourselves to see the people who push our boundaries for who they are. I hope we can embrace them for their unconventional—and conventional—virtues, and their faults. And finally, I hope we can recognize within ourselves when we are forcing someone into a role to fit our own stereotypes, or are rejecting someone because she does not fit our paradigm.

The rabbis were willing to stretch their frame, to imagine greater, to take the first steps beyond their gendered worldview. As modern Jews and scholars our challenge is to continue that path, and to strive for awareness of our own lenses even as we use the rabbis' lenses to examine rabbinic literature.

NOTES

Notes to Introduction

[1] Actually five times, but tradition interprets Moses' sister in Ex. 2 as Miriam.

[2] Ex. 1:16.

[3] Ex. 1:22

[4] Ex. 1:15-21.

[5] Ex. 2:1-3.

[6] Ex. 2:3.

[7] Ex. 2:4.

[8] Ex. 2:7.

[9] Ex. 2:5-10.

[10] Friedman, for instance, ascribes Ex. 2:1-23a (the foregoing biblical story) to J, and Ex. 15:20-21 and Num. 12:1-16 to E, while the Deuteronomy reference is from the Deuteronomist school. Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 250-252.

[11] Ex. 15:1.

[12] Num. 12:1-2. George W. Coats argues for two different sources. George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 261. Friedman and Victor P. Hamilton dispute two different source documents for Numbers 12, Friedman asserting, "[This] story in E . . . reflects the depth of antagonism between the priests who identified with Moses (either as their founder or as their ancestor) and those who identified with Aaron." (Friedman, 76) Cf. Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1982), 336-337.

[13] Num. 12:14.

[14] These terms are *androgynos*, *tumtum*, *ay'lonit* and *saris*. The rabbis defined all four of these terms, however, using male-female language. Although the existence of these categories in rabbinic legal texts indicates a more complex understanding of gender, at its base the rabbinic paradigm is still a binary male-female one, with the male side dominant. The *androgynos*, *tumtum* and *saris* were barred from the performance of some *mitzvot* for not being fully male, and permitted others on a case-by-case basis. See Elliot Kukla, "Terms for Gender Diversity in Classical Jewish Texts" and "Gender Diversity in Halacha (The Way

We Walk): Mishna and Tosefta (1st – 2nd centuries C.E.)," in TransTorah.org [database online] (San Francisco: TransTorah, 2006) [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: http://www.transtorah.org/resources.html.

[15] These worlds included the influence of ancient Israelite culture and the Bible, the Persian Empire and Hellenization, which began even before Alexander conquered the Fertile Crescent. Mayer I. Gruber, "The Status of Women in Ancient Judaism," *Judaism in Late Antiquity, Part Three: Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism,* ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Boston: Brill, 1999), 2:162; Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2002), 36, 41-42.

[16] Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?" in *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean,* ed. Maria Wyke (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 136, quoted in Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 2.

[17] LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered community. Some people prefer the longer acronyms LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning), LGBTTSQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two spirit, queer and intersex), or LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, questioning/queer, intersex, ally/asexual). Probably as a result of this profusion of unwieldy acronyms, the acronym LGBT has come to stand for all people who define their gender or sexuality differently than the normative, dual-gender, heterosexual paradigm. See "LGBTQIA Glossary," UCDavis Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Center, n.p. [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: http://lgbtcenter.ucdavis.edu/lgbt-education/lgbtqia-glossary; "LGBTQIA," *Urban Dictionary.com*, n.p. [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=LGBTQIA; "LGBTQIA Students," *University of Missouri-Kansas City*, n.p. [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: http://www.umkc.edu/HOUSING/lgbtqia.asp; "Trans and Sexuality Terminologies," *Trans-Academics.org*, n.p. [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: http://www.trans-academics.org/trans_and_sexuality_termi. For information on the Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation, see their website at http://www.huc.edu/ijso/.

[18] Cf. *TransTorah* (TransTorah.org); Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: 1997).

[19] For instance, see Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 1-43, esp. 9.

[20] Judith R. Baskin, "Women as Other in Rabbinic Literature," *Judaism in Late Antiquity,* 177; Gruber, 173.

[21] Jacob Neusner, *Androgynous Judaism: Masculine and Feminine in the Dual Torah* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1993), 106; Neusner, *Theology in Action: How the Rabbis of the Talmud Present Theology (Aggadah) in the Medium of the Law (Halakhah): An Anthology*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham/Boulder/New York: University Press of America, 2006), 43-48.

[22] Neusner, viii.

[23] Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised," 149, quoted in Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 19.

[24] Neusner, vii.

[25] Gruber, 173.

[26] Translation in Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2002), 15, based on Soncino translation. Baskin explains that a woman's voice was sweet because it sounded like an instrument made from bone, as Eve was created from Adam's rib-bone (according to this interpretation). Baskin, 15.

[27] Mordechai Akiva Freedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: A Cairo Geniza Study* (New York, 1980), 1:19, quoted in Gruber, 163-164.

[28] Baskin, "Women as Other in Rabbinic Literature," 177.

[29] Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, Brown Studies, no. 36 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982). It is unclear whether this title referred to a position of spiritual, political or economic power, although Brooten suggests that holding this position argues for learning on the part of women, Brooten, 32.

[30] Gruber has counted the following professional roles for women in the Hebrew Bible:

> Elsewhere I have shown that women in the Levant in the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 B.C.E.) through the period of Persian hegemony (ending 330 B.C.E.), the eras portrayed in the Hebrew Scripture, were employed outside of the home and farm as priestesses and para-cultic functionaries (Exod. 38:8, I Sam. 2:22); prophetesses; sages (2 Sam. 14;20); poetesses (Exod. 15:21; Judg. 5:1-31; Prov. 31:1-0); keening women (Jer. 9), which is to say clergy who officiated at funerals; musicians (Ps. 68:26); queens; midwives, we-nurses; baby-sitters; business persons; scribes, cooks, bakers and producers of cosmetics (1 Sam. 8:13), as well as innkeepers and prostitutes (Josh. 2). (Gruber, "Status of Women," 152.)

He refers to Gruber, "Women's Roles in the Ancient Levant," in *Women's Roles in Ancient Civilizations*, ed. Bella Zweig (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), Chapter 5.

[31] Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Brill, 1997), 231.

[32] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 84. Judith Hauptman notes that women's exclusion from the synagogue simply reveals "that the rationale for these restrictions is women's social inferiority." Judith Hauptman, Women and the Conservative Synagogue," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, eds. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: JPS, 1992), 164.

[33] Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 172-174, 180-183, cf. *Tosefta Kelim Baba Metzia* 1:6.

[34] Ibid., 191.

[35] Ibid., 190-192.

[36] Ibid., 193.

[37] Gruber, 161-163.

[38] Jacob Neusner, *How the Rabbis Liberated Women*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism, vol. 191 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998). Women were required to do certain rituals,

as well as pray at fixed times, including a "day off" in which women abstained from work at the beginning of a new month, *Rosh Hodesh*. Baskin, "Women as Other," 184, cf. *M. Shab.* 2:6. The rabbis tried to protect a woman's rights by requiring that her husband feed her, clothe her, satisfy her sexually, provide for her and her children in case of divorce or his death, ransom her if kidnapped, provide medicine for her, and bury her with honor. Cf. *M. Ket.* 4:4, 8-12, 5:6, Judith Hauptman, "Women and the Conservative Synagogue," 168.

[39] Gruber, 154.

[40] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 43.

[41] See *B. Yoma* 47a for an example of a text in which a woman's worth is related to her motherhood.

[42] Ibid., 117-118.

[43] Boyarin, 134-166, 196. See also Judith Hauptman, "Women and the Conservative Synagogue," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, eds. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: JPS, 1992), 164.

[44] Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), esp. 19.

[45] Ibid., 19, quoted in Gruber, 166. Some scholars argue that a visceral fear of women's menstruation contributed to their exclusion. Baskin, 23-29.

[46] Boyarin disputes this, arguing that while the rabbinic relationship to sexuality was complex,

> The rabbis are not willing to consider either women per se or sexuality a negative or threatening element in the world. But any social hierarchy, however "benign," seems to carry within itself the seeds of a potential discourse of contempt, and such discourse was likely hovering just below the surface of the rabbinic attempt to produce a discourse of female confinement that was not misogynistic in character. (Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 94)

[47] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 141.

[48] Cf. Ibid., 162.

[49] Tal Ilan, *Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, vol. 115 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), cf. 19-42.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] See Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 61.

[2] II Kings 22:14; Judges 4:4. See Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 169.

[3] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 171.

[4] Devora Steinmetz believes that both these texts reflect an ancient, inherited tradition in which Miriam is associated "with the institution of kingship." Devora Steinmetz, "A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash," *Prooftexts* 8 (Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 47.

[5] I quote *B. Sotah* 11a - 12a exclusively in this discussion only because Sotah is slightly more comprehensible than *Sifre Numbers*. The same traditions also appear in *Ex. Rab.* 1, 1:17. It is almost identical to the version in the Babylonian Talmud, and may be based on it.

[6] Sif. Deut., Piska 26, 3:23.

[7] I Chron. 2:18-20 reads, "And Caleb the son of Hezron begot children of Azubah his wife--and of Jerioth—and these were her sons: Jesher, and Shobab, and Ardon. And Azubah died, and Caleb took unto him Ephrath, who bore him Hur. And Hur begot Uri, and Uri begot Bezalel" (JPS 1917).

[8] An interesting parallel to the transformation the rabbis also attribute to Yocheved after her husband remarried her at Miriam's instigation; cf. *B. Sotah* 12a, further along on the page.

[9] Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Jerusalem: Horeb, 1926), 133, s.v. *'etnan*.

[10] A. Cohen, "Sotah," *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim*, I. Epstein, ed. (London: The Soncino Press, 1936), 59 n15.

[11] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 169.

[12] *B. Moed Katan* 16b. Cf. *B. Avodah Zarah* 36b, *Megillah* 29a.

[13] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, especially 185-186.

[14] Baskin, 30-35, 91. In *B. Shabbat* 33a, Abraham decides not to tell Sarah about his intention to sacrifice Isaac because "women are light-minded." "Light-minded" captures a weakness of will and an inability to think ahead, and thus embraces the sins of both gossip and adultery. These sins clearly emerge in the rabbis' minds from an inability to think ahead, to think profoundly, or to take seriously God's commandments. And thus it can lead to some of the most grievous sins: adultery and a lack of faith. Cf. *B. Qidd* 89b, Michael Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 146, 158. For the association between women in groups, gossip and adultery see *B. Gittin* 45a.

[15] Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness*, 261.

[16] The use of a singular verb to introduce the action of multiple actors is by no means uncommon in the Hebrew Bible. Beginning with the female actor is unusual, but a parallel can be found with Deborah, in Judges 5:1. (Moses also leads the singing in the singular, although Exodus 15:1 lists both Moses and the Children of Israel as singers.)

[17] Tirzah Meacham, "Woman More Intelligent than Man: Creation Gone Awry," in *Historical, Literary, and Religious Studies*, ed. Herbert W. Basser and Simcha Fishbane (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 60, cited in Baskin, 55.

[18] Baskin, 140-154. Cf. *B. Gittin* 45a.

[19] Cohen notes, "She was an invalid so nobody would marry her." Cohen, "Sotah," 59 n2.

[20] The Hebrew could be read as "Caleb . . . begat Azubah," as opposed to the more sensical meaning of "Caleb begot children with his wife Azubah."

[21] This infantilizing of women is common in rabbinic tradition. Great rabbis often call their women, including their wives, "my daughter." Cf. *B. Sotah* 7a, 22a,*B. Yevamot* 34b, 106a, 121b, *B. Ketubot* 66b, *B. Nedarim* 20b, *B. Menakhot* 44a, *B. Chullin* 47b.

[22] Horovitz, 97. Neusner, *Sifré to Numbers: An American Translation and Explanation*, Vol. 2, Brown Judaic Studies 119 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 115 (XCIX:I, 1.B – 2.D).

[23] Some of these midrashim explain that Zipporah was not really a Cushite but rather just as a Cushite is distinguished by his skin, so Zipporah was distinguished by her deeds. (*Sifre Zuta* 12:1.)

[24] Horovitz 98, Neusner, *Sifré to Numbers*, 116 (XCIX.2.A.).

[25] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 185.

[26] Sif. Num. 100; Sif. Zut. 12:8. Elaine Phillips points out that Sif. Num. 99 by emphasizing the beauty of Zipporah also emphasizes the will-power of Moses in resisting her. (Elaine A. Phillips, "The Singular Prophet and Ideals of Torah: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses in Early Rabbinic Texts," *The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition*, edited by Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity*, Vol. 6 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998], 82.)

[27] Phillips, 79.

[28] Dvora Steinmatz points out that the Babylonian Talmud logically explains Moses' separation from Zipporah as an issue of purity: since Moses might at any time speak with God, he needed to be pure at all times, and being in sexual contact with his wife posed a slight risk that he might not be pure at all times. Steinmetz, 49.

[29] Devora Steinmetz, "A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash," *Prooftexts* 8 (Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 35-65.

[30] *M. Yevamot* 6:6.

[31] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 88.

[32] Cf. ibid., 96.

[33] As Steinmetz points out, Moses' behavior as a father is never described in the Bible after his son's birth and naming, except for his failure to circumcise his son—a failure that Zipporah rectifies in Ex. 4:24-26. Steinmetz, 62n.36.

[34] Steinmetz, 49.

[35] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 31.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] Jacob Z. Lauterbach, transl., *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, Vol 2 (Philadephia: JPS, 1961), 81; translation mine. *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 15:20 has a similar story, but her father neither kisses nor slaps her, and rather than saying "she held on to her prophecy," the text reads, "but she still stood in prophecy still stood in prophecy." *Midrash Prov.* 14:1 has a version of this story almost identical to the one that appears in *B. Megillah*.

[2] The opposite argument might be made: that she grasped onto her prophecy specifically out of concern for the redemption of Israel. Devora Steinmetz makes this argument, in context of the concern Miriam shows for the continuity of her people and family, such as in challenging her father to remarry her mother. We will look at these texts shortly. (Steinmetz, 42) However, I believe that the way the rabbis describe her father treating her—the poetic parallels of him kissing her on her head and then slapping her on her head—create an image of a child, acting in relationship to her father and whose action is driven by her father's treatment of her.

[3] A midrash on *tob*, good: "The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful (*tob*) he was, she hid him for three months" (Ex. 2:2). *B. Sotah* 12a has several midrashim on what *tob* might mean; the final one compares Moses' mother looking at him and seeing he is *tob* and God looking at light and saying it is *tob*, arguing that *tob* means that the whole chamber was filled with light when Moses was born.

[4] Miriam, Aaron and Moses' mother, and Aaron's wife.

[5] I am indebted to Rabbi Ruth Sohn for this insight. The *midrash* that Yocheved is Shifrah and Miriam is Puah also appears in *Sif. Num*. 78.

[6] The meaning of *po'ah* is not clear. Jastrow renders this passage "she blew a charm into the mother's ear." (Jastrow, 1202) In studying this passage with Ruth Sohn we also proposed that this might refer to blowing in the baby's mouth or to breathing with the mother to help her regulate her breathing during labor.

[7] Steinmetz, 38.

[8] Horovitz 73-74.

[9] Neusner, *Sifré to Numbers*, 58.

[10] Steinmetz, 42.

[11] This story may be a conflation of several earlier stories, but the germ of the story that appears in *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael Tracta Shirata* 10 suggests that it is an old tradition.

[12] Throughout this chapter I call Moses and Miriam's parents Amram and Yocheved, although they are not named in Exodus chapters 1-2. The only character besides God who has a name in the first two chapters of Exodus is Moses; all others are known by their title, relationship to others or profession. Although the only named person is Moses, the main actors are the women who

surround him. I follow the rabbis' example in choosing to use the characters' accepted names, even when they are not named in the biblical texts.

[13] This story appears in both *B. Sotah* 12a and 12b, as well as some mid-to-late midrashic works, including *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13. The relatively early *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* knows it. Its commentary on Ex. 15:20 begins, "*And Miriam the Prophetess . . . took* But where do we find that Miriam prophesied: It is merely this: Miriam had said to her father: 'You are destined to beget a son who will arise and save Israel from the hands of the Egyptians.' Immediately, *There went a man of the house of Levi and took to wife . . . and the woman conceived and bore a son . . .* (Ex. 2:1-3)" (*Mek. dR.Yish. T. Shirata* 10, Lauterbach, 81). *Mekhilta deRabbi Shimon bar Yochai* (Melamad edition, 100) has the story of Amram separating from Yocheved, but he does it to confuse the Egyptians and hide Yocheved's pregnancy. Miriam's prophecy is a separate story, parallel to the one quoted from Megillah. In *Mek. d'Rab. Shim.b. Yochai* 15:20 Miriam prophesies Moses birth and redemption of Israel to her father; he asks what happened to her prophecy, and the proof that her prophecy stands is that Ex. 2:4, when she watches over Moses, is a verse about prophecy.

[14] Cohen explains that this means that while Pharaoh decrees the infants' death, preventing their birth prevents their soul emerging into this world and therefore having the chance to be reborn in the World to Come. (Cohen, "Sotah," 60 n4.)

[15] For instance, Hannah's argument with God, using rabbinic logic, to convince God to give her a child is seen as laudable. *B. Berakhot* 31b-32a; see Bronner, 96-97 and 108-109n35.

[16] R. Judah may know a slightly different version of this story, or he may be suggesting an entirely different interpretation: Amram does not divorce his wife. Exodus 1:1 reads literally, "*Went* a man of the house of Levi and (he) *took* the daughter of [the house of] Levi." R. Judah may be reading this verse as "Amram went and took counsel *with his daughter*, a daughter of the house of Levi." Or he may be reading it as, "Amram went (and had counsel with his daughter), then he had sex with his wife."

[17] *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13.

[18] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 54.

[19] *B. Shabbat* 54b. Translation based on the translation in the article by Ruth Sohn, "Truth or Consequences," *Reform Judaism*, Fall 2007 (New York: Union of Reform Judaism, 2007), 28.

[20] Ibid., 29.

[21] *B. Arakhin* 16b, translation from Sohn, 29.

[22] *Sifra Metzora* 7-8; *Sif. Deut* piska 1, 275; *Sif. Num.* 99; *Sif. Zuta* 12; cf. *Sif. Num.* 105.

[23] Gunther Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary*, S. David Sperling, ed., Chaim Stern, transl. (New York: UAHC Press, 1996), xxix.

[24] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1962), 10.

[25] Ibid., 21.

[26] Based on Lauterbach, 81.

[27] This verse is followed by Amos having a vision, of Israel being destroyed and eventually restored. The prophet uses the Nile as one of the metaphors in that vision.

[28] The rabbis understood Wisdom as an attribute of God. As a feminine word, it might also refer to the *Shekhinah*, the dwelling of God on earth.

[29] Translation from Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952) 250-251.

[30] Ibid., 251.

[31] *B. Sotah* 11a.

[32] Kadushin, 253.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] A later rabbinic text makes an association between Miriam as a source of salvation and the resonance of her name with bitterness. This passage from *Exodus Rabbah* compares three verbs of disquiet from Job with three oppressive commands by the Egyptians, and uses word-play to declare that for each decree a savior came: Miriam, Aaron and Moses.

> *Then came Amalek* (Ex. 17:8). It is written, *I was not at ease, neither was I quiet, neither had I rest; but trouble came* (Job 3:26). . . . Another explanation: *'I was not at ease'*—on account of the first decree which Pharaoh decreed against me, as it says, *And they [the Egyptians] made their [the Israelites'] lives bitter (*vaY-MaR-RU*)* (Ex. 1:14). God raised up a deliverer (*go'el*) for them—this is Miriam, whose name intimates the bitterness (*MiRuR*) of slavery. *'Neither was I quiet'*—on account of the second decree, *If it be a son, then ye shall kill him* (Ex. 1:17); God then raised up a redeemer—Aaron, whose name alludes to birth. *'Neither had I rest'*—on account of the third decree which [Pharaoh] decreed: *Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river* (Ex. 1:22); but God raised up a redeemer—Moses whose name indicates his association with water, for it says, *Because I drew him out of the water* (Ex. 2:10). *'But trouble came'*—this refers to Amalek. (*Exodus Rabbah* 26:1)

[2] David E. Greenberg, . "The Rabbinic Portrayal of Miriam" (Rabbinic diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1978), 41-42.

[3] Ibid., 43-44.

[4] In most texts, the miracle associated with Aaron is "the pillar of cloud," that is, the cloud that guided the Israelites by day in their journeying: it stopped and the Israelites rested; it moved and the Israelites followed, and was replaced with a pillar of fire at night (cf. Ex. 13:21). It is also associated with God's presence in many biblical verses—as are other clouds (cf. Ex. 40:34; Ex. 24:16, where the term "glory," *kavod* is used to mean God's theophanic presence, and the cloud is the visible symbol of it). "Clouds of Glory" may therefore refer to the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites or all manifestations of God in a cloud in the last four books of Moses.

[5] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Vayassa'*, 5; my translation—passage missing from Lauterbach.

[6] The next *tosefta* (*T. Sotah* 11:2) opens with the tradition that associates Moses with *manna*. In that text *manna* was supposed to disappear with Moses death but miraculously remains for the Israelites a short time longer.

[7] The incident in which Moses strikes the rock at Meribah *against* God's commandment, and is unable to enter the Holy Land as punishment, appears in Numbers 20 (cf. Num. 20:12). In Ex. 17, God commands Moses to strike the rock.

[8] The text I have has צרעה, wasp or plague here, which I have translated as sorrow/travail/lamentation, צרה, assuming a textual error.

[9] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Vayassa',* 5; my translation—passage missing from Lauterbach.

[10] *B. Taanit* 9a combines, explains and expands on the two *Tosefta Sotah* passages, following the logic of *T. Sot.* 11:8 (including concluding with the Zechariah verse), and using prooftexts like *T. Sot.* 11:1.

[11] Cf. *B. Moed Katan* 28a, *B. Baba Bathra* 17a, *Sif. Deut.* 26, *Sif. Deut.* 339.

[12] Either this foretaste of heaven is a result of the complete righteousness of these characters (next line), or, equally likely, the use of the word was interpreted by the rabbis to refer to that inclusive, final experience of God in the World to Come: "all."

[13] Maurice Simon in the Soncino Talmud explains that "all" in reference to each patriarch means that they were completely righteous. (Maurice Simon, "Baba Bathra," *The Babylonian Talmud: Baba Bathra*, I. Epstein, ed. [London: The Soncino Press, 1935], 85 n10.)

[14] Because they died with a divine kiss.

[15] Simon explains that if they had a taste of the world to come and were entirely righteous—the argument of the previous paragraph—then they would not have been denied "this final honour." (Simon, 86 n3)

[16] Aaron died at God's command, but the rabbis interpret "by the mouth of Adonai," as "by a Divine Kiss:" "Aaron the priest ascended Mount Hor at the command (*'al pi YHWH*) of the Lord and died there . . ." (Num. 33:38). "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there (*sham*), in the land of Moab, at the command of the Lord (*'al pi YHWH*)" (Deut. 34:5).

[17] Num. 20:1 reads, ". . . Miriam died there (*sham*) and was buried there (*sham*)." The rabbis extrapolate from what they regard as an unnecessary use of a word to the contextual meaning of that word used elsewhere in the biblical text. In other words, since "Miriam died and was buried there" would have conveyed the same meaning as the actual verse, the rabbis assume that God must have used the word "there," *sham,* twice to hint at additional meaning.

[18] Simon explains, "i.e., rest in the grave in reliance on that love." (Simon, ibid., n7.)

[19] Deut. 33:12.

[20] Ps. 16:9.

[21] *Ex. Rab.* 26:1. See note 4, above, for the full text.

[22] "*Go'el: zo Miryam*." Ibid.

[23] Hammer, 269.

[24] Greenberg, 43-44.

[25] *M. Sotah* 1:9; adapted from Cohen, *Seder Nashim*, 42.

[26] For more on this see *Tosefta Sotah* 3:17-3:19, and on the good 4:1, as well as *Mishnah Sotah* 1:7, and on. "The measure of goodness is five hundred times greater than the measure of retribution" (*T. Sot*. 4:1). The examples given are of Abraham's meritorious actions and how Israel had or will benefit from it. *B. Sotah* 11a does associate the example of Miriam with the idea that good deeds are rewarded many times over. *T. Sotah* 4:7 has the Joseph interpretation of *M. Sotah* 1:9, but not the bit on Miriam. Serach, however, is involved in this story. Cf. Neusner, *The Tosefta: Seder Nashim—The Order of Women,* Vol 3., *The Tosefta* (New York: Ktav, 1979).

[27] The others are Jacob and Moses.

[28] *Sifre Numbers* 106, *Sife Zuta* 12:15. *Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael* takes off from the verse in which Joseph's bones are carried out of Egypt. (*Mek. d'Rab. Yish. Vayhi* 1.)

[29] An easier translation would be, "By driving her, by expelling her, You shall contend with her." In the context of Isaiah this grammar is odd, for Isaiah is speaking of Jacob and Israel, male, singular symbols for the people. But this verse deals with an unreferenced feminine. (JPS 1985 translates "her" as "them.") The rabbis seem to be playing on the meaning of *tarivnah*, You shall contend with her. The root verb might also mean "to judge" (cf. Is. 57:16, 3:13). Menachem-Zvi Kadari, *Milon Ha'ivrit Hamikra-it* (*Biblical Hebrew Dictionary: a Treasury of Biblical Language from* Alef *to* Tav) (Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University, 2006), 1004.

[30] *Sif. Num* 106 (Horovitz, 104).

[31] *Sif. Num.* 106 (Horovitz, 105), *Sif. Zut.* 11:35, *Mek. d'R. Yish. tractate Vayassa* 3. The rabbis re-read Num. 12:16, when the Israelites set out after Miriam's leprosy. A standard reading of the verse is "After that the people set out from Hazeroth . . . ," but the rabbis in these texts read it as "And after the people had set out from Hazeroth they *returned* to Hazeroth to wait for Miriam to be healed."

[32] Bronner, 74.

[33] Shulamit Reinharz, "Emor: Contemporary Reflection," eds. *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 744.

[34]Bronner, 75-76.

[35] As well as being a visible manifestation of God's presence.

Notes to Conclusion

[1] Bronner,170.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 144.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Gruber, 173

[6] A very biblical model for heroes, who are often portrayed as flawed (Jacob cheats his brother and lies to his father; Abraham takes a concubine and then expels her to the desert; David commits adultery and conspires to have his partner's husband killed.

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