

## Relationships Matter: Celebrating Miriam's Legacy

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Prophetess. Community leader. Provider. Relationship builder. In one word: Miriam.

In our Torah portion this week, Parashat Chukat, we read, "The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (Numbers 20:1-2). Before our ancestors continued into the Promised Land, Miriam – followed by Aaron and then Moses – died.

Certainly, one could read the above quotation from the Torah as separate ideas: 1) Miriam died, and then, as a separate thought, 2) the community was without water. Our rabbis, however, interpret the juxtaposition of these two verses to teach that among Miriam's roles in the Wilderness journey was to supply our ancestors with water to drink. That is, *because* Miriam died, the community was without water. Just as a mother nurses her young, so too did Miriam give us drink when we were thirstiest. Miriam was a giver, perhaps not fully appreciated until she could give no more.

Miriam was a singer too. Just as Moses led the men in song after crossing the Red Sea, so too did Miriam lead the woman: "Sing to the LORD," she proclaimed, "for [God] has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver [God] has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:21).

The rabbinic *midrashim* tell us much more about Miriam, such as that she married Caleb! This is, perhaps, no surprise. After all, our rabbis see a beautiful symmetry in her life: in her youth and in her old age, Miriam devoted herself to strengthening the Jewish People by uplifting the institution of marriage.

Early in Exodus we read that Pharaoh issued a decree sentencing to death every male child born to a Jewish woman. Our rabbis teach that, in response to Pharaoh's evil order, Amram the Levite and leader of the Israelites in Egypt ruled that every husband must divorce his wife in order to prevent pregnancy and thus the obligation to kill children. However, Amram's young daughter, Miriam, convinced her father of the importance and beauty of marriage, and the need to continue procreation even in the face of incredible danger.

Amram, inspired by Miriam, relented. In turn, Amram remarried his wife Yocheved. Sometime later she gave birth to their third child, Moses. We have Miriam to thank. We also need to thank her because she accompanied Moses in the baby basket and supported his education while at the Pharaoh's palace. Because of Miriam, Moses learned of his identity as a member of the House of Israel.

Moses and Miriam grew close, and together led the Israelites out of slavery. Over the years, Miriam saw Moses exhibiting one of the signs of prophecy and burdensome leadership: Moses forsook his wife and his marital obligations to her. When in the Torah we learn that Miriam spoke ill of Moses's wife Tziporrah, our rabbis explain that in actuality Miriam was chastising Moses for his failure to love his wife.

Miriam began her leadership of the Jewish people by celebrating the importance of marriage. Her leadership of the Jewish people culminated with her focus on the beauty of marriage. Miriam tended to individuals and she cared for the entire community. Miriam reminds us that relationships matter and taking the time to invest in those relationships matters as well.

As we celebrate this week the life of Miriam, may we honor her for all the ways small and large that she cared for and led our ancestors during their most difficult times. In addition, may we heed her advice this week and every week to honor the importance and to celebrate the beauty of marriage. May we further take to heart the lesson that all relationships are important: friendships, the parent-child relationship, the sibling relationship, business relationships, and of course the relationship of one partner with another. Relationships matter and require our attention.

From my family to yours, Shabbat shalom!