

The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah

Introduction to *The Five Books of Miriam*

The Five Books of Miriam gives a commentary of the Torah to explore various themes and questions from the perspective of women across different generations. A combination of Jewish tradition, Midrash and an intergenerational dialogue to explore and debate what the Torah means for women's lives.

Who is Miriam?

Miriam is the daughter of Amram and Jochebed, and the sister of Moses and Aaron. She first appears in the Book of Exodus and is a prophetess. In Exodus, Miriam watched over baby Moses as he was placed by the River Nile and Miriam is described as helping Moses and Aaron to free the Jewish people from exile. Miriam is said to have devoted her time to women and children, regularly provided a source of hope to the community, helped those who were ill and protected the well, the source of fresh water that followed the people as they wandered through the desert. During Passover, Miriam's Cup, which is filled with water, has become a part of the Seder Meal to serve as a symbol of Miriam's Well - a healing and sustaining source. It also seeks to make the Seder more inclusive of women's stories.

Quotes from the Torah about Miriam

'She put the baby in it [Moses] and then placed it in the tall grass at the edge of the river. The baby's sister stood some distance away to see what would happen to him... The princess opened it and saw a baby boy... Then his sister asked her, "Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to act as a wet nurse?" "Please do," she answered. So the girl went and brought the baby's own mother. (Exodus 2: 3-9)

'The prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took her tambourine, and all the women followed her, playing tambourines and dancing. (Exodus 15: 19-21)

Miriam sang for them: "Sing to the Lord, because he has won a glorious victory; he has thrown the horses and their riders into the sea." (Exodus 15: 21)

'Beshallakh: The Miriam Tradition'

The chapter 'Beshallakh' in the *Five Books of Miriam* discusses the idea of the Miriam tradition in Judaism. The Miriam Tradition is the understanding that religious values form in and through movement with ritual and dance developing as patterns of rituals. Many Jewish communities follow the tradition of Miriam in song and dance at times of festivals and celebrations. However, this chapter also seeks to explore other descriptions of Miriam.

Miriam is portrayed as a prophet and a leader especially to women. Miriam is able to inspire women to create new songs, poems and stories, despite only having a single verse of her song in the Torah.¹

Dance can be an important part of worship to G-d, it is a form of prayer and can be used during times of celebration. For example, it is said in Exodus 15: 20: 'all the women followed her, [Miriam], playing tambourines and dancing.' Dance is still an important part of many Jewish communities today, with the independent dance tradition practiced by Jewish communities across the world and with festivals such the Karmiel Dance Festival to celebrate these dance traditions.²

The Torah tells us that Miriam prays on behalf of women at the Sea of Reeds, as it is written in Exodus 15: 21: '[Miriam] sings for them.' Jewish women have always written their own prayers which have supported them in times of hope, need, trouble and danger. For example, Yiddish prayers called tekhines were written specifically for women. They reflected individual experiences in a woman's life such as marriage, childbirth, baking challah, lighting candles on Shabbat and giving tzedakah (charity).³

Points of Reflection

1. How would you describe Miriam's personality?
2. How might Jewish people honour Miriam during Passover?
3. What does water symbolise to you and how could this be associated with prayer?
4. Can you write a poem or song to inspire your community?

¹ Frankel, E., *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, G.P Putnam's Sons Publishers: 1996, p.110.

² Frankel, E., *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, G.P Putnam's Sons Publishers: 1996, p.111-112.

³ Frankel, E., *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, G.P Putnam's Sons Publishers: 1996, p.112.