

# Miriam: Water Prophetess

## Miriam in the Torah: First look

A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water" (Exodus 2:1–10).

### Questions to consider:

1. What details of this story are included, and what is left out?
2. The above passage is used as proof-text for why Miriam is called a prophetess later in the Torah. Why do you think this is the case?

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## Miriam in the Torah: Singing at the Sea

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.” Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea. The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen—Pharaoh’s entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left (Exodus 14:21–29).

. . . Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said:

“I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;  
Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea . . .” (Exodus 15:1).

. . . 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. (Exodus 15:20–21).

### Questions to consider:

1. What details of this story are included, and what is left out?
2. Miriam is now a leader of the people. What qualities are evident?
3. What is the difference between Moses and Miriam’s songs?

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## Miriam in the Torah: Mistakes were Made

. . . When they were in Hazeroth, 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?” The Lord heard it. Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth. Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting.” So the three of them went out. The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, “Aaron and Miriam!” The two of them came forward; and He said, “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 with 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!” Still incensed with them, the Lord departed.

As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales. When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. And Aaron said to Moses, “O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother’s womb with half his flesh eaten away.” So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “O God, pray heal her!”

But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted.” So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted (Numbers 12:1–15).

## Questions to Consider:

1. What details are provided and what is omitted?
2. Does Miriam’s punishment fit her crime? Why or why not?
3. What is the response to Miriam’s illness from her family and the community, and what does this response tell us about Miriam herself?

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## Miriam in the Torah: Death in the desert

(1) The Israelites arrived as a congregation at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. (2) *And there was no water for the congregation*; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. (3) And the people argued with Moses and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our people perished before Adonai! (4) Why have you brought the assembly of Adonai into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? (5) Why have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!' (6) And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces; and the glory of the LORD appeared unto them. (Numbers 20:1-6)

## Questions to Consider:

1. What details are provided and what is omitted?
2. According to the text, what is Miriam's legacy?

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## Companion Midrash: First Look

AND MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS . . . TOOK . . . [Exodus 15:20]. 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. [Exodus 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., 2:4].<sup>1</sup>

-Mechilta d’Rabbi Ishmael

## Companion Midrash: Singing at the Sea

AND MIRIAM SANG UNTO THEM [Exodus 15:21]. Scripture tells that just as Moses recited the song for the men, so Miriam recited the song for the women: SING YE TO THE LORD, FOR HE IS HIGHLY EXALTED, ETC. [ibid.].<sup>2</sup>

-Mechilta d’Rabbi Ishmael

## Companion Midrash: Mistakes were Made

Why does Scripture state explicitly of [the punishment of] Miriam, but by intimation regarding Aaron? Since she was the one who began [the conversation]. To what can this be compared? To two people who were walking past a vineyard. One of them went into the vineyard and gathered grapes, ate some, and gave his friend to eat. When the owner of the vineyard came, he only caught the one who was in his vineyard. Thus with Aaron and Miriam: they both spoke, and both were smitten, but Scripture is explicit only about Miriam, as it says, “there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales,” because she was the one who started it.

-Sifre Zuta 12:9-10

Moses drew a small circle, and stood inside it, and beseeched mercy on [Miriam], saying, “I will not move from here until Miriam my sister is healed,” as it is written, “Please God, please heal her.”

-Avot de Rabbi Natan 9

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## Companion Midrashim: Death in the Desert

Ten things were created at twilight of the first Shabbat eve. These are: the mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach]; the mouth of [Miriam's] well; the mouth of [Balaam's] donkey; the rainbow; the manna; [Moses'] staff, the *shamir*; the writing, the inscriptions and the tablets [of the Ten Commandments]. Some also say the burial place of Moses and the ram of our father Abraham.

-Mishna, Avot 5:6

*Shamir* = a magical worm, central to midrashic understanding of how King Solomon built the first temple without using iron tools. The Shamir, brought from paradise by an eagle to King Solomon, possessed the ability to cut through rock or diamond.



*In the Talmud, the Rabbis discuss the significance of the “three shoots” on the grapevine that appears in the wine steward’s dream (from the story of Joseph in jail.) What do these three shoots represent? There are many opinions, but Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains that the shoots allude to three specific gifts that God has given to our people:*

R. Yehoshua b. Levi said, “the vine itself represents Torah. The “three shoots” represent [Miriam's] well, the cloud of glory [that followed the children of Israel through the desert] and the manna.

-BT Hullin 92a