

PARSHAT HUKKOT

Rabbi Michael Gold

WAS MIRIAM RACIST?

“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.” (Numbers 20:1)

This week we read about the death of Moses’ older sister Miriam. There are many passages throughout the Torah and Midrash that indicate the greatness of Miriam. That is why she is known as *Miriam HaNeviva* “Miriam the Prophetess.” In fact, in our home we have introduced a relatively new tradition to our Passover Seder. We place a cup of water for Miriam alongside the cup of wine for Elijah. I bought a cup showing Miriam playing the tambourine, a scene from the Torah.

Miriam’s greatness begins when she was a child. According to the Midrash, Moses’ parents separate when Pharaoh decrees that all baby boys should be tossed into the river. Miriam convinces her parents to come back together. “Pharaoh’s decree may be overturned, but by not having children, your decree will last forever.” Moses’ parents reunite and baby Moses, the savior of the people Israel, is born.

When Moses’ mother places him in a basket to float down the river, Miriam follows to assure the baby will be all right. Pharaoh’s daughter rescues baby Moses and Miriam arranges her own mother to act as a wet nurse, allowing the baby to survive. One can surmise that Moses, growing up in Pharaoh’s home, also learns of his heritage through his birth-mother nurse. Miriam’s role is vital in the redemption of Israel from Egypt.

Later, after the crossing of the sea, Moses leads the people in the Song of the Sea, which has become part of our daily liturgy. Miriam takes the women aside, while holding a tambourine, and leads the women in song and dance. Her leadership and central role in the journey through the desert are obvious.

Nonetheless, perhaps Miriam’s most important role appears in this week’s portion. Miriam dies, and immediately the people complain about the lack of water. Tradition teaches that Miriam had a well that provided water

during the years of wandering. The well was one of the last miraculous things God created at the last moment before Shabbat. When the Miriam dies, the well dries up. This leads to the famous scene where Moses hits the rock to provide water for the people. Our Passover cup of water for Miriam is a reminder of her miraculous well.

Having said that, even the most virtuous person has moments of weakness. For Miriam, it was the incident we read a few weeks ago, when she and her brother Aaron complained about Moses' black wife. "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he married" (Numbers 12:2). Cush is the Hebrew for Ethiopia and for those with dark skin. They were descendants of Noah's son Ham, cursed by their father. Both Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses' wife, but Miriam seems to be the ringleader. She is the only one punished. God afflicts her with *tzaraat*, a skin disease often mistranslated as leprosy. Miriam's skin turns white, and she is forced to separate from the community for a week. It is almost as if God is saying, "You are going to complain about someone with black skin, I will show you what it is like to have white skin."

Was Miriam racist? She was a truly decent person. But she had a moment of weakness. As a song in the hit Broadway musical *Avenue Q* teaches, "Everyone's a little bit racist, sometimes." The lyrics continue, "Doesn't mean we go around committing hate crimes. Look around and you will find, no one's really color blind." Perhaps the story of Miriam appears as a warning to all of us. We all have the potential to be prejudice (from the word pre-judge) of some people based on skin color, ethnicity, religion, and multiple other superficial factors. It is a tendency we should fight.

Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a color blind society, where people are judged "not by the color of their skin but the content of their character." Long before King, the prophet Malachi had the same dream. "Have we not all one father? Did not one God create us all?" (Malachi 2:10).