

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

to [*hofiah panim keneged*] her father.” (1:13). Perhaps it was this defiant optimism that singled her out to receive prophecy and play an even more significant role:

Seven prophetesses. Who were these? Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther... Miriam, as it is written, “And Miriam the prophetess the sister of Aaron” (Exodus 15:20). Was she only the sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses? Rabbi Nahman said in the name of Rav: Because she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron 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 tapped her on the head, saying, ‘Daughter, where is thy prophecy?’ So it is written, “and his sister stood afar off to know,” (Exodus 2:4) to know what would be the end of her prophecy. - Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a

The light that filled the house when Moses was born was the sign of his holy mission. But even as Amram was quick to doubt the prophecy when the situation became difficult, Miriam kept faith, not only *watching* what would become of her brother, but also *watching over* him to make sure he lived. According to the Mechilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Shirata 10, this was a holy act:

... And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him (Exodus 2:4). For the expression “standing” suggests [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 Samuel 3:10). And it also says “Call Joshua and stand,” (Deuteronomy 31:14).

Afar Off. The expression “afar off” everywhere suggests [the presence of] the Holy Spirit, as in the passage: “From afar the Lord appeared unto me.” (Jeremiah 31:2).”

This text goes on to explicate the rest of the verse similarly, making clear that Miriam’s presence is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Each of these beautiful midrashim shows us a different aspect of holy action. In the first, Miriam stands up to her father, speaking out about what she believes is right. In the second, she receives prophecy and is open to seeing a clear sign of holiness, believing in its truth even when circumstances become difficult. In the third midrash, Miriam is willing to wait and watch Hashem’s plan unfold, standing in for the Holy Spirit as she watches over her baby brother.

And when we act in the world with optimism and confidence, seeking signs and speaking truth, and stand watch with great care, we are carrying on the tradition of Miriam the Prophetess.

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Shemot

January 6, 2018 | 19 Tevet 5778

Annual | Exodus 1:1-6:1 (Etz Hayim p.317-341; Hertz p. 205-224)
Triennial | Exodus 3:1-4:17 (Etz Hayim p. 326-335; Hertz p. 213-220)
Haftarah | Isaiah 27:6-28:13, 29:22-23 (Etz Hayim p.342-346; Hertz p. 225-228)

Dvar Torah

Rabbi Gail Diamond, teacher, Project Oded

Divrei Torah about Moses often emphasize his being chosen by God for the holy task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. But from midrashim we learn that Moses’ destiny was foretold by his sister Miriam even before his birth, suggesting that God also chose Miriam too for a holy task: standing up and standing by to make sure Moses would live to fulfill his mission.

In the Talmud we find that Miriam was ultimately responsible for Moses even being conceived. Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a says:

The verse states: “And there went a man of the house of Levi” (Exodus 2:1). To where did he go? Rav Yehuda bar Zevina says: He went according to the advice of his daughter. A Sage teaches: Amram was the great man of his generation. Once he saw that the wicked Pharaoh said: “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river” (Exodus 1:22) he said: We are laboring for nothing. He arose and divorced his wife. All others arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him: Father, your decree is more harsh than that of Pharaoh, as Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, but you decreed both on the males and on the females...Pharaoh the wicked - it is uncertain whether his decree will be fulfilled; you are righteous - your decrees will certainly be fulfilled... [Amram] arose and brought back (remarried) his wife. All arose and brought back their wives.

And this is the basis for Exodus Rabbah’s statement that Shifra and Puah were actually Yocheved and Miriam: “[Miriam was called] Puah, because she stood up

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Difficult verses from the Tanakh are often the proving ground for some of the rabbinic sages' most provocative and creative ideas. For instance, this week's haftarah, which ostensibly deals with themes like the redemption and punishment of the people of Israel while they were under Assyrian domination, has an obscure verse which seemingly describes God's determination to punish His people's disloyalty without measure: "Assailing them with fury unchained (b'se'esea), his pitiless blast bore them off on a day of gale." (27:8) This verse likely refers to the destruction wreaked upon the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria, lending this tragedy theological justification.

The word "se'esea", rendered above as "unchained" (NJPS), is, however, an obscure word. Some rabbinic sages interpreted it differently, using a rabbinic method which breaks a word into component parts. This procedure, known as notarikon, renders the word as "seah seah". A "seah" is a common form of measure which is not overly large. This interpretation gave the verse an entirely different meaning. Instead of full throttled punishment, this creative etymology understood God's punishment to be measured and manageable. (See Targum Yonathan)

This interpretation also prompted the formation of an interesting rabbinic theological concept. The doubling of the word "seah" led some sages to understand that the intention of this verse was to teach that divine justice would be meted out in like manner – "midah k'neged midah" or "measure for measure". This interpretation led the following midrash to see the above verse not as a description of God's punishment of Israel but rather as an explanation of how God would deliver retribution upon the Egyptians of Torah times for their enslavement of the children of Israel: "Rabbi Yehudah said: 'the Egyptians would be stricken with the very staff that they struck the Israelites.' Rabbi Nehemiah said: 'the Egyptians will be slain with the sword with which they slew Israel.' [Why? On account of the word] "b'seeseah" – [read it:] 'b'seah seah' – 'measure for measure'. As Rabbi Meir taught: 'With the measure that a person metes out, so it shall be measured out for him.'" (adapted from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 11:4 Mandelbaum ed. p. 203-4)

This midrash teaches a simple, but important, lesson: good leads to more good, and evil leads to more evil. And even if we don't always see poetic justice occur, it is nevertheless wise to behave as if our deeds, both good and bad, have repercussions that will rebound to affect us and those we care about, because all too often, they do.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We are opening *Shemot*, the second Chumash (Torah book), with a new Pharaoh, the enslavement and killing of the Children of Israel, the birth of Moshe, and (many years later) God choosing him as leader of the people. Moshe's initial attempt to convince Pharaoh to let the people go seems to end in failure.

- 1) As the story opens, we are told that a new king ascended the throne in Egypt and he 'did not know Joseph' (1:8). What seems unreasonable about that statement? (Think about how far back you know your family history.) How do you think that we should understand the verse?
- 2) Pharaoh apparently does not wish to be too obvious in his devious plan to contain the Israelites. At first he sends them to work, appointing labor-tax officials to be in charge (1:11). How was this first stage of state-work understood by the Israelites? (Which might explain why they went along with it.) What did he do when this did not work (1:12-14)?
- 3) Moshe was raised in the house of the daughter of Pharaoh (2:4-10). Why do you think that Moshe needed to have this kind of an upbringing? Why was his family not a sufficient environment?
- 4) When Moshe is assigned by God to take the people out of Egypt, he has several reservations. For one thing, he is afraid that the people will not believe him and not listen to him (4:1). Why do you think that they might not believe and listen? (He is coming with great news of redemption!)
- 5) To relieve some of Moshe's great anxiety of speaking, Hashem promises that Aaron, Moshe's brother, will come to meet him and speak for him; and Aaron 'will rejoice in his heart' (4:14). What do we learn about Aaron from this reaction? What other reaction could he have had?

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