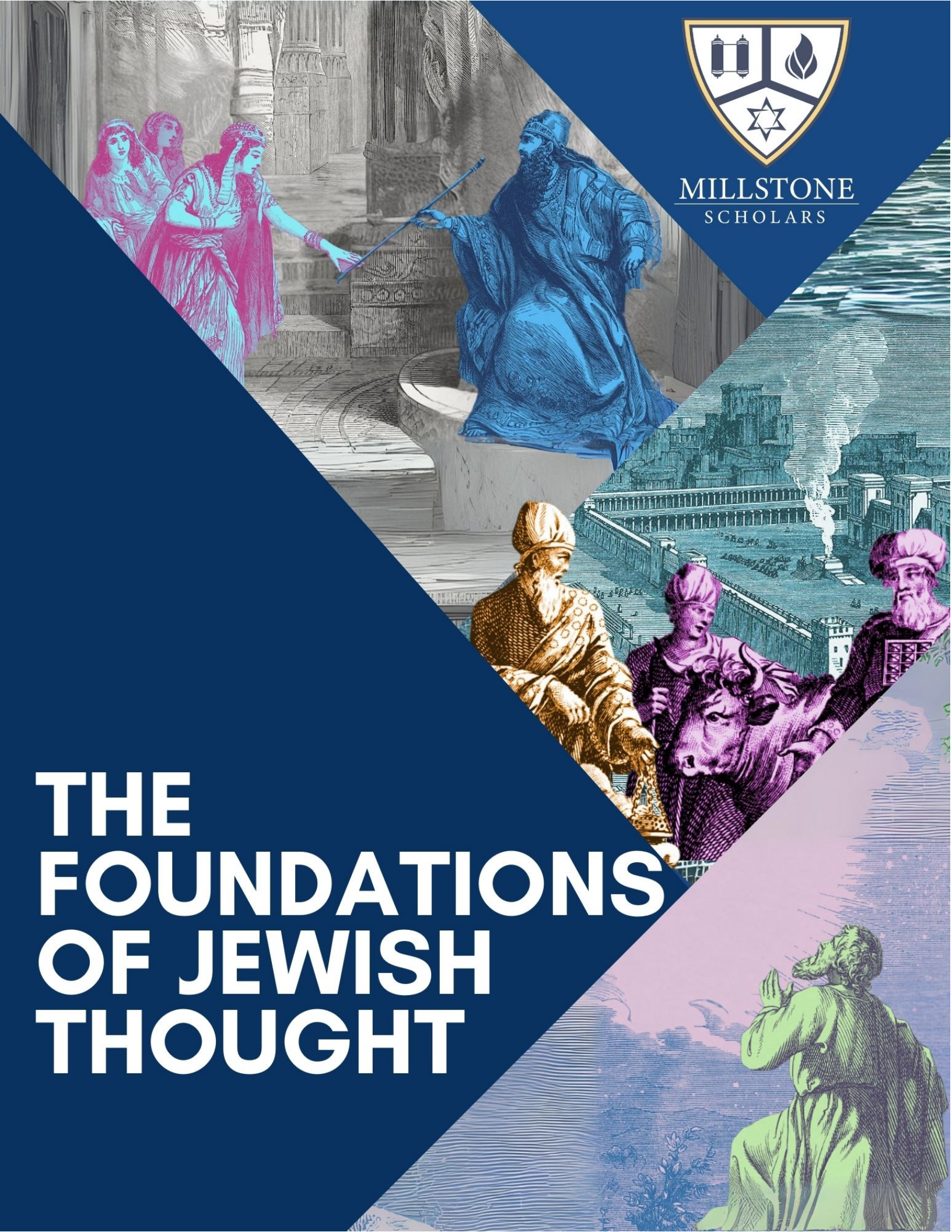




MILLSTONE
SCHOLARS

THE FOUNDATIONS OF JEWISH THOUGHT



Miriam the Prophetess: Mother of Hope and Determination

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~1400 BCE,
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Dateline: ~1400 BCE, Egypt

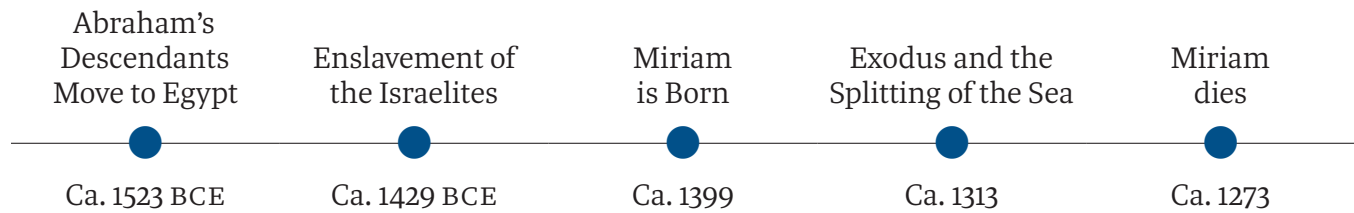
Nearly 130 years into Egyptian servitude, and just a few years before the birth of Moses, Yocheved gave birth to Moses' elder sister, Miriam. Though born into the thick of oppression and exile, Miriam developed a profound and deep hope in redemption in the face of unbearable persecution.

In this section, we will study how the Bible, rabbinic tradition, and scholars understood Miriam's legacy. What were her unique contributions to the exodus story? What enabled her to see through the darkness of oppression and hope for a greater future? And why is Miriam often referred to as "Miriam the prophetess"?

To answer these questions, we will look at Miriam's involvement in the exodus narrative as is told in the Bible and in Midrash. More specifically, we will examine Miriam's part in ensuring her brother Moses's survival and, therefore, his rise to become the leader of Israel. We will then read the works of two scholars who consider Miriam's legacy in the Jewish tradition.



Part B: Historical Spotlights



1313 BCE: The Red Sea Splits and the Israelites Escape Egypt



Shortly after Pharaoh chased the Israelites out of his land, the Egyptian monarch had a change of heart, chased after the people, and cornered them between his army of chariots and the Red Sea. When it seemed all hope was lost, God miraculously split the sea, providing an escape route for the Israelites and subsequently, after luring the Egyptians to pursue, crashing the water back on the Egyptians, leaving Pharaoh and his chariots defeated.

1314 BCE The Sin of the Spies and Forty Years of Punishment



On the verge of entering the Land of Israel, Moses and the Israelites sent a mission of spies to appraise the Land of Israel and her inhabitants in anticipation of Israel's military conquest. However, due to lack of confidence and fear of the unknown, most of the spies return with a negative report provoking hysteria amongst the people who announce that they no longer desire to go into the land. In punishment for their lack of faith and confidence, God subjects them to 40 years of wandering in the desert before entering the Land of Israel.

1273 BCE: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses Die, and Joshua Takes Charge



After 40 years in the desert, the three leaders of Children of Israel, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, die before they could live with the people in the Land of Israel. Joshua, Moses's trusted disciple, is appointed the new leader, and he leads the people into Israel, engaging in military battles against its inhabitants, and settling the land.

Key Texts and Discussion Questions

Source 1: Babylonian Talmud – Sota 12b

After Pharaoh's wicked decree to drown all Israelite baby boys in the Nile, the nation fell into deep despair. According to the Rabbis, even the people's leader, Amram, the future father of Moses, fell victim to this hopelessness and led by example in halting family life, in fear that future children would be born only to be drowned in the Nile.

In the following Talmudic passage, Amram is rebuked by an unlikely critic—his young daughter, Miriam. Miriam refuses to yield to the bleak forecast of Jewish fate, and she persuades her father to remarry Miram's mother, Yocheved. This union would soon produce Moses, the savior of Israel who would, in due time, lead the people from bondage to freedom.

Amram was the most eminent man of his generation. Aware that Pharaoh had decreed, "Every son who is born shall be cast into the river" [Exodus 1:22], he said, "In vain do we labor," and was the first to divorce his wife. After that, all the Israelite men divorced their wives. Then his daughter [Miriam] said to him, "Father, your decree is crueler than Pharaoh's. He has decreed only against the males; you decree against both males and females. Pharaoh decreed only concerning this world, while you decree concerning both this world and the next. Since Pharaoh is a wicked man, there is doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not; but since you are a righteous man, your decree is sure to be fulfilled." At once, he went and took back his wife, and so did all the others.

Discussion Questions:



1. What do you think of Miriam's arguments? Are they convincing?
2. Why is it significant that Miriam's actions bring about Moses' birth? What might that tell us about the necessary ingredients for redemption?
3. What does Miriam mean when she says "since you are a righteous man, your decree is sure to be fulfilled"?

Source 2: Exodus 2:1-10

After Miriam's parents remarry, a son, Moses, is born. To skirt Pharaoh's oppressive decree, the boy's mother hides him from the authorities, then places him in a basket and sends him down the Nile River, in the hopes of granting Moses a chance to survive. Miriam, a secondary character in this story, plays a role in ensuring Moses' whereabouts are known and that he remains connected with his family. Her care for her brother's fate and her resourcefulness in ensuring he stay in contact with his family, allow to Moses to maintain his Israelite identity even while raised in Pharaoh's palace.

A man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; she saw that he was good, and she hid him for three months. When she could no longer hide him, she took a papyrus basket for him and covered it with tar and with pitch. She placed the child in it and placed it in the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister [Miriam] stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done to him. Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe in the river while her maidens were walking by the river. She saw the basket in the reeds and sent her handmaid, and she took it. She opened it and saw him, the child, and behold, it was a boy crying. She felt compassion for him and said, "This is one of the children of the Hebrews." His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call for you one of the nursing women from the Hebrews,

and she shall nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go", and the young woman went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said, "Take this child and nurse him for me and I will give your wages." The woman took the child and nursed him. The child grew up, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he was a son to her. She named him Moshe and said, "For I drew him from the water."



The Mother of Moses,
by Simeon Solomon (1860)

Discussion Questions:



1. What does it mean that Yocheved saw that the baby was "good" [tov]?
2. What emotions might Miriam and her mother have felt upon learning that Moses was taken into Pharaoh's house?
3. Why is it significant that Miriam returns Moses to be nursed by his mother?
4. How might Miriam's actions here connect to how Miriam is described in Source 1?
5. Apart from Moses, why do you think the characters of this story are not given names?

Source 3: Exodus 15: 20-21 and Mekhilta of R. Yishmael

A mere week after Moses leads the people out of Egypt, Egyptian chariots race after the Israelites to coerce them back into slavery. Stuck between the Egyptian army on one side, and the Red Sea on the other, the Israelites are all but ready to surrender. Suddenly, however, God splits the sea, providing a route of escape for the Israelites, and, after luring the Egyptians in, crashes the water down on the enemy army. In response to these events, Moses and Miriam spontaneously lead the people in a song of praise.

In the following passage, you will read Miriam's segment of the song. In addition, see the explanation of the Mekhilta of R. Yishmael, a Midrashic commentary on the Bible.

Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the tambourine in her hand and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dances. Miriam sang responsively to them, "Sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously; a horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea."

Mekhilta of R. Yishmael on Exodus 15:

How did Israel have tambourines and drums in the middle of the desert? Rather, it must be that the righteous ones of the nation had faith and knew that God would perform miracles when leaving Egypt. Therefore, they prepared these instruments in advance.



Miriam, by Anselm Feuerbach (1862)

Discussion Questions:



1. Why specifically here is Miriam referred to as "Miriam the prophetess"?
2. Why is she referred to as "Aaron's sister" and not "Moses's sister"?
3. Why, according to the Mekhilta, is preparing instruments an act of faith? And how might Miriam be the most fitting character to exhibit that faith?

Part D: A Scholar's View

Source 1: Yaffa Benaya on Miriam's Leadership

Yaffa Benaya, a research fellow at Shalom Hartman Institute, offers her insights as to Miriam's legacy as a leader. Benaya argues that Miriam's mode of leading the people was different than her father Amram's and brother Moses' leadership.

Miriam began to impart to the people the ability to “sing itself” in the song of the sea, when she asks the people to sing (“And Miriam answered them, Sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously; a horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea “; Exodus 15:21) and adds to this the exit with drums and dances, which add to the words a physical-experiential dimension, a dimension that brings together and empowers...

Miriam's leadership is empowering, close, not distant; One that involves sharing from the beginning of the journey. Miriam vividly remembers standing alone in front of her father and the generation of mute mothers. Even then, she learned something about a leader's loneliness and the possibility of other, less-lonely leadership.

It is no coincidence that Miriam looks after the family and her brother Moshe; And it is no coincidence that she is identified as Pu'ah [see Exodus 1:15], one of the midwives. Miriam is a leader-midwife. Just as the role of the midwife is not to create the child but to deliver it, to take care of all the preparations and actions so that it will be born properly, so Miriam's way of leadership. It trains the leaders for self-leadership, in their own powers...

I would like to argue that Miriam embodies budding relational leadership, leadership that places trust, concern, and caring between the leader and the people at the center. Miriam brings to the arena of public leadership the values that have guided her since childhood, when she protected her brother and put him out of danger and when she preserved the integrity of her

Discussion Questions:



1. According to Benaya, how is Miriam's leadership different from that of other leaders? How does is that reflected in the sources you read and in Benaya's sources?
2. According to Benaya, why is it significant that we are told of Miriam's actions in her home, as well as her leadership in the public sphere?

family. In the transition from the private home to the public, she does not leave behind the values of caring and concern for others. She sees them as guiding values in the public arena as well, in relation to the nation.

3. Can you think of any leaders in your life who embody Miriam's type of leadership?

Source 2: Jonathan Sacks on Women and the Exodus

What we know about [Miriam] is no less impressive. She takes the risk of following the rush basket containing the baby as it floats down the Nile. She sees it taken out of the water by an Egyptian princess. Not content with witnessing its rescue, she takes a remarkable initiative. She goes up to the princess and offers to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. The result is that Moses, against all odds, is taken home and brought up in his own family. Miriam is the child slave who has the confidence to be undaunted in the presence of royalty, the courage to speak openly to the daughter of her people's oppressor, and the resourcefulness to think of a way of bringing the baby back to its home. We sense in her qualities of character of a high order. Without her, Moses might never have known his identity. He would have grown up not knowing he was an Israelite. As if sensing what was at stake, Miriam performs a role that in retrospect was crucial for Israel's redemption – one of the few instances in the Bible (David's encounter with Goliath is another) in which heroism is attributed to a child...

Once Pharaoh had decreed that all male babies were to be murdered, the Israelites decided not to have children. To bring a child into the world with a fifty-fifty chance of being killed was taking an unwarranted risk with life. For that reason the men separated from their wives. How, then, was Moses born? Something and someone must have changed the Israelites' mind, specifically in the case of Amram, Moses' father. That must have been either Yocheved or Miriam, the only other figures to feature in the narrative at this point. Of the two, Miriam is the obvious candidate. The text says

Discussion Questions:



1. According to R. Sacks, how do the Rabbis know it was Miriam who changed Amram's mind and not some other character?
2. Why is it significant that Miriam is a child in this story? What might children be able to accomplish that adults cannot?

nothing more about Yocheved than that she bore a child, whereas Miriam's resourcefulness shines from every word written about her. It must, therefore, have been Miriam who persuaded her father that he was wrong, that his decision, logical and ethical though it was, lacked one thing, namely faith itself. That is the textual basis for the story.

Part E: Final Thoughts

The combination of young Miriam's fearlessness in confronting her father with her sisterly care when looking after brother Moses produced a leader who empowered those around her to hope for a better future and take action. Because of her dogged determination and leadership, it is only fitting that she led the people in song at the splitting of the sea. Where in our lives can we apply these characteristics of Miriam? When and how must we channel her faith and hope in a better future?



Moses in the Bullrushes, by
Elizabeth Jane Gardner (1878)

Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- *Women and the Exodus* | Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks | <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/women-and-the-exodus/>
- What Does It Mean to Have Faith | Aleph Beta | <https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/what-it-means-to-have-faith>
- Miriam, Moses' Friend | Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks | <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/miriam-moses-friend/>