

Elie Wiesel Women in the Bible: Miriam

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) As you know, the tale unfolds in the wilderness. All its characters are colorful, exciting, interesting. But of all the women who dwell in the turbulent, dramatic universe of the Bible, she seems the most obscure, the most mysterious, and perhaps the most unfortunate, the most underestimated. We know many things, perhaps too many, about our vivacious grandmother Eve. We are told [00:01:00] about the way she chatted with her husband and when. We also know what she was doing when she was away from home. We know which fruit she preferred, (laughter) and how she went about, about wheedling her husband to eat an apple, who wasn't even hungry. (laughter) Her husband who thought he was free, until --

We are also told that sometimes, in profuse detail, about the life of Sarah. The beautiful, the most beautiful of all women then. Sarah who became a mother much too late. And the life of Rebecca, who was a little young to marry a distant cousin, named Isaac, but was nevertheless determined to shape his future. They tell us about the sufferings of pale Leah, ill-loved, her eyes always weary, [00:02:00] and the sufferings of her younger

sister Rachel, who had to wait seven, then another seven, years, to wed the man who loved her, the only man she loved.

Each of these women is vivid, fully realized. But the Bible is far less informative about a woman who, given the role she played in our people's development, should interest us just as much, if not more. After all, while the four matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah were involved mainly in domestic dramas, some might even call trivial, Miriam played an unforgettable part in an epic, in the very birth of a nation, whose experience would impact [00:03:00] so much of human destiny. Yes, her name is Miriam. And she intrigues me on more than one count. She fascinates me on more than one level. Why is she always away from the limelight? Why does she always seem veiled in shadow?

We are not told when she was born. One would say, she existed only in relation to her brothers. The text is explicit in this, and we know the circumstances. Pharaoh had condemned all Jewish male children to death. "As a result," says the text, and the Talmud comments, "husbands separated from their wives so as not to have more children. Then, *"Vayeilekh ish mi-beit lei-vi"*, [00:04:00] and there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived and bore a

son, and when she saw him, that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him a wicker basket, and daubed it with slime and with pitch and put the child therein. And she laid it in the reeds, by the banks of the Nile River. And his sister stood far off to observe what would be done to him."

No names are given, but we understand perfectly. The baby was Moses, and his sister was Miriam. This is the first time that she is mentioned, though she is not even named. [00:05:00] So she was his older sister. Moreover, from the text we learn that she was precocious, and daring. Quote: "Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?' And whom did she call? The child's mother. Her mother. And the woman took the child and nursed it, and the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son." Unquote. A brilliant, imaginative scheme. A great scenario. Moses is saved, nursed by his own mother, adopted, and presumably launched on a great career, all because [00:06:00] his sister Miriam is a shrewd judge of situations and people, and a skillful manager.

But she's not yet named. Why was there no announcement of her birth? Is the Bible really anti-feminist? Do only the boys count in that book? Let me immediately refute this charge of discrimination, politically incorrect though it might be.

Aaron, the older brother, is not yet mentioned either. We will meet him only later, much later, as the ally and accomplice of Moses. But from that moment on, as we know, the two brothers become inseparable. But what about their sister, Miriam?

[00:07:00] Often unknown, always invisible, or almost so. We sense her presence, but we sense it in the wings. Her name ultimately will be recorded seven times in scripture, but she appears only on rare occasions. Once, to sing, and another time, to slander.

Should we pity her for the modest role assigned her in the text? Let's admit it. She deserves more attention, and more respect, and indeed, we shall return to this point a bit later. For the moment, let's honor again the tradition we have maintained here for 26 years. Let's open a parenthesis. As always, a few preliminary remarks are in order. [00:08:00] I imagine that my presence here tonight surprises some of you. But then, I am more surprised than you are. (laughter) For years now, I have been saying it's enough. Well, never mind. If God grants me

life, I will go on saying it. Every year. (laughter) Better, if I say it, then if you say it. (laughter)

But why am I here? What is the explanation? I have none. No one need explain why he or she loves learning. On the contrary, if one ceases to study, then one must say, why? It is study, and a love of study, a passion for study, which bring us together here [00:09:00] on the first Thursday evening after *Simchat Torah*. It is the love of study that I would like to impart on those who don't have it yet, although I think you all have it. Therefore, I hope and I plead with you, to come here before I am here, to come here late afternoon on Thursday and study with Rabbi David Woznica and Rabbi Meir Fund. They are great teachers, and in order for all of us to be better involved in the text, and know more about the commentaries, please do come. You will be rewarded.

Why do we begin Thursday after *Simchat Torah*? The answer is, why not? (laughter) Oh, it's symbolic, because on *Simchat Torah* we end the Torah and we begin again, [00:10:00] which means we never cease to learn. You think you know everything? Begin again. To be a Jew is to be able to go on learning. And, to the last breath, to want to go on learning. *Ahavat Torah*, the love of Torah, is as powerful as *Yirat Shamayim*, the fear of

heaven, and perhaps more pleasant. I am free to say, and you are free to listen, that both *Ahavat Torah* and *Yirat Shamayim* lie in the domain of our will, of our sensibilities. We choose. I am free to invoke either or both, or reject them. A believing Jew defines himself or herself [00:11:00] in terms of that singular and constant choice, of that singular and constant sense of freedom.

But why this theme for tonight? Why a woman in the Bible? And why Miriam? And the answer is simple. Up to now, we have always chosen, for the first of our annual sessions, biblical and prophetic characters. With few exceptions, all have been men. And I have been reproached for that. People, not necessarily women, have said to me, "Don't you live in the real world? Don't you live in today's world? Was the Jewish culture and religious tradition developed by men alone? For men alone? What about the women?" [00:12:00] In the face of that serious charge, fraught with significance and threatening consequences, how could I choose otherwise? So I bow before the argument, and I acknowledge my obligation.

It is true that we have tried to paint portraits of Sarah, and Hagar, and Ruth, and Esther. And even of the young daughter of Yiftach. But other women, too, are eminently worth knowing.

And so we ought to consider them more often, and tonight we shall try to measure their greatness, their profundity, their complexity, by the standards of Scripture. To put it in another way, we will try to find how does the Bible view the founding mothers of our religion? And women in general. What was the ancients' attitude towards them? [00:13:00] How do they appear in the Midrashic literature? Are they all saints or all sinners, as in some religions?

These questions about Miriam may help us to discern, if not define, not the position, but the direction to a position of women in our ancient and living memory. And so, let's close the parenthesis and open the doors. (laughter, pause) [00:14:00]

Well, I have been thinking a lot about Miriam. I tried to imagine her. Was she beautiful? Was she intelligent? What makes a woman beautiful? We know the answer. Love. What makes her intelligent? We know the answer. Life. A French poet, Paul Valéry, said, "An intelligent woman is one in whose presence even a stupid man feels intelligent." (laughter)

[00:15:00] I am convinced that in Miriam's presence, everybody felt intelligent. So we repeat, of all the women whose lives are recorded in the Bible, Miriam is the least known. We do not

even know if she was married. The text is so discreet about her that in the end, they intrigue and disturb us. What does the text wish to hide from us about her? First, she appears as a silent figure, nameless, then suddenly she is given an honorific title, *Ha'nevia*. *Miriam Ha'nevia*, Miriam the Prophetess. But we have no idea what she may have prophesied. [00:16:00] But then, the text insinuates that she talked a bit too much, and a bit too rashly. Again, all the sources, the biblical sources at least, unquestionably are trying to conceal a few things about Miriam. How important are they?

At first glance, instinctively, the reader likes Miriam. I do. It is impossible not to love Moses' big sister, his protector. Human in her virtues as in her weaknesses, impartial. At times, self-effacing, courageous when courage is needed, wonderfully devoted. She inevitably rouses our affection and our admiration. This is someone we listen to, and pay attention to, [00:17:00] someone we follow, precisely because she so seldom appears onstage. She makes no effort to stand out, to assert herself, to overshadow anyone, and consequently, she doesn't suffer from overexposure. You might say that she wants, by her withdrawing nature, to make herself desirable. Does she want to be desired? By whom?

We met her for the first time on the banks of the Nile, invisible, looking after the baby brother whom her mother, the despairing Yocheved, was forced to abandon in a little basket. When she appears on the scene again, Moses is a man in every sense of the word. He is married, [00:18:00] and a father, and leader of a people who have fought their way out of slavery, a people he has just liberated to lead them towards their rendezvous with destiny and God. He has just ended his stunning Song of the Sea, the *Shirat HaYam*, in which he and the children of Israel express their gratitude to God for saving them. "Ashirah la-Adoshem kiga'oh ga'ah." In the first person singular. Why "Ashirah," "I shall sing to God"? Because at that moment, every Jew became a poet.

And the song says, "Ki vah sus par-oh b-rikhbo u'vfarashav" for the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots, [00:19:00] and with his horsemen, into the sea. And God brought again the waters of the sea upon them. But the children of Israel, "halchu vayabashah" went on dry land in the midst of the sea." And so ends the uniquely glorious chant of Moses. But the next words belong to Miriam. "Vatikach Miriam Ha'nevia ahot Aharon, and Miriam the Prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her, with timbrels and with dances. 'Shiru L'Adoshem KiGa-oh Gaah' said Miriam.

'*Shiru L'Adoshem.*'" Which means, "Miriam answered Moses, or echoed Moses, or responded to Moses, [00:20:00] and the children of Israel, 'Sing, *Shiru*, sing all of you, sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider had God thrown into the sea.'"

Finished with Miriam. The story continues, without her. The revelation on Sinai, the Ten Commandments, the laws on slavery and diet and the Sabbath and the sanctity of the family. In general, the rules of human relations, the arduous crossing of the desert with its snares and obstacles. The endless complaints of the people, culminating in the fabrication, in the construction of the golden calf. Trials and terrestrial punishments, all happen [00:21:00] without another word about Miriam. Outside of her space, of her surroundings, without her. Miriam, the brave and devoted woman who had saved her brother's life.

And so we read dozens of pages. Chapters parade past. And still, not a word, a single word, about the missing prophetess. Where is she? We follow Aaron's spiritual activities, Joshua's military maneuvers. The scouts, the reports from the scouts about "*eretz zavat chalav u'd-vash* on one hand the land of milk and honey, and on the other hand, the discouraging report about,

the land of Canaan, where we, said the ten scouts,, look like nothing. [00:22:00] And then, we see Betzalel's artistic endeavor. But Miriam, where is she? What is she doing? What is her occupation or preoccupation? Was the birth of Israel an event for man only?

It is true that the text is no more revealing about Moses' wife, or Aaron's. But that's not the same. Miriam is not only a woman, she's more than that. She's the woman prophetess. She's different, she's special. She entered the story, after all, on a brilliant note, saving her brother, singing the glory of God at the crossing of the Red Sea. She is a prophetess, so isn't it now her function to make pronouncements, to assert herself? [00:23:00] Why should a prophetess be silent when her brother the prophet is not? Since when are prophets condemned to silence? Why does the text silence her?

At this point in the tale, we have almost forgotten everything about Miriam, we forgot that she existed. She is a victim of man. That is, of a society, if not a history, dominated by men, and therefore, we can only feel sorry for her. But then, all of a sudden she reappears. The narrative has lingered in the text over Eldad and Medad, two young men, who one morning decided that, after all, they too want to become prophets. "'Vayitnabu

toch bamachaneh', they wanted to do what others were doing," and true, after all, why not become leaders and speak the way they do, [00:24:00] why not?

So, jealous of his master's unique standing and privileges, Joshua, the closest disciple, the closest servant, of Moses, was angered. And Moses calmed him, Moses was always calm in situations of crisis. And Moses said something very beautiful. He said, "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets." Which means, in his high place, he was so high above everyone else, that Moses had no fear of competition. "*Mi yitein kol-am n'viim-*, let everybody be a prophet."

Maybe 3000 years later, it happened. (laughter) Everybody thinks that he or she is a prophet. (laughter) [00:25:00] The topic here, at this particular spot, is ambition and envy, and the text illustrates this further through a drama involving nutrition. What to eat, what not to eat. And in the middle of all that, or after all that, the spotlight falls suddenly on -- but listen. The text says, "*Va-t'daber Miriam v'Aharon b'Moshe al odot ha'isha hakushit asher lakach.* And Miriam and Aharon, her brother, or, Miriam and then Aharon, or even Miriam with Aharon, lashed out among themselves at Moses, their brother, for marrying *Kushite*, [00:26:00] an Ethiopian wife." And they went

on. They said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken also to us?"

What is the connection between marrying an Ethiopian wife and God speaking to Moses? God then intervened, and the response is immediate from God, "*Vayishma Adoshem*, and God heard it." And God knew, and wanted us to know, "*v'ha-ish Moshe*," the man Moses, the human being that Moses is, was very meek, "*anav mikol adam, anav me-od*." Above all the men who were upon the face of the earth, no one was as humble as Moses. [00:27:00] And, without waiting for an answer, or for a correction, or for anything else, God reprimanded Aaron and Miriam, praising their brother. And in his anger, God left them.

Miriam was punished; covered with leprosy, she turned white as snow. Aaron begged Moses, who begged God, to help their sister, not to leave her half-dead, that is, outside of the camp, humbled, isolated, ravaged, dead in life. And God was merciful, and ordered Miriam away from camp for seven days, that was the law, and the people waited for seven days until she recovered. Then, they all left. Here again, we cannot help but feel compassion for Miriam. It was not she alone who slandered Moses. [00:28:00] Or she was not alone when she slandered

Moses. But she, alone, was punished. Why? Why she and not Aaron?

A few chapters later, we come upon one more mention of Miriam, and that, too, is so distressing. The people stopped at, for a time, at a place called Kadesh. It was there that Miriam died. It was there that she was buried. Poor Miriam. No longer does the text call her prophetess. Her death is not even told in one sentence, it is told in half a sentence. The text will tell us that the people wept for her brothers. Not for her. "*Va-tikkaber sham,*" that's all. [00:29:00] It is *sham*, there, in the wilderness of Sin, that she was committed to the earth. There was no national funeral ceremony. No funeral orations, no eulogies, no collective mourning, just the bare minimum. But didn't the people care? Or were they too preoccupied?

Listen. Hardly had Miriam been buried, that the text says, "There was no water for the congregation of the children of Israel. And they gathered themselves together, not to weep over the death of their sister Miriam, they gathered themselves together to rebel against Moses and against Aaron, crying, I quote, 'Wherefore have you made us to come out of Egypt, [00:30:00] to bring us into this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates. Neither is

there any water to drink.'” Again, there seems to be no obvious connection between these two episodes. They seem a non sequitur. What does it have to do with the burial, the funeral, of Miriam, that they were thirsty and angry?

And yet, maybe they were cause and effect. Because the people did not honor their prophetess in her death, their own survival was in jeopardy, they had nothing to eat and nothing to drink. And because, neither God nor His people seem to have cherished her sufficiently during her life, it's only just that we, tonight, express our affection and respect for her memory.

[00:31:00] But wait a second. Let's turn the question around, and say, suppose the Bible was fair in its treatment of Miriam. Suppose she deserved no better. Suppose Miriam was not on her brother's spiritual and moral level. Let's look into that possibility. Why not? And let's return to the source material in which she appears. She had followed her mother to see what would become of her little brother. Wasn't this simple curiosity on her part? You know, young girl's curiosity? We know already that she acted shrewdly and fearlessly on her brother's behalf, but beyond that, we are told nothing.

Moses was in the royal palace. Did she, Miriam, go for [00:32:00] occasional walks near the royal palace, to catch a glimpse of him, and tell her mother that everything is okay? Did she try to win the favor of the Pharaoh's daughter? And so, meet her brother face to face? Did she ever try to make contact with him, even in secret, to remind him of his true origins? That he didn't belong to Pharaoh's family, he belonged to the Jewish people.

As for the miracle of the Red Sea, the text is enigmatic. Why is she identified as the sister of Aaron, and not of Moses? Might it be to insinuate that she was jealous already of her younger brother? Was it jealousy that made her want to emulate him? Was it to demonstrate her own strength that she called the women together? Was that her purpose, her motive? [00:33:00] To organize the first feminist movement in Jewish history? (laughter) To say, to demand, "Hey, be careful. We, too, know how to compose poetry. We also know how to rejoice and sing with timbrels and dances, and thank God for the miracle."

But what, in fact, did they sing? "*Shiru la-Adoshem kiga-oh ga'ah*," the first verse of the song of Moses, which she a little bit changed. Some slight variation on the same theme. Moses said, "*Ashirah la-Adoshem*," in the first person singular, he

said, "I shall sing," which I find very beautiful. I. He was inspired. A poet always says "I." But when he says -- she says, "I," the poet speaks on behalf of all those who think "I." [00:34:00] He was in ecstasy. And when he said, therefore, "I," he spoke on behalf and for the entire people of Israel. Miriam said, "*Shiru la-Adoshem.*" "You better sing, you sing." She issued an order, a command. "Sing to the Lord." As if Miriam wanted to accentuate her own superiority over men and women. She gave the order. Become poets.

From that approach derives a quasi-modern interpretation, which emphasizes Miriam's ambitious side. Envious of Moses and of Aaron, she tries to organize the women to build a political base for herself. She must have said to herself that she, too, after all, lived through the exile in Egypt. She, too, took part in the liberation. [00:35:00] Why has she not been called upon to play a more significant role in this evolving society, in those dramatic times? In other words, she is a politician. A power-seeker. She no longer wishes to live on the margins, in obscurity. "*Shiru la-Adoshem, sing the glory of the Eternal,*" would therefore seem a rousing command, an appeal to women to seize power. Or at least, a share of power.

As to the third reference, her part in the slandering, it's clear. The text does not use the plural, "Va-y'dabru Miriam v'Aharon -- and Miriam and Aaron slandered Moses," the text uses the word *daber*, in the singular, *va-t'daber*, the singular feminine, *vat'daber Miriam v'Aharon*, because it is Miriam who initiates the vilification. [00:36:00] She is the leader. Aaron either listened in silence or made his contribution to the exchange afterwards. He followed his big sister. Would he have spoken at all if his sister had not taken the initiative? That is why the punishment fell on her, on her alone.

Would that be why the people did not wear mourning at her death, because they were angry at her? These hypotheses seem plausible, and may even be probable, but I must admit I do not like them. And in the name of fairness, as much as chivalry, the Jewish writer in me wants to rise to Miriam's defense. And for that, let us consult the Talmudic literature, the literature of commentaries and interpretation. Their imaginative power has always filled us with wonder. They will not disappoint us.

[00:37:00]

For the Midrash, Miriam was a precocious child. Rabbi Shimon bar Nachmani says so. At the age of five, says he, she was already assisting in her mother -- with her mother -- in

midwifery. She became a midwife. Summoned to Pharaoh's presence to hear his decree that newborn males be killed, little Miriam made fun of him by sticking out her tongue and saying, "Ha. Just let him wait. Sooner or later, God will take care of him." In his anger, the Pharaoh wanted to have her killed. But Yocheved, the mother, saved her by imploring the Egyptian monarch to spare her and says, "She's a little girl. She doesn't know what she is saying." But of course, Miriam did know. [00:38:00] As she knew that the future belonged to Moses. She had predicted it to her father, she convinced her father to come back to his wife. And in a way, marry her again, and live with her again, in order to have a child, a male child, Moses, and she predicted that Moses will be the liberator of the children of Israel. And we are told that her father, much moved, gave her a kiss on the forehead.

Her initiative in gathering the women together after the crossing of the Red Sea? The Talmud doesn't hesitate to make a virtue of it. Just as Moses sang for the men, says the Talmud, so Miriam sang for the women. What's wrong with that? A prophetess, she did nothing on her own account, she expressed a higher will than her own. [00:39:00] If she sang, it was because God inspired her to sing. Only one verse, so what? I wish I had written that verse. Since when does the literary

value of a poem depend on its length? She may have known already the rule that less is more. (laughter) She called her community to sing *Shiru*. Is there a more beautiful, a more exalting, call to people? Her cry is a pure plea for spirituality, for transcendence, and besides, the form *Shiru* proves that she was calling to women and to men at the same time. How can we fail to thank her for striving to unify the people, all the people, men and women alike, in a song of thanksgiving, in a celebration of memory? [00:40:00] Moses said *Ashirah*, I shall sing, he excluded himself from the people, whereas she managed to bring the people together, and associate the people to the song.

Let's note in passing that the commentator Kli Yakar says, that it was at this moment in Miriam's life that the prophetic gift came upon her. In other words, she didn't burst into song because she was a prophet, but rather she became a prophet because she burst into song. How, then, are we to make sense of the episode of slander? The Talmud says it's quite simple. The tale teaches us an important lesson. It teaches us the danger of slander and the punishment for it, and the universality of both. More precisely, if Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, [00:41:00] the unique prophetess in scripture, was capable of committing that sin, who could claim to be immune of it? Or

immune to it? What's more, if Miriam, so great, so holy, was punished, who could hope to emerge unscathed? And so the story teaches us that, even Miriam, to be cured had to submit to the fate of all lepers. To isolation, and humiliation, for nepotism then was not a Jewish phenomenon. She was Moses' sister, but she had to share the fate of all other people, and submit to the law.

And the other lesson is that penitence, *t'shuvah*, is always possible. Let's add that slander, *lashon hara*, spiteful or malicious gossip, but true gossip, [00:42:00] is unanimously detested in the rabbinical tradition. Don't think that slander, *lashon hara*, means that when you tell lies about other people, then you are simply *divrei sheker*, you are telling lies.

(laughter) When you tell the truth about other people, that's *lashon hara*. If it's bad to the other people, or about the other people. Why is it so bad? The wild beast, says the Talmud, kills by biting its prey. The serpent darts its poison toward the man it is looking at, so there is contact between the evil and the victim, but slander is different. They say something in Galilee, and the arrow wounds or kills someone in Rome.

Our greatest masters have written extensively in denunciation of *lashon hara*, malicious gossip. [00:43:00] The slander that, according to Maimonides, can shake the universe to its foundations. And he adds that "it annihilates three persons: him who commits it, him who it strikes, and him who hears it." In other words, the gossipmonger, the victim, and the hearer, all are affected by slander. In the Jewish tradition, it is more culpable to listen to slander, to receive it, than to spread it. And thus also, according to Maimonides, it is forbidden to approach, or even to be in the company of, an individual guilty of slander.

In truth, the term *lashon hara* is often inadequately translated. It doesn't merely mean spiteful gossip. Then it would mean *lashon ra'ah*, [00:44:00] the evil tongue. When you say *lashon hara*, it means the tongue of evil. To insult someone, to damage or discredit someone, to defame someone behind his or her back, is to serve the powers of evil. But why should slander be punished by leprosy? The answer is, it is to mark the guilty one clearly, visibly. To draw the guilty from their hiding places. Does a man believe he can do evil unto his brother with impunity, and go on strutting about like a friend? The leprosy isolates him and points him out as culprit. So this account of

slander, therefore, belongs to the [00:45:00] moral history or to the moral of the history of our people.

Still, let's rein in our enthusiasm for a moment. All this doesn't explain why Miriam alone was punished. Nor, why she was cured. She, who never made *t'shuvah*, or at least, is not known to have made *t'shuvah* in the text. Certainly Moses interceded in her favor. A credit to Moses, who proved that he held no grudge. But can anyone make *t'shuvah* for another? Can I do it for you? And didn't Aaron, her accomplice, deserve punishment also? True, he repented. He said, yes, we have sinned, he said to his brother. What do you mean, we have sinned? Why didn't she also say, we have sinned? Is that sufficient to appease divine wrath? [00:46:00]

Troubled by the injustice inherent in this tale, some Talmudic sages opened a serious and probably stormy debate in an academy, in an effort to solve the problem. Listen to Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva, as we know, often compassionate towards women because of his ever-perfect wife Rachel, he thinks everybody was like Rachel -- Rabbi Akiva cannot accept that when two people commit the same sin, only one is punished. The other is not. He therefore believed that Aaron was also punished. In the same

way. His skin also turned leprous. And if the text doesn't say so directly, it is in order not to embarrass him. (laughter)

But now listen to the immediate reply [00:47:00] of Rabbi Yehudah ben Bathrya. "Akiva, Akiva," he said, and I quote him (laughter), "one day on Judgment Day you will have to explain yourself." (laughter) "Either you are right, in which case you have discovered, you have revealed, what the Torah kept concealed about Aaron, or you are wrong, in which case, you have defamed a *tzadik* like Aaron." According to Rabbi Yehudah ben Bathrya, Aaron was reprimanded but not punished.

Then there is a third hypothesis, that Aaron was punished, as Miriam was, but God cured him before her, that in fact, the leprosy disappeared in the next instant in the case of Aaron, but not Miriam. [00:48:00] At any rate, we realize, therefore, that the Talmud doesn't commit discrimination. But we realize, also, that the Talmud at least makes an effort to defend Miriam. And it goes so far as to suggest that the text must be interpreted differently. If she, Miriam, raised the matter of their brother's marriage to a *Kushite* woman in Aaron's presence, it was to save Moses from himself. That is, she wanted to prevail upon Aaron, to prevail upon Moses, to remarry Zipporah, his first wife, and produce more children.

She, who by common belief, was without husband or child, in those days, you would say an old maid, [00:49:00] in our days, you would say single -- (laughter) she enjoyed playing a *shadchanit*, a marriage broker. A Midrashic legend says clearly that it was she who insisted that their father remarry Yocheved, their mother. Because, as we know, he separated from her, as all other men did, in order not to have Jewish children in a world that didn't want Jewish children. The legend even adds that Aaron and Miriam danced at their parents' second wedding. So, Miriam the prophetess possessed great powers of persuasion. Apparently, everyone obeyed her. She invited the women to express their common joy, and they responded with enthusiasm. She said to her parents, let's celebrate your remarriage, and they say, why not? Only Moses did not listen to her, not always. [00:50:00] Is that why she resented his august position?

In the Midrashic text, we are given to understand that God looked kindly upon Miriam. As long as she lived, the drought was not severe. After her death, it became acute. The fruit trees, according to legend, were all withered. We are asked in the Talmud, "Who treated Miriam? Who detected the leprosy on her?" Usually it's a *Kohen* -- the priest, the high priest.

Aaron couldn't, because he was her brother. Moses couldn't, because he wasn't a priest. Says the Talmud, "God himself did it. God punished her, God made a diagnosis, and God cured her. God himself." [00:51:00]

Why? What did the people of Israel do immediately after Miriam was laid to rest? We noted this as we read the text, they clamored for water. And the story goes that there was in the desert a miraculous spring of fresh water, and it bore the name of Miriam, *Be'er Miriam*. Counted among the ten creatures preceding creation, this fountain, always in motion, accompanied the children of Israel everywhere, and it possessed the power to cure the sick, as well as to slake thirst. Question. Since the spring or fountain possessed the power to cure the sick, why didn't Miriam have access to its waters to cure her own leprosy? Is it because, as we all know, the shoemaker walks barefoot? [00:52:00] And "*ein chavush matir atzmo mi-beit ha-asurim*" a prisoner can never free himself? He needs someone from the outside?

And incidentally, where is that spring now? Rabbi Hiyya said, "Whoever climbs to the peak of Mount Carmel and sees a net, a fisherman's net, at the bottom of Lake Tiberias, is gazing at Miriam's spring." And in our prayers for the High Holidays, we

invoke her name also, to remind God of His promises, His obligations to our people. Well then, what can we say about Miriam's character if she is so fairly and so beautifully treated, at least in some passages of the Talmud?

Unquestionably, she possessed the gift of leadership. Her tragic fate sprang from that. The people of Israel have never been affectionate, or faithful to their leaders. Isn't Moses himself proof of that? [00:53:00] Moses never knew a sunny day. Either God was angry with him because of his people's behavior, or his people drove him to despair because of God's behavior. (laughter) He demanded so much of them, too much. We may even ask ourselves at times if the decision -- God's decision to bar Moses from the promised land was not a reward, rather than a punishment. (laughter) As if to say, "You have suffered so much from your Jews, it's enough." (laughter)

Only after Moses' death did the people understand his greatness, and his importance. It was worse with Joshua, when he died no one bothered to come and pay his last respects. The Talmud describes this in concrete and brutal language. Why did the Jews abstain from gathering at the funeral of the leader to whom they owed the conquest of their homeland? [00:54:00] And it answers, "Because everybody was too busy. Some were working the

fields, others were pruning the vines, and others were tending to business." In fact, we don't even know who was present at Joshua's death.

The Talmud does tell us who buried Miriam. Her two brothers, Moses and Aaron. Alone? Probably. The people? All they could think about was water. Scandalous, but true. With no respect for their leaders' mourning, the people clamored for answers, explanations, immediate solutions. The atmosphere became so ugly that Moses and Aaron felt threatened, and they fled. And they took refuge in the *Ohel Moed*, the special tent that was [00:55:00] home to the spirit of God, to be alone. Safe. Alone with the memory of their sister, who had barely left them. Today we would say, alone to sit *shiva*.

And then, an astonishing thing happened. God chased them away. Those are the very words of the Midrashic account. God chased them from the *Ohel Moed*. "What are you doing here?" He said. "Your people are thirsty, and you sit here weeping for the death of old Miriam?" And thus, we learn, yes, He used the word "old" Miriam. And thus, we learn, not with satisfaction, that the unhappy prophetess was old. But we learn with satisfaction that she didn't die young. [00:56:00] (laughter) At the same time, this version of the Talmud saddens us. Why does God call her

old? Doesn't He know that women don't like that? (laughter) Is there no courtesy in heaven? And why should God disturb her brothers' mourning? Why this impatient, menacing tone? Is that how we talk to people just back from the cemetery? Aren't there laws of mourning that we must obey? To respect the mourner? Isn't God supposed to obey the same laws?

Valuable questions. How can I answer without consulting the teachers, the teachings of Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman? For him, the *Halacha* and the *Haggadah*, the law and the legend, are inseparable. [00:57:00] We tell a story to illustrate or emphasize a law, and in this instance, the law is at once urgent and timeless. Here it is. "Despite the respect we are obliged to show to the dead, the living take precedence. A funeral procession must yield the right of way to a marriage procession." That's the way it is. And we can do nothing about it. It is more important to celebrate life than to weep for death. When it is a matter of sparing men and women the agonies of thirst, mourning, even for a prophetess, may and should be interrupted. But then the question may be, Moses and Aaron were living people! They, too, have feelings, and their feelings should be spared. And the answer, probably, is, [00:58:00] even they, perhaps, should have interrupted the *shiva*, and help people live and fight death.

I have told you that Miriam moves me and saddens me. Alive, she spent most of her days in the shadow of her brothers. Dead, she counted for less than any anonymous Jew unhappy and parched. And yet, her fate is that of a typical older sister, who sacrificed herself for her family. She accepted all misfortunes, provided only that her family be happy. She went so far as not to marry, in order to care for her nearest and dearest, and for the people of Israel. [00:59:00] The slander, this is the principal transgression we can reproach her for. But since Moses forgave her, why shouldn't we? How can we be more severe than he was? Only God is perfect in all ways. The human being is perfect in none. At best, we bear within us a glimmer of divine perfection, little more, and nothing else.

But there is another problem. Her envy of her younger brother. It is not Moses' marriage with the *Kushite* woman that bothers her. What sets her on edge is his superiority in his dealings with God. When we love, we ought not to be envious. Worse, her desire to bring Aaron over to her side, to make of him a kind of co-conspirator against their brother, who according to her, was more successful than she. And this, I find unworthy of her. I don't like [01:00:00] when people play people against other people. Rather than taking pride in her younger brother, one

would say that she was working to undermine his authority. But how can we explain a flaw like that in such a great biblical heroine?

We have said it before here, and we must say it again. Unlike those in the sacred history of other religions, our ancestors are not saints. They are portrayed as human beings, which is to say, capable of greatness, of immense greatness, but also of pettiness. And it is because they are human that they touch us. It is because they are human that they influence our choices, and our commitments. What do I love about Miriam? First of all, her name. [01:01:00] Perhaps it bears her secret, and her destiny. *Mem, resh, yod, mem. Maryam.* The bitterness of the sea. There was much reason for her to be bitter. Or perhaps *meryam*, the revolt of the sea, the revolt at the sea's edge against the sea. Take out the *resh*, and we have *mayim*, water. Her whole life was lived under the sign of water. We meet her on the banks of the Nile, we find her on the far shore of the Red Sea, we leave her -- or she leaves us -- as her people are clamoring for water. And water is like love. We only appreciate it in its absence. To the thirsty, it stands for happiness. To the slaked, the fulfilled, the satisfied, it represents the dull intoxication, the banality of everyday life.

[01:02:00] Water is the gift of life. But also a call to death. It all depends on what we wish to make of our existence. Like love, water is what you do with it. Miriam made of her love for her brothers, in spite of what happened, a small incident in her life -- I believe that she remained the heroine of a fine story of devotion toward family, and of a great commitment to her people. One might say that she loved her life only to enrich the lives of others. And so in conclusion, she remains, in my eyes, the little girl who in that time of terror and death during the reign of cruel Pharaohs, follows her mother to the banks of the Nile. And she hears her [01:03:00] infant brother wailing, and she waits to see what will become of him. She looks here and she looks there, and she recognized the woman who will save Moses, and she acts accordingly. Simple curiosity? Not at all. It was more than that. Miriam looked in order to remember.

I love Miriam. I love her because her story, after all, is not only a story of love for her brothers and her people, not only a story of encouragement for and of other women to be free, to be authentic. It's also a story, a very great and touching story, of commitment to memory. (applause) [01:04:00]

M1:

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