

Miriam, Deborah, and the Glass Ceiling
Shabbat Shirah, Parashat Beshallah, 5776

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The song is terrific:

And Miriam the prophet took her timbrel in her hand,

And all the women followed her just as she had planned,

And Miriam raised her voice in song-

She sang with praise and might

We've just lived through a miracle: We're going to dance tonight!!

The song is as effective as it is inspiring. When we ask young people the source of *Mi Chamocha*, they will often respond that Miriam led the Children of Israel in this song of praise when they had crossed the Red Sea on dry land, liberated at long last.

The biblical reality is more complicated. Yes, after the Red Sea closes on the Egyptian armies, and the people are free, the Israelites sing a song of praise to God, including the words of *Mi Chamocha*, "Who is like you, *Adonai*, among the gods? Who is like you, awesome in miracles, performing wonders?" The trouble is that the opening words of Exodus chapter 15, say that "Moses and the Children of Israel sang this song to *Adonai*." Only at the end of the chapter do we read, "And Miriam the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam sang unto them: 'Sing ye to *Adonai*, Who is highly exalted: Horse and rider has God thrown into the Sea.'" Moses's song goes on for 18 verses. Miriam seems to quote only the first. Perhaps she goes on to echo Moses's song in its entirety, but we don't read that in the Torah. No *Mi Chamocha* is recorded in Moses's voice alone.

The notion that Miriam is the source of those sacred words is meaningful Midrash, predating its popularization in Debbie Friedman's song. Perhaps the patriarchy couldn't handle the truth, so the words were placed in Moses's mouth. Perhaps Miriam ghost-wrote for her brother, who led the men while she led the women.

Given the antiquity of Torah, we may be grateful for Miriam's role, however secondary to at least one if not both of her brothers. After all, she is called *ha-n'viah*, the prophet, a title not often bestowed upon women in the Ancient Near East. Even Moses is only called a prophet in the very last verses of the Torah, at his death, when we are told that "there has not since arisen a prophet like Moses." Aaron has the distinction of being the priest, and even of being Moses's prophet, but not God's. The definite article adds to Miriam's distinction: She's called "the prophet," suggesting preeminence in her ability to commune with the Divine.

Still, even though more could be said about Miriam's meaningful role in Torah, we must confess that an actor playing her in a film version of the Exodus could only hope to be nominated as best supporting actress.

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song, and not only because of the Song at the Sea. Our Haftarah is Deborah's Song, from the Book of Judges. Deborah is unreservedly called a "judge," long before our own groundbreaking Annabelle Imber Tuck became the first female Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court. Making the case for Deborah even stronger, a "judge" in the context of the Book of Judges is a military and civilian ruler of the confederated tribes of Israel. And Deborah, like Miriam is called *n'viah*, a prophet.

Gender roles are fascinating in Deborah's story. She calls upon a male general, Barak, to defeat the Canaanites. Barak responds that he will take up arms only if Deborah accompanies him. Deborah agrees to go, but prophecies, "The journey you take will not be for your honor; for *Adonai* will deliver Sisera[, the Canaanite general,] into the hand of a woman." The reader expects Deborah to defeat Sisera herself. Instead, a non-Israelite woman, Yael, seduces Sisera and gets him so drunk that he falls into a deep sleep. Yael then drives a tent-stake through Sisera's brain. Deborah and Barak then sing the song of deliverance that we know as "Deborah's Song."

Looking at that story through 21st Century eyes, we could raise intriguing questions. Can a woman triumph only by using her power of seduction? Is Deborah the "woman" standing behind "every successful man?" Why isn't Deborah the sole leader of the song that is, after all, hers?

I wonder what Deborah would think of the very real, if far from certain, possibility that the United States could be led by a woman President a year from today. Would she challenge us to ask whether having a female President would really change the United States?

We all know that women, on average, earn less than men. According to the American Association of University Women, women earn 79 cents on a man's dollar, a number that "has barely budged in a decade. At the current rate, the gap won't close for more than 100 years." Moreover, "The pay gap is worse for women of color . . . worse for mothers, and it only grows with age." The pay gap affects women in every state, "but in some states it's worse than others," Arkansas being slightly worse than the national average at 78 cents, probably better than most of us expected. Women with professional degrees earn only 74 cents to the average man's dollar, while those with a doctorate are right at the 79 cent average. A recent study of clergy compensation indicated that women clergy earn less than their male counterparts. And remember, we are only talking about religious groups liberal enough to have women clergy! Embarrassingly, that disparity includes the Reform rabbinate.

Pay, of course, is only one measure of equality. Women are subjected to overwhelmingly-male legislative bodies, notoriously including the Arkansas Legislature, imposing restrictions on women's health care. Note that these regulations are not scientifically-based. To cite but one awful example, Arkansas requires that the medication commonly used to stimulate a non-surgical abortion be administered in an excessive quantity known both to be entirely unnecessary and to cause increased physical discomfort to the woman.

Would a woman President change that? Well, the one who is a leading candidate for her party's nomination wouldn't take steps to make those situations worse. However, we may rightly ask ourselves: Has Black America benefitted from our nation's being led by its first African American President these last seven years? Without faulting President Obama's efforts, which some do, much is outside his control. Thanks to the Supreme Court, the Voting Rights Act no longer assures that people aren't denied the right to vote, oh so subtly on the basis of their race. And, as I've said before, we are more aware than ever that we must proclaim, "Black lives matter;" because in too much of America, they don't. Perhaps the same would be the case for women after seven years of a Hillary Clinton presidency.

Make no mistake: Miriam and Deborah crashed through the glass ceilings of their day. In the Ancient Near East, precious few other women achieved religious and secular leadership roles like theirs. Similarly, win or lose the presidential race, Hillary Clinton has achieved public success of which her mother's generation could only have dreamed. Still, even in this week when we celebrate the 43rd anniversary of Roe versus Wade, women must fight for, and often lose, control over their own bodies. Still, more than a half century after our nation began to discuss gender inequality, the most basic measure, pay equity, remains stagnant.

Women have waited too long: For pay equity. For sole control over their own destinies. For true equality. Like Moses, who sang before Miriam, men, often unaware of our privileged position, must raise our voices for equality. Let us look forward to the day when, like Miriam, women will take up whatever instruments they choose, dancing and singing to melodies of their own making. Then, like Deborah and Barak, may we sing a song of liberation, together.

Amen.