

Gaiac Healer, Goddess, Ecstatic Rock 'n Roll Mama? THE CULT OF MIRIAM

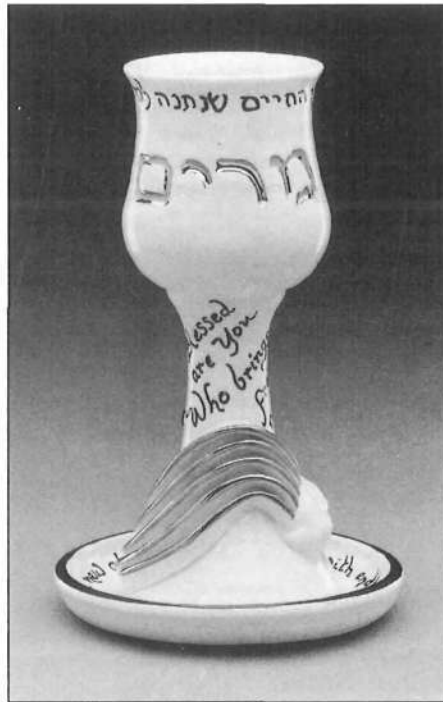
By Susan Schnur

Who was the biblical Miriam? A minor character, backstage sister to the palace-reared Moses, occasional Rosencrantz-&-Guildenstern-type helpmeet? Or was she a real historical leader in her own right—with her own substantial cult-following that was entirely separate from that of her brother's? New biblical scholarship strongly suggests the latter.*

It seems that at some point in biblical history the centrality of Miriam's role in the text was excised, leaving only telltale fragments. For example, there are two versions of the crossing of the Red Sea in the book of Exodus—one having Moses as the protagonist, the other celebrating Miriam. The question is, why does the Bible bother to tell the story twice? "Biblical scholars agree that the [Miriamic] passage is the older, original narrative. Editors of the Torah tried to change the story, focusing attention on Moses," writes lay-researcher Lorrie Greenhouse Gardella, "but the tradition honoring Miriam was strong, and editors dared not eliminate it completely. They retained bits and pieces of Miriam's story."

If you squint while rereading the books of Exodus or Numbers, you'll pick up, through the pentimento, the existence of a cult of devotees who demonstrate extraordinary allegiance to Miriam. Generally the Bible is a text of haiku-like economy, so it's worth wondering why the Bible has taken such careful pains to note both Miriam's death and funeral, as well as documenting that the Hebrew community stays devotedly at her side when she's leprous, and that it discovers when she dies that their only source of water is, indeed, coterminous with her life. "Miriam died and was buried"; records the book of Numbers, "now there was no water for the congregation."

This is potentially strong stuff (without water, a wilderness community is slated for its own death) — was Miriam, in fact, the sole person upon whom the community's sheer biological survival depended? Why should Miriam and water be coterminous—is there the



The potter, Nissan Graham-Mayk, explains: *This graceful pedestal goblet holds spring water for the ritual of Kos Miryam. As the cup rotates, so Miriam's story is unfolded. Symbols of Miriam include the rock from which sprang forth her well, and the precious waters which gently cascade into a musical staff. Notes sparkle up from the water into and through her tambourine. The "Mayim Khayyim" blessing encircles the rim while the blessing for "endless possibilities" tumbles freely down the stem, continuing onto the well of the drip plate. (The blessings are from the ritual of Stephanie Loo Ritari, Matia Angelou and Janet Berkenfield.)*

residue here of excised stories about a Miriam who once nurtured not only a community's body, but its desiccated soul? In general, it's always wonderful to be stopped short in our readings of the Bible, to realize how we dance lightly, again and again, over key narratives, without stopping fully to really grasp them.

Interestingly, Dorothy Zeligs, in a

psychoanalytic study, takes a look at the biblical incident that directly follows Miriam's death and the concurrent disappearance of the Hebrews' gentle, reliable source of water. Moses strikes the rock, and, against God's wishes, begets water violently. Scholar Mhairi MacMillan, citing Zeligs, points out that "Moses' aggressive, sinful act follows directly on the death of Miriam, his older sister, who had been like a mother to him from infancy. Moreover, Miriam had been 'the group mother and source of nurturance' to the wilderness community, and her loss to them was likely to have been followed by deep distress and anger. Zeligs suggests these feelings were unacknowledged and uncontained, and may have led to Moses' aggressive acting-out in anger against the Lord."

Miriam is also of note as the *only* female mentioned in Hebrew scriptural genealogies who is not someone's wife or mother. This exception to the (very depressing) rule can be read in several ways, but one possibility is that Miriam was real, beloved, and formidable—too vital a figure to suffer reduction solely to fictive marriage. On the other hand, as a populist cult figure she threatened biblical editorial policy — she couldn't look *too* large. Maybe appending her to Moses and his family was a kind of compromise.

Archetypally, Miriam derives from the Goddess who is "the infinite depths of the waters, the Great Mother, the Queen of the Sea," writes Mhairi MacMillan. She's the Goddess "whose tears, representing purity, have special powers of healing," and who symbolizes "the profound mystery of the

* (See, for example, Rita J. Burns' *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?*, Scholars Press, 1987; Mhairi MacMillan's "Miriam: Wilderness Leader, Priestess, Ancestor of Mary," in Alix Pirani's *The Absent Mother: Restoring the Goddess to Judaism and Christianity*, HarperCollins, 1991; Phyllis Trible's "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *Bible Review*, 1989; or read *Exodus* and *Numbers* again, but with a refreshed eye.)

Deep; the reservoir and source of life"—those waters which, said Mircea Eliade, "precede every form and sustain every creation."

Clearly the Miriamic story and related ancient Miriamic legends abound with associations to both water and birth: She is a central, religiously ecstatic figure at the crossing of the Red Sea (metaphorically birthing/midwifing a new free nation); she hides her baby brother Moses in a river (and has involvement in his conception); and she's associated with her miraculous well, a magical spring of water that travels with her wherever she goes, and that was famous for its ability to heal, both psychologically and physically. Jewish legend claims that Miriam's well was brought into existence at *the* most spiritually liminal moment of Creation—during twilight of the sixth day of the world. It was the miracle-worker Miriam (her very name translates in part as "water") who re-found the magic well after it had been lost for millenia.

Indeed, Jewish legend recounts that the rivers that flowed from Miriam's well were so big that the Hebrews needed boats to cross over from one part of their camp to the other. Many legends tap into Miriamic metaphors; the mystical book of the Zohar, for example, speaks of rivers which come from the Emanation of Understanding called "Marah the Great Sea, the Mother of all living."

The biblical scholar Rita Burns points out that when God punishes Miriam with leprosy, her skin turns "white as snow," a term used in other contexts to designate purity, not ritual uncleanness. Maybe, she posits, beneath the overt narrative of Miriam's punishment there lurks an earlier, suppressed

story of a spiritual initiation rite. When Miriam challenges Moses' unique position as sole spokesperson/prophet of Yahweh, she is perhaps not claiming to be his equal (though she's called a prophetess, the Bible never, oddly, offers evidence of her prophetic activities), but rather she's "asserting that there were other, equally valid ways of conveying the divine message," writes MacMillan. "That is, that Miriam had *her* way, which we may assume to be somehow the women's or feminine way," of calling the sacred into existence.

Finally, if you are, like myself, a contemporary ritual junkie desperately seeking to make religious experience less cognitive, Miriam offers herself also as a beautiful model of ecstatic faith—as dancer/drummer/singer she enjoins us not to neglect in spiritual Judaism the crucial role of disinhibition.

From these musings, let's turn to the Passover seder. Can we take what we know about Miriam and integrate her into the *haggadic* proceedings? Towards the ceremony's conclusion, we open the door for the prophet Elijah, inviting him to drink from his brimming goblet of wine, beseeching him to lead us towards a future of peace and love. Since Elijah's ceremony comes near the end of the seder, how about bracketing it with a goblet for Miriam — a cup of *mayim khayyim* ("living waters") marking the seder's beginning?

This idea (and the ritual that follows) originated with Stephanie Loo Ritari, and was

written by Ritari, Matia Angelou and Janet Berkenfield. Ritari suggests filling a crystal goblet with fresh spring water. (But see Nissan Graham-Mayk's porcelain version, commissioned by LILITH and available for purchase, opposite page.)

To Ritari, Miriam's cup represents "consciousness of what's absent from Judaism . . . a better valuing of heart and body, intuition, creativity, spontaneity, direct personal spiritual experience, egalitarianism, inclusivity, mercy and consolation." If you're interested in appropriating this ritual for your own use (and if Ritari's associations feel too complicated for you), search for your own metaphors and meaning. I myself, in finding Thesean threads, tend to trust most whatever is simplest and from the heart.

Perhaps, holding Miriam's cup aloft, you feel that it stands for healing in its broadest sense. Maybe it symbolizes for you the need to infuse women's perceptions into Judaism and into our own private valued lives. Maybe Miriam's cup stands for process—the trek *through* the wilderness, as opposed to phallic goal (the arrival at Canaan). Or, it might represent women's special abilities to celebrate struggle, change or growth. What's most absent at your seder, demanding to be present? My personal angle on *Kos Miryam* [Miriam's Cup] this year has to do with magic—the magic of touch: that one can sometimes touch and heal, be touched and heal.

Since we at LILITH are committed to the task of forwarding women's felt needs in Jewish life, we were pleased when we had the brilliant idea of commissioning someone to create an actual ritual object called "Miriam's Cup." We think that clay-artist Nissan Graham-Mayk has fulfilled the task beautifully.

Jung once said that ancient archetypes are like "riverbeds which dry up when the water deserts them," but which can be refilled again at any time. "The longer water has flowed in this channel," he wrote, "the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return to its own bed." Miriam's cup, once glistening with water that energized the soul, calls to us in confident invitation. Let all who are ready, come and fill it. Let all who are thirsty, come and drink.

May next year find us still upon our journeys.

To order the goblet shown on page 16, contact: The Microfarm Pottery, 67 Reynolds Drive, Eatontown, NJ 07724. 908-542-4949. Chen porcelain wheel-thrown goblet comes with drip tray; lead-free glossy white glaze. Hand-carved bas relief designs are black and 23k gold; lettering is freehand calligraphy, black and 23k gold. Goblet stands 7 to 8 inches; holds 5 ounces. Goblet and tray are signed and dated. Copyright 1991 by Nissan Graham-Mayk. Price is \$95 plus 10% shipping.

MIRIAM'S CUP: A New Ritual for Women at Passover

BY STEPHANIE LOO RITARI, MATIA ANGELOU, AND JANET BERKENFIELD

After explaining the symbolism of *Kos Miryam* (Miriam's Cup), raise the goblet and recite:

LEADER: *Zot Kos Miryam, Kos Mayim Khayyim, Zay-kher l'tzee-at Mitzra-im.* This is the Cup of Miriam, the Cup of living waters, which we drink to remember the Exodus from Egypt.

ALL: These are the living waters, God's gift to Miriam, which gave new life to Israel as we struggled with ourselves in the wilderness.

N'Varekh et Eyn ha-Khayyim sheh-*

natnah lanu mayim khayyim.

Barukh Atta Adonai, Eloheinu Hei ha-Olamim, sheh-ha-kol nih'yeh bi-d'varo.

Blessed are You God, Life-Source of the Universe, by Whose word everything is created.

Blessed are You God, Who brings us from the narrows into the wilderness, sustains us with endless possibilities, and enables us to reach a new place.

AMEN.

(All drink.)

For more information on Kos Miryam ceremonies (copyright 1990, Kol Isha) for occasions other than Passover, write: Kol Isha, Box 142, Arlington, MA 02174.

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