

Miriam's Goblet

(*Kos Miriam*)

In recent years, we have begun placing two ceremonial goblets on our Seder tables: the traditional one, filled with wine, for Elijah the Prophet, and a second one, filled with water, for Miriam the Prophetess (she is called "prophetess" in Exodus 15:20).

Miriam is a central figure in the Passover drama. She stands guard loyally when her baby brother Moses is set floating on the Nile, and she arranges for a wetnurse—Moses' own mother—who gets paid by Pharaoh's daughter for caretaking and living with her own child. Miriam leads the Hebrew people in singing and dancing (that most natural expression of religious joy) after they cross the Red Sea. And she dies by the kiss of God; the Angel of Death, we are told, has no power over her. After her death in the desert, the Hebrews lose their most precious possession: water—and it is then that Miriam's grieving brother strikes the rock.

The Midrash teaches us that the water, which disappeared at Miriam's death, came from a miraculous well. Created during twilight on the eve of the world's first Sabbath, the well was given by God to Miriam because of her holiness, and it was intended to accompany the Hebrews in

the desert throughout the span of her life. "Miriam's Well," as it was called, not only quenched

thirst; it also

cured body and soul. Both Miriam and her well were spiritual oases in the desert, bedrock sources of nurturance and healing.

We place Miriam's goblet on the Seder table as a counterweight to the cup of Elijah. The latter is a symbol of messianic redemption at the end of time; the former, of redemption in our present lives. Elijah lived in the desert as a lone, howling visionary, focused on the millennium. Miriam sojourned in the same wilderness, but she accompanied the Hebrew people. Tireless tribal parent, she offered hope and renewal at any stage of the journey.

We place Miriam's goblet on the Seder table to remind us, as well, of Jewish women, whose stories have been too sparingly told. On Passover in particular, a holiday celebrating many kinds of birth (that of Hebrew babies in Goshen, of Moses, of the Jewish people, of springtime), we recall women, whose domain, of course, is birth. Beyond the many males in the Haggadah—Jacob, Laban, Pharaoh, Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Eliezer, Sisera, Elijah, even God as "King"—Miriam's cup remembers others.

We raise her goblet and recite this prayer:

*You abound in blessings,
God, creator of the universe,
Who sustains us with
living water. May we, like
the children of Israel leaving
Egypt, be guarded and
nurtured and kept alive in the
wilderness, and may You give
us wisdom to understand that
the journey itself holds the
promise of redemption.
AMEN.*

—Rabbi Susan Schnur

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