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This week's teaching is provided by Rabbi Gail Diamond, teacher, Project Oded.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Mitch

rabbimitch@templesholom.com

Divrei Torah about Moses often emphasize his being chosen by God for the holy task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. But from midrashim we learn that Moses' destiny was foretold by his sister Miriam even before his birth, suggesting that God also chose Miriam too for a holy task: standing up and standing by to make sure Moses would live to fulfill his mission.

In the Talmud, we find that Miriam was ultimately responsible for Moses even being conceived. Babylonian Talmud Sotah 12a says:

The verse states: "And there went a man of the house of Levi" (Exodus 2:1). To where did he go? Rav Yehuda bar Zevina says: He went according to the advice of his daughter. A Sage teaches: Amram was the great man of his generation. Once he saw that the wicked Pharaoh said: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river" (Exodus 1:22) he said: We are laboring for nothing. He arose and divorced his wife. All others arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him: Father, your decree is more harsh than that of Pharaoh, as Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, but you decreed both on the males and on the females...Pharaoh the wicked—it is uncertain whether his decree will be fulfilled; you are righteous—your decrees will certainly be fulfilled... [Amram] arose and brought back (remarried) his wife. All arose and brought back their wives.

And this is the basis for Exodus Rabbah's statement that Shifra and Puah were actually Yocheved and Miriam: "[Miriam was called] Puah, because she stood up to [hofiah panim keneged] her father" (1:13). Perhaps it was this defiant optimism that singled her out to receive prophecy and play an even more significant role:

Seven prophetesses. Who were these? Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther... Miriam, as it is written, "And Miriam the prophetess the sister of Aaron" (Exodus 15:20). Was she only the sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses? Rabbi Nahman said in the name of Rav: Because she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron and said, "My mother is destined to bear a son who will save Israel." When he was born, the whole house was filled with light, and her father arose and kissed her on the head saying, "My daughter, thy prophecy has been fulfilled." But when they threw him into the river, her father arose and tapped her on the head, saying, "Daughter, where is thy prophecy?" So it is written, "and his sister stood afar off to know" (Exodus 2:4) to know what would be the end of her prophecy. —Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a.

The light that filled the house when Moses was born was the sign of his holy mission. But even as Amram was quick to doubt the prophecy when the situation became difficult, Miriam kept faith, not only watching what would become of her brother, but also watching over him to make sure he lived. According to the Mechilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Shirata 10, this was a holy act:

...And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him (Exodus 2:4). For the expression "standing" suggests [the [presence of] the Holy Spirit, as in the passage "I saw the Lord standing beside the altar" (Amos 9:1). And it also says "And the Lord came and stood" (I Samuel 3:10). And it also says "Call Joshua and stand" (Deuteronomy 31:14).

Afar Off. The expression “afar off” everywhere suggests [the presence of] the Holy Spirit, as in the passage: “From afar the Lord appeared unto me” (Jeremiah 31:2).

This text goes on to explicate the rest of the verse similarly, making clear that Miriam’s presence is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Each of these beautiful midrashim shows us a different aspect of holy action. In the first, Miriam stands up to her father, speaking out about what she believes is right. In the second, she receives prophecy and is open to seeing a clear sign of holiness, believing in its truth even when circumstances become difficult. In the third midrash, Miriam is willing to wait and watch Hashem’s plan unfold, standing in for the Holy Spirit as she watches over her baby brother.

And when we act in the world with optimism and confidence, seeking signs and speaking truth, and stand watch with great care, we are carrying on the tradition of Miriam the Prophetess.