

R. Sorotzkin seems to be offering a third prayer model for us. According to his interpretation, Miriam and the women did not sing a new song, but instead made the old song their own by infusing it with their own “intense concentration and sacred fervor.” Today as well, there are some who create their own services based on traditional ones, not producing new liturgy but rather imbuing the service with a musical spirit that speaks to their souls. (Perhaps a Carlebach-inspired service might be one example of this model, or *Kabbalat Shabbat* services with musical accompaniment.)

We have explored three comments dealing with the nature of Miriam’s and the women’s musical accompaniment of their song to help us think about our own various prayer experiences: The first model suggested a spontaneous outburst of song, music, and dance. The second model spoke of an induced experience in which onlookers or participants are inspired to express themselves in song and music. And the third model spoke of a more intentional style of inspired prayer, in which like-minded spirits come together to refashion traditional services with their sacred fervor. As I mentioned above, I think that the lines of the models are blurred and that we may actually experience more than one of these prayer models—even during the same prayer occasion.

Although the Torah does not tell us what happened after Miriam and the women added a musical element to their prayer-song, my hunch, based on our analysis, is that some of the men were inspired by these women to sing more fervently and to dance and play instruments, as well.

<sup>1</sup> There are many interpretations for the occurrence of the epithet “Aaron’s sister”, including this one by Ramban (R. Moses ben Nahman, 1194–1270, Spain/Israel): “The correct interpretation appears to me to be that because Moses and Miriam were mentioned in the Song and Aaron was not, Scripture wanted to mention him. It therefore said ‘the sister of Aaron’ as a mark of honor to him, i.e., that he was her older brother and that his sister the prophetess connected her genealogy to him, since he too was a prophet and a holy man of God.” It is as if the Torah is concerned for Aaron’s feelings and is subtly reminding the reader to be sensitive to others’ feelings as well.

<sup>2</sup> Keli Yakar, therefore, offers another explanation for the epithet Aaron’s sister: “The words ‘the sister of Aaron’, imply that she was [Aaron’s] equal in prophecy, but not Moses’s [equal].”

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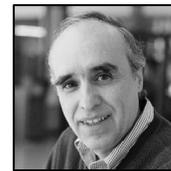


# TORAH FROM JTS

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## Last Days of Pesah 5775

יום טוב אחרון של פסח  
תשע"ה



### Miriam’s Song and the Role of Music in Prayer

Dr. Walter Herzberg, Assistant Professor of Bible and Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS

After the sea was parted and the Israelites were rescued from the pursuing Egyptians, Moses and the children of Israel sang the Song of the Sea, praising God for having saved them:

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to God, and they said as follows: I will sing to God, for He is exalted above all exaltedness, a horse and its rider He hurled into the sea . . . (Exod. 15:1–18)

Following the conclusion of the song, the Torah relates that Miriam, leading the women, sang as well:

Then Miriam **the prophetess, Aaron’s sister**, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang for them: Sing to God for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver He has hurled into the sea. (Exod. 15:20–21)

What prompted Miriam and the women to rejoice with song, instrumental music and dance?

The traditional commentaries offer a few suggestions. However, to fully understand their comments, we must first address two questions that require interpretation:

1. Why is Miriam referred to as “**the prophetess, Aaron’s sister**”? In other words, why Aaron’s sister and not Moses’s, and why is she called “the prophetess” at this juncture?
2. Having left Egypt in haste, where did the women find instruments to accompany their singing?

Rashi (Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105, France) addresses both questions based on rabbinic sources:

When did she prophesy? When she was [known only as] “Aaron’s sister,” before Moses was born, she said, “My mother is destined to bear a son” [who will save Israel], as is found in Sotah 12b, 13a.

According to this rabbinic tradition, Miriam foresaw that her mother would give birth to the one who would redeem the children of Israel. By using the epithets “prophetess” and “Aaron’s sister,” the Torah is thereby alluding to the rabbinic tradition of Miriam’s prescient declaration made many years preceding the event, when Aaron was her only brother<sup>1</sup>.

The second question is commented upon by Rashi as well:

The righteous women of that generation were [so] certain that the Holy One, blessed be He, would perform miracles for them, they took timbrels out of Egypt. (from Mekhilta)

Rashi is following the tradition of the rabbis, specifically Rabbi Akiva, that “on account of the merit of the righteous women, the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt” (Yalkut Shimoni, Psalms 68). The women exhibited their resolute belief in God’s imminent redemption long before the event, by bringing along musical instruments in order to be prepared to praise God in a truly celebratory manner.

Both Miriam and the women firmly believed in God’s ultimate redemption of the Israelites.

Based on these rabbinic understandings, we can address our primary question: Why did Miriam and the women sing and rejoice with instruments and dance, while no such mention is made of accompanying music and dance during the Song of Moses in the preceding verses?

We will examine three responses of traditional commentators to our question.

The Malbim (R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Weiser, 1809–1879, Russia) suggests the following:

And she [Miriam] was called the **sister of Aaron**, as *Hazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) explained, since she prophesied—when she was only Aaron’s sister, before Moses was born—that a son would be born [to her mother] who would become the redeemer and the savior.

And now that her prophecy was fulfilled, she took the timbrel in her hand.

It seems that Miriam’s singing and instrumental response was a spontaneous reaction to the fulfillment of her prophecy—a kind of “Hallelujah moment.” The timbrels and dancing were an external manifestation of her internal, emotional state of joy—an extension of her inner self at that very moment. So, too, says Malbim, concerning the women who followed her: realizing that “all this was done on account [of their righteousness],” they responded “with particular” rejoicing for the role they [and their righteousness] had played.”

In both cases, then, the joy was overflowing and exhibited itself in singing, dancing, and musical accompaniment. This is one model of the relationship between prayer, singing, music, and our emotions.

Keli Yakar (Shelomo Ephraim Luntschitz, 1550–1619, Prague), on the other hand, sees the musical outpouring not as a spontaneous outburst of joy, but rather as intended to *induce* a state of joy. Differing from both Rashi and the Malbim, Keli Yakar suggests that Miriam became a prophetess<sup>2</sup> only at the time of the splitting of the sea, as did the other women.

Now she [Miriam] became a prophetess, for on this occasion the women also merited to see the Divine Presence until they said, “This is my God,” as our Sages said. . . . Since the Divine Presence does not rest [among anyone] except through joy . . . [Miriam] took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her with timbrels, dancing in circles so that the Divine Presence would descend upon them through joy.

According to Keli Yakar, the music, dancing, singing was a means to an end: arousing a joyful state of being. This seems very different from Malbim, who understood the joyous outpouring as the manifestation of the already existing joy.

Or perhaps these two approaches are complementary? Upon closer examination of Malbim’s comments, one might suggest that *Miriam’s* spontaneous response inspired the women to rejoice as well. Indeed, in prayer settings, an inspired prayer leader or congregant may inspire others to more heartfelt prayer and singing. Nevertheless, the lines are blurred—it’s not easy to tell which is the spontaneous and which is the induced expression of joy, for the induced expression may be indistinguishable from the spontaneous. (Gospel services similarly seem to move between spontaneous and induced expressions of joy and prayerfulness.) That’s why it’s difficult to know whether the women who followed Miriam’s spontaneous display were influenced to participate in her experience or were somehow encouraged to release their inner emotions in a spontaneous manner as well. If this sounds somewhat confusing, that’s because it is.

Finally, R. Zalman Sorotzkin (1881–1966, Poland/Jerusalem) offers a third possible answer to our question of why Miriam and the women in particular rejoiced with song, instruments, and dance:

Miriam did not sing a new song. She and the women only repeated the song of Moses and the children of Israel with greater vivacity and emotion, with drums and dancing... .... It was the same song, but with an intense concentration and sacred fervor surpassing that of the men. Indeed, the women of that generation were more righteous than the men, and it was by their merit that our ancestors were redeemed. (*Insights in the Torah*, p.168)