



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### 16 BeShalach – Instituting Liberation

#### Text

##### Exodus 14

<sup>26</sup> Then the Lord said to Moshe, "Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen." <sup>27</sup> Moshe held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea. <sup>28</sup> The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen — Pharaoh's entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. <sup>29</sup> But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>30</sup> Thus the Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. <sup>31</sup> And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moshe.

##### Exodus 15

<sup>1</sup> Then Moshe and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said,  
I will sing to the Lord, for He/She has triumphed gloriously;  
Horse and driver S/He has hurled into the sea.  
<sup>2</sup> The Lord is my strength and might;  
He is become my deliverance.  
This is my God and I will enshrine Him/Her  
The God of my father, and I will exalt Him/Her.  
<sup>3</sup> The Lord, the Warrior — Lord is His name!  
<sup>4</sup> Pharaoh's chariots and his army  
He has cast into the sea;  
And the pick of his officers  
Are drowned in the Sea of Reeds.  
<sup>5</sup> The deeps covered them;  
They went down into the depths like a stone.  
<sup>6</sup> Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,  
Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe!  
<sup>7</sup> In Your great triumph You break Your opponents;  
You send forth Your fury, it consumes them like straw.  
<sup>8</sup> At the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up,  
The floods stood straight like a wall;

#### שמות יד

כֹּו נִי אָמַר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה נְטֵה אֶת-יָדְךָ עַל-הַיָּם וַיָּשׁוּבוּ הַיָּמִים עַל-מִצְרַיִם עַל-רֶכְבּוֹ וְעַל-פָּרָשָׁיו. כֹּו וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַיָּם וַיָּשׁוּבוּ הַיָּם לְפָנֹתַי בַּקֶּרֶת לְאִיתָנוּ וּמִצְרַיִם נָסִים לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַיִּנְעַר יְהוָה אֶת-מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם. כַּח וַיָּשׁוּבוּ הַיָּמִים וַיִּכְסּוּ אֶת-הַרְכָּב וְאֶת-הַפָּרָשִׁים לְכָל חֵיל פְּרָעֹה הַבָּאִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם בַּיָּם לֹא-נִשְׁאָר בָּהֶם עַד-אֶחָד. כֹּט וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִלְכוּ בִּבְשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם וְהַיָּם לָהֶם חֹמָה מִיְמִינֵם וּמִשְׁמַל אֵלֶם. ל וַיִּוָּשַׁע יְהוָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל-שַׁפְּת הַיָּם. לֹא וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת-יְהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ בֵּיהוָה וּבַמֹּשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ.

#### שמות טו

א אֲזַי שִׁיר-מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאֵמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי-גָאֵה גָאֵה סוֹס נֹר כָּבוֹ רָמָה בַּיָּם. ב עֲזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה וַיְהִי-לִי לִישׁוּעָה זֶה אֵלֵי וַאֲנֹנְהוּ אֶלֶּהִי אָבִי וְאֵר מְמַנְהוּ. ג יְהוָה אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה יְהוָה שְׁמוֹ. ד מִרְכָּבַת פְּרָעֹה וְחֵילוֹ יָרָה בַּיָּם וּמִבְּחַר שְׁלֹשִׁי טַבְּעוֹ בַּיָּם-סוּף. ה תַּהֲמֹת יִכְסִּימוּ וַיִּרְדּוּ בְּמַצּוֹלַת כְּמוֹ אֶבֶן. ו וַיִּמְיֶנָּה יְהוָה נֹאדְרֵי בְּכֹחַ וַיִּמְיֶנָּה יְהוָה תִּרְעַץ אוֹיֵב. ז וּבָרַב גְּאוֹנֶךָ תִּהְרַס קְמִיךָ תִּשְׁלַח חֹרֶן נֶךְ יִאֲכַלְמוּ פִקְשׁ. ח וּבְרוּחַ אֲפִיךָ נִעְרְמוּ מֵיָם נִצְבּוּ כְּמוֹ-נֶדֶד נְזִלִים. ט קִפְאוּ תַהֲמֹת בְּלִבָּם.



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9 The foe said, "I will pursue, I will overtake,  
I will divide the spoil; My desire shall have its fill of them. I  
will bare my sword —  
My hand shall subdue them."  
10 You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them;  
They sank like lead in the majestic waters.  
11 Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials;  
Who is like You, majestic in holiness,  
Awesome in splendor, working wonders!  
12 You put out Your right hand,  
The earth swallowed them.  
13 In Your love You lead the people You redeemed;  
In Your strength You guide them to Your holy abode.  
14 The peoples hear, they tremble;  
Agony grips the dwellers in Philistia.  
15 Now are the clans of Edom dismayed;  
The tribes of Moab — trembling grips them;  
All the dwellers in Canaan are aghast.  
16 Terror and dread descend upon them;  
Through the might of Your arm they are still as stone  
Till Your people cross over, O Lord,  
Till Your people cross whom You have ransomed.  
17 You will bring them and plant them in Your own mountain,  
The place You made to dwell in, O Lord,  
The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established.  
18 The Lord will reign for ever and ever!  
19 For the horses of Pharaoh, with his chariots and horsemen,  
went into the sea; and the Lord turned back on them the waters  
of the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the  
midst of the sea.  
20 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in  
her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with  
timbrels.  
21 And Miriam called to them:  
Sing to the Lord, for He/She has triumphed gloriously;  
Horse and driver He/She has hurled into the sea.

ט אמר אויב אַרְדֹּף אֲשִׁיג אַחֲלַק שְׁלַל תִּמְלֹאמוּ  
נַפְשֵׁי אַרְיִק חֲרָבִי תוֹרִישְׁמוּ יָדַי.  
י נְשַׁפֵּת בְּרוּחְךָ כֶּסֶם וְיָם צָלְלוּ כַּעֲוֹפֶרֶת בְּמַיִם  
אֲדִירִים.  
יֵא מִי-כַּמֹּךָ בְּאֵלִים יְהוָה מִי כַּמֹּךָ נֶאֱדָר בְּקִדְשׁ  
נוֹרָא תְהִלֹּת עֲשֵׂה פִּלְא.  
יב נְטִית יְמִינְךָ תִּבְלַעְמוּ אֶרֶץ.  
יג נְחִית בְּחֶסֶדְךָ עִם-זוֹ גְּאֵלֶת נִהְלֶת בְּעֶזְרְךָ אֶל-נוֹה  
קִדְשְׁךָ.  
יד שְׁמַעוּ עַמִּים יִרְגְּזוּן חֵיל אַחֲזֵי יִשְׁבִי פְּלִשְׁתָּ.  
טו אַז נִבְהָלוּ אֱלֹפֵי אָדוֹם אֵילֵי מוֹאָב יִאֲחֲזְמוּ רַעַד  
נִמְאָגוּ כֹּל יִשְׁבִי כְנָעַן.  
טז תִּפֹּל עֲלֵיהֶם אִימַתָּה וּפְחַד בְּגֹדְךָ לְזָרוּעֶךָ יִדְמוּ  
כְּאֶבֶן.  
עַד יַעֲבֹר עִמָּךָ יְהוָה עַד-יַעֲבֹר עִם-זוֹ קִנִּית.  
יז תִּבְאֲמוּ וְתִטְעַמוּ בְּהַר נִחְלָתְךָ  
מִכּוֹן לְשִׁבְתְּךָ פַעֲלֶת יְהוָה מִקִּדְשׁ אֲדָנִי כּוֹנְנֵנוּ יָדִיךָ.  
יח יְהוָה יִמְלֶךְ לְעֹלָם וָעֶד.  
יט כִּי בָא סוֹס פָּרַעַה בְּרִכְבוֹ וּבִפְרָשָׁיו בַּיָּם  
וַיֵּשֶׁב יְהוָה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת-מִי הַיָּם וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִלְכוּ  
בִּיבְשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם.  
כ וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אַחֹת אַהֲרֹן אֶת-הַתֹּף  
בְּיַדָּהּ וַתִּצְאֵן כָּל-הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ בְּתַפִּים וּבְמִחֹלִּת.  
כא וַתַּעַן לָהֶם מִרְיָם שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה כִּי-גָאֵה גְּאֵה סוֹס  
וְרִכְבוֹ רָמָה בַּיָּם.



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#### Context

The children of Israel set out to freedom on a roundabout route via the Sea of Reeds, guided by a divine pillar of fire by night, and a pillar of cloud by day. Meanwhile Pharaoh regrets his decision to free them, and sets out with his army—horses and chariots, in hot pursuit of the Israelites. Caught between the turbulent sea and the advancing Egyptian army, God splits the sea for the Israelites to pass through on dry land. From the safety of the far bank, the Israelites witness the drowning of their enemies. The Israelites respond to the redemption with joyous song and dance. Very shortly, the mood changes to pessimism and complaint—the Children of Israel fear the unknown desert ahead, and long for the certainty of slavery. God supplies them with a neutral food, *man*, sufficient for each person according to her and his need. To their thirst, Moshe responds by striking a rock, and drawing forth water. The parasha ends with a battle against Amalek who attacks from the rear of the camp. Under Yehoshua's leadership, the Israelites prevail with divine help, and God vows to blot out the remnant of Amalek in every generation.

#### Explorations

The crossing of the sea is the crowning moment of the redemption; the "Song at the Sea" is the liberation finale. The text credits Miriam the prophet with a leadership part in the celebration. The prophet Micha explicitly names Miriam along with Moshe and Aaron among the triumvirate of Israel, the three leaders (Micha 6:4). Many feminists herald Miriam as a biblical role model. Yet, the biblical text about Miriam is sparse and unclear. Understanding Miriam's role as a leader after the crossing of the sea requires careful analysis of the brief verses that mention her.

Most biblical commentators assume that Miriam leads a segregated community of women, imitating Moshe's triumphant song sung first by the men. For example, Rashi quotes the [Mekhilta](#)—an ancient collection of midrash, on the verse about Miriam's dancing:

**And Miriam called out to them:** Moses said the Song to the men, and they answered after him, and Miriam said the song to the women (Rashi on 15:21).

Rashi accepts and validates reading segregation, though it is in no way explicit in the text.

According to a statement in the talmud, God rebukes the angels when they strike up a song of praise while Her/His creatures are suffering, “The work of My hands is drowning in the sea, and you wish to sing songs?!” “God does not rejoice at the punishment of sinners” (BT Megilla 10b; Sanhedrin 39b). While the angels are rebuked for singing, the Israelites sing, play timbrels, and dance without interference. The main point in this passage is to express God's compassion—for the Egyptians who drown, and for the Israelites who burst with joy at their release from suffering.

According to the following midrash, the men sing first, then the women, and afterwards, the angels. The angels express their sense of dishonor at being put behind the women.

“Is it not enough that the men have preceded us? Shall the women come before us also?” lament the angels. But God replies, “As surely as you live, so it is.” (Exodus Rabbah 23:7)



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God rebukes the angels for their humiliating remark about the women. In spite of the rebuke, the midrash accepts the assumption that the men sing first and separately from the women.

Two partly identical introductory statements frame the song, one attributed to Moshe and one to Miriam,

Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang this song to God and they spoke saying,  
“**I will sing to God for S/He is highly exalted,  
horse and driver S/He has thrown into the sea.**” (Shmot 15:1, my emphasis)

At the end, another verse seems to re-introduce the Song, this time, led by Miriam,

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 called them,  
“**Sing to God for S/He is highly exalted,  
horse and driver S/He has thrown into the sea.**” (Shmot 15:20-21, my emphasis)

These two different introductory statements--about Moshe and Miriam—introduce the identical first line of the Song, “Sing to God for S/He is highly exalted, horse and driver S/He has thrown into the sea.” The two parallel verses are the basis for the reading that women celebrate separately at the sea. The complete text of the Song follows the line about Moshe who presumably leads the recitation by the men, the principal celebration. Afterwards, Miriam leads the women. Following this *segregation* interpretation, the text is unclear about whether Miriam leads the women in a complete repetition of the Song, or whether she and the women recite only the first line quoted in the verse.

In spite of the popularity and dominance of this segregation interpretation, some grammatical elements in the text do not support it. The first verse reports about Moshe and the Children of Israel using the first person masculine form: “I (Moshe) will sing.” It is common in ancient song traditions for the poet to exhort her/himself. The Song of Devora – a prophet and judge of Israel—pairs with parashat BeShallah as the haftara (reading from the prophets) on Shabbat Shira when Song at the Sea is read. In the Song of Devora, like Moshe, she sings in the first person,

אֲנִי כִי לִיהוָה אֲנִי כִי אֲשִׁירָה אֲזַמֵּר  
לִיהוָה אֵל הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

**I will sing, I will sing** to the Lord,  
**I will hymn** the Lord, the God of Israel.” (Judges 5:3, my emphasis)

Moshe declares his personal intention to sing and the text refers to the rest of the Children of Israel, retaining the singular verb. While in biblical Hebrew the verb at the beginning of the sentence includes the subjects that follow, in Moshe's verse, he emphasizes his personal experience also in the next verse,



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1 **I (will) sing** to the Lord, for S/He has triumphed gloriously;  
Horse and driver S/He has hurled into the sea.

2 The Lord is **my** strength and might;  
S/He is become **my** deliverance.

This is **my** God and **I will enshrine** Him/Her  
The God of **my father**, and **I will exalt** Him/Her.

To Moshe the text attributes no less than *seven* singular grammatical forms in the ensuing verse. By contrast, Miriam directly addresses the entire people with a plural masculine form of command, calling upon *everyone* to sing. The Torah does use feminine verb forms where they are needed. The series of feminine verbs about the midwives is one example we have seen (Shmot 1:17-20). Our passage uses the feminine verb form to describe the women *going out* after Miriam to dance (Shmot 15:20). If Miriam had been addressing only the women, then an appropriate feminine verb command form ought to appear in the text, however unusual it would be in the biblical corpus. Similarly, verse 21, "*ve-ta'an lahem Miriam*"—"Miriam exhorted them," uses the masculine plural accusative form of the pronoun "them", another strong indication that Miriam addresses the men and the women. The masculine plural forms in the verses about Miriam challenge the tradition of two gender-segregated celebrations at the sea.

In addition to these grammatical cues, let us consider the scene. The Israelites begin the Exodus in their homes. Families perform the rituals—the lamb offering, marking their doorposts, feasting together. They stay awake through the night enduring the fear of the last plague. They head off together into the wilderness and cross the miraculous split sea. Arriving finally at the safe dry sea bank, we can imagine families clustering together, embracing one another, filled with awe and gratitude. The idea that men and women would separate from each other seems foreign and improbable.

The reading of the Miriam verses I propose here opens a possibility that Moshe sings the Song together with the People of Israel *in response to Miriam* and the other women who follow her lead. Accordingly, the order of the events might not be as they might appear in the order of the text. Rather, first Miriam calls upon the people to sing (as related in verses 15:20-21), and then, in response to her call, Moshe and the people respond— (as related in verse 15:1). This sequencing of the events explains some other puzzling words in the verses. The opening verse does not clearly state what happened before the Song that requires the preface, "*And then* Moshe and the children of Israel sang... ." Az, "then," is a conjunction used variously in the Tanach to refer to a specific period of time, or to bridge a sequence of events. Here, we might read *az* to mean, *following* Miriam and the dance ceremony that she initiates.

Devora's song and the Song at the Sea are both part of an ancient tradition of women's song and dance in ancient cultures. Here is another biblical example from the prophetic book of Shmuel,



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When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang.... (1 Shmuel 18:6–7)

According to scholars, women also led laments at both weddings and funerals—songs of love and death were intimately connected (see for example Jerrold S. Cooper, “[Genre, Gender, and the Sumerian Lamentation](#),” Johns Hopkins University). In the following passage from Homer, an ancient Greek epic poem, women and men dance together.

Hereon there danced youths and maidens whom all would woo, with their hands on one another's wrists. The maidens wore robes of light linen, and the youths well woven shirts that were slightly oiled. The girls were crowned with garlands, while the young men had daggers of gold that hung by silver baldrics; sometimes they would dance deftly in a ring with merry twinkling feet, as it were a potter sitting at his work and making trial of his wheel to see whether it will run, and sometimes they would go all in line with one another, and much people was gathered joyously about the green. (Homer, *Iliad*, Book XVIII, line 590)

Returning to our interpretation, in our parasha, the text withholds the important information about the opening of the scene to the end of the text of the Song. The Torah might thereby suggest that the liberation begins and ends with women's initiatives—birthing Israel, and creating an eternal prayer celebration. The Song at the Sea is part of our traditional liturgy. According to this reading, Miriam institutes prayer-song at the Sea. Reciting it, we aspire to reenact redemption as a daily event, and enliven ourselves to participate in liberation.

#### Questions for Discussion

The interpretation that Miriam and the women lead the Song at the Sea has very different implications from the traditional view of two gender-separate celebrations. Discuss the impact of this idea that a woman initiates and conducts the first national prayer experience of the Israelite People? How might it impact your conceptions, your prayer and religious observance, your ideas about the Torah?

Gender segregation is one of the flags of the Orthodox movements in Judaism. The Song at the Sea is a possible precedent for a gender-integrated model for public prayer and celebrations. Consider the potential for this kind of interpretation to influence and inspire synagogue practice—your own, and the members of your community.

Centuries later, we attempt to experience the relevance of our ancient texts and traditions. Our sages included the Song in the daily morning prayers. What meaning do we see and what intention do we affiliate with the daily recitation of the Song at the Sea in the light of our various interpretations?

Modern critical bible scholars suggest that the two different introductions of the Song come from different sources: one describes a Song event led by Miriam, the other, an event led



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by Moshe—these two sources are redacted together; this is another way to address the difficulties in our text. Among the possibilities suggested here, and your own ideas, how do you make sense of the verses at the opening and closing of the Song?

#### Study Links

[Here](#) is the Chabad argument for separation between men and women in the synagogue. And another orthodox argument [here](#). The South African Progressive movement argues [here](#) that the Jerusalem Temples, and ancient synagogues through the seventh century C.E. had no separation. Is [this woman in the video](#) making fun of the apologetics about women's roles in Judaism, or is she serious? Check out the responses on the blog.

Biblical scholar, Everett Fox discusses the content of the Song at the Sea [here](#).

For an example from the halakhic midrash on the book of Shmot, *Mekhilta*, and how the midrash works, click [here](#).

A 1,300 year old manuscript containing fragments from the Song at the Sea was on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 2007. [Click](#) for the image. More recently the fragment has been reunited with another, clearer piece. Unlike the version of the Song in the Dead Sea Scrolls, these fragments lay out the page of the Song in a clear poetic style. Check out [this](#) description of the find.

#### Summary of Issues

Whereas most assume that the Children of Israel celebrate their liberation from slavery in gender-separated groups, it is possible to interpret that Miriam exhorts and leads the women together with men and children, the entire people together as one vibrant community alive with a shared experience of joyous embodied prayer—song and dance.

#### Methods & Observations

We tend to interpret texts according to our prior assumptions, and look for affirmation of our current practices. The Miriam verses demonstrate that people's desire to see what they want and expect overcomes even grammatical difficulties. With sensitivity to gender, we become aware of alternate possible interpretations that affect our views of the Torah and our Jewish practice. These alternatives can co-exist with one another—we can entertain more than one explanation of human experience, and of our sacred texts.

#### Contact

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