

Miriam's Cup: Lifting Up the Prophetess in Our Passover Seders

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Source 1: Miriam's Cup (*Ritualwell*)¹

A Miriam's Cup is a new ritual object that is placed on the seder table beside the Cup of Elijah. Miriam's Cup is filled with water. It serves as a symbol of Miriam's Well, which was the source of water for the Israelites in the desert. Putting a Miriam's Cup on your table is a way of making your seder more inclusive. It lets people know that at your table, the words of girls and boys, women and men, are welcome. It is also a way of drawing attention to the importance of Miriam and the other women of the Exodus story - women who have sometimes been overlooked...

There are many legends about Miriam's Well. It is said to have been a magical source of water that followed the Israelites for 40 years because of the merit of Miriam. The waters of this well were said to be healing and sustaining. Thus, Miriam's Cup is a symbol of all that sustains us through our own journeys, while Elijah's Cup is a symbol of a future Messianic time.

Discussion:

- What resonances do you have with Miriam's cup? Do you typically have one?
- How do you understand Miriam's cup as a feminist intervention in the seder?
- How do Miriam's and Elijah's cups "work together" in your mind?

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<https://ritualwell.org/ritual/miriams-cup/#:~:text=Putting%20a%20Miriam's%20Cup%20on,to%20the%20importance%20of%20Miriam>

Source 2: Numbers 20:1-2

(1) The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.
(2) The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.

(א) וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צִן)
בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם
מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם: (ב) וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה
וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן:

Discussion:

- How do you understand the connection between the lack of water and Miriam's death?
- Are there memories of anyone you have lost who you want to lift up at this time?

Source 3: Rashi on Numbers 20:1-2²

AND THERE WAS NO WATER FOR THE CONGREGATION — Since this statement follows immediately after the mention of Miriam's death, we may learn from it that during the entire forty years they had the "well" through Miriam's merit -- Taanit 9a

(א) וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה. מִכָּאן שֶׁכָּל אַרְבָּעִים
(וְשָׁנָה הָיָה לָהֶם הַבְּאֵר בְּזְכוּת מִרְיָם (תַּעֲנִית ט

Discussion:

- How does your knowledge of Miriam as the one who provided water for the community change your perspective of Miriam?
- How do people emotionally/metaphorically provide water? Who is an example of a leader like that in your life?

Source 4: Siftei Chakhamim, Numbers 20:2³

(1) **The well in Miriam's merit.** For immediately after Miriam died they no longer had water. You might ask: Why was the well not in Aaron's or Moses's merit? The answer is that it was in the merit of Miriam waiting for Moses by the

(א) הַבְּאֵר בְּזְכוּת מִרְיָם. שֶׁהָרִי מִיד כְּשָׁמְתָה מִרְיָם
לֹא הָיָה לָהֶם עוֹד מַיִם. וְאִם לָמָּה לֹא הָיָה הַבְּאֵר
בְּזְכוּת אַהֲרֹן אוֹ מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּלֵּךְ בְּזְכוּת שֶׁהִמְתִּינָה לְמֹשֶׁה
עַל הַמַּיִם לְרֵאוֹת מֶה יַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ כִּשְׁהוֹשֵׁלךְ בְּתִיבָה,
לִכְּנֹעַשָׁה לָהּ זְכוּת זֶה שֶׁל בְּאֵר דֵּהִינּוּ מַיִם שֶׁנִּתְּן
הַקָּב"ה מַיִם לָעֵדָה בְּשִׁבִילָהּ:

² Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Shlomo Yitzhaki), known as Rashi (based on an acronym of his Hebrew initials), is one of the most influential Jewish commentators in history. He was born in Troyes, Champagne, in northern France, in 1040 (*My Jewish Learning*).

³ "Siftei Chakhamim" is a supercommentary on Rashi's commentary on Chumash. Written by Shabbetai ben Joseph Bass (1641–1718) in Amsterdam, it is mostly a collection of other commentaries, in addition to the author's own insights, meant to give a basic understanding of Rashi (*Sefaria*).

water, to see what would happen to him when he was placed there in the box [as a baby] (Exodus 2:4). In return, this merit of the well, i.e., the water that God provided for the congregation was on her behalf.

Discussion:

- How does the Siftei Chakhamim's interpretation shift your understanding of Miriam's merit?
- Why is water important in Miriam's story?
- How do you understand Miriam's gift as connected to her past? Is this a trait of good leaders?

Source 5: Rabbi Jill Hammer, "Reflections on Miriam's Cup" (*Feminism and Religion*, 2021)⁴

Recently, in our own family and community seders, we have settled on merging the Miriam's Cup with another stage of the seder: the handwashing. There are two ritual handwashings during the seder, one near the beginning and one right before the meal. The second handwashing has a blessing, but the first handwashing has no blessing. So we say the blessing over the Miriam's Cup right before the first handwashing, and then (in non-Covid years) we wash one another's hands. Miriam, who once waited by the Nile to watch over a baby in a basket, watches over our acts of care for one another.

This tradition, while new, feels in line to me with the way that Sephardic women healers invoked Miriam as a healer who used water as her medium of healing, as scholars Jack Levy and Rosemary Zumwalt note. The Jewish law code known as the Shulchan Aruch imagines that all water drawn on Saturday night is water from Miriam's well and is healing (Orach Chayyim 299:10). Washing can be a way of offering healing to someone.

Plus, when we use water to wash one another, we are engaging in the biblical tradition of hospitality, just as Abraham washed the feet of the angels (Gen. 18:4). We can use water to welcome one another into sacred space, just as Miriam's well, which some say set itself up at the center of the wilderness camp, helped to create sacred space for the Hebrew tribes.

Discussion:

- How do you relate to this ritual? Do you feel like this is a way you might want to implement remembering Miriam in the Passover seder?

⁴ <https://feminismandreligion.com/2021/03/25/reflections-on-miriam-cup-by-rabbi-jill-hammer/>

Source 6: Rabbi Sue Mauer Morningstar, "Pesach Prayer: Miriam's Cup" (Kol Aleph, 2014)⁵

We raise this cup to celebrate the legacy of Miriam:
holy prophet, compassionate protector,
graceful healer and midwife, giver of life and water,
whose miraculous well followed the Children of Israel
throughout our wanderings in the desert.

We celebrate the freedom of women
in this particular place
at this particular time,
to sing out to God in joy,
with full, strong voices
with timbrels and dance
and without fear.

In the merit of our singing foremothers
Miriam, Channah, Devorah, Serach bat Asher, the Shulamite
and the women who came out to greet King David...

In the memory of our bubbies,
many of whom did not enjoy and could not even imagine
the freedoms we take for granted today...

And in humble recognition of our sisters
in repressive religious regimes around the world today
who are not free to sing out and to worship God in joy, we say:

The time for silencing women is over!
Sing out to God a new song!
שירו לה' שיר חדש!
Shiru L'HaShem Shir Chadash!

בְּרוּכָה יְיָ שְׁכִינָה אֵם כָּל חַי שֶׁהֵכֵל נְהִיָּה בְּדַבָּרָה
Brucha Yah Schechinah eym kol chai shehakol nihyeh bidvarah.
Blessed are you Holy One, mother of all life: everything exists by your words.

Discussion:

- Morningstar connects Miriam to the memories of our women ancestors, both biblical and in our own lives. Which ancestors do you want to remember in this season of liberation?

⁵ <https://kolaleph.org/2014/04/01/pesach-prayer-miriams-cup-by-rabbi-sue-mauer-morningstar/>