

**Honoring Carmen Arick:
How Would Miriam Have Responded to Korach's Rebellion?**

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Torah tells us more about Miriam than about most biblical women. Still, Moses's big sister is often absent at key moments. Korach's rebellion is one such incident: We know how Moses and God respond. Moses angrily proposes an ordeal, and God vindicates him. The ground opens up to swallow the rebel leaders. Next, a fire consumes the remaining mutineers. Finally, a plague strikes Israelites who are appalled by the harsh punishment.ⁱ Throughout these tribulations, Miriam is neither seen nor heard.

Sometimes, when Miriam is missing, the rabbis imagine her involvement. Early in Exodus, we read that two Levites, a man and a woman, are married, and a baby is born.ⁱⁱ Soon, we come to know this newborn as Moses.ⁱⁱⁱ Our sages identify a problem: Moses is not the firstborn child of this couple. In fact, both Miriam and Aaron are older. The rabbis credit Miriam in their answer to the question: "Why does the Torah suggest that Moses is the first child born after this Levite couple marries?" The sages give names to the Levite couple, Yocheved and Amram. Noting that Pharaoh has decreed the death of every newborn male,^{iv} the rabbis imagine that Amram divorces Yocheved, leading all married Israelite men to do the same, saying, "We are laboring for nothing by bringing children into the world to be killed."^v Miriam intervenes: "Father, your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's, as Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, but you decreed [against the birth of] males and females, and now no children will be born. Pharaoh decreed to kill them only in this world, but you decreed in this world and in the World-to-Come, as those never conceived will not enter in to the World-to-Come."^{vi}

Miriam's response enables a future for the Children of Israel. Miriam urges her father to look at life and law more broadly, persuading him to consider that a positive outcome is possible, in this world or the next.

How might Miriam have applied these methods and principles to Korach's rebellion? Let's start by examining the causes of the rebellion, which might have

been Miriam's first step. After all, she seems to understand the reason for her parents' divorce before she objects and proposes an alternative. Moses and God, by contrast, respond to the uprising sharply, without exploring the reasons for the insurgents' discontent.

Korach's central complaint seems to be that Moses, and especially Aaron, have raised themselves above the community, unjustified since, in Korach's words, "all the community are holy, all of them."^{vii} Korach would seem to have a point. We are all familiar with the Levitical injunction to the entire congregation of Israel: "You shall be holy; for I, Adonai, am holy."^{viii} So is Korach right? Modern Torah scholar Yeshayahu Leibowitz says "no:" "Korach fails to understand the difference between ... a fact and an aspiration."^{ix} We are all required to strive for holiness. Sanctity is not inherent in any of us but can only be achieved by the way we live our lives.

Let's imagine Miriam's response to Korach's claim, "All the people are holy." More to the point, we may wonder how she would have reacted to Moses's challenge: "Take out your firepans, and we'll see whom God considers holy!"

Perhaps Miriam would have objected to her little brother's decree, much as she had to her father's. "You're setting a dangerous precedent there, Moses," she might have said. "You're asking God to choose, and we already know how God will answer. Must we really risk the deaths of hundreds of our people, maybe more, every time there's a challenge to leadership?"

"Put away the firepans," Miriam might have counseled, "and take out the Torah. Look at that Holiness Code that commands us to be holy. What does it say about how we achieve that? Honoring our parents. Observing Shabbat. Assuring the wellbeing of the poor and defenseless. And yes, offering sacrifices correctly. In that same Levitical chapter, we're even taught that reproaching our sinful neighbors is also a path to holiness, but not by setting up a sacrifice contest with dire consequences for the community."

In short, Miriam might have reminded Moses that laws reserving priestly functions to Aaron and his sons are far from the only commandments in the Torah. Whenever we are stuck on one injunction, to the exclusion of all others, we are bound to go wrong. Just as Amram needed to see beyond Pharaoh's

wicked decree to retain at least a sliver of hope for Israel's future, Moses would have done well to imagine non-exclusionary and nonviolent means to keep Korach and his band of rebels within the Israelite tent.

What would have been the result? We cannot know. The Mussar masters, teachers of Jewish ethical discipline, describe a soul-trait that Miriam exemplifies and which we would all do well to adopt: *bitachon*, or trust.^x No, we're not taught to trust that God guarantees a positive outcome to every tribulation. Judaism is no prosperity gospel, suggesting that, as long as we're faithful, we'll be healthy, wealthy, and happy. Instead, we learn that we take whatever steps we can in order to achieve the desired result, and then trust that, whatever the outcome, God will be at our side, and we will be O.K. We may have to change our definition of "O.K.," but we will be O.K., in this world or the next.

Miriam practices that kind of *bitachon*, trust. She does not promise her father that he will sire God's agent of liberation. She does urge action that will make a future possible, trusting that the outcome will, if nothing else, be better than simply acceding to Pharaoh's genocidal decree. If she counseled Moses to take out the Torah rather than the firepans, Miriam couldn't guarantee that Korach would see the light, but buying time and appealing to reason would offer cause for hope and faith.

Tonight, we honor Carmen Arick, as she completes her service as our President. I could recount several instances in which she has led in the tradition of Miriam, asking our congregation and her colleagues in leadership to look beyond the letter of one particular existing regulation, opening the possibility to a better future.

About a year ago, a parent wanted to enroll a child in our Religious School without joining the Temple, forbidden by existing policy. Carmen spoke up like Miriam, suggesting that enforcing the rule would punish the child, even the future of Judaism, more than the parent who did not wish to become a member. Fears and concerns were real: Would folks drop their membership, now that they could enroll their kids in Religious School without it? And what is the future of Judaism for a child whose parents' commitment to Judaism doesn't include communal responsibility? Carmen counseled *bitachon*, trust. We could do our part, offering the young person the Jewish education she seeks. Might somebody take

advantage of the loophole, and drop a membership? Perhaps, though it hasn't happened. And maybe the best answer – Carmen's answer, like Miriam's – is to trust our members. Who can guarantee the future of Judaism in this child's family? Surely, we cannot; but we may well imagine that we would imperil the possibility of a Jewish outcome if we did not open our door to the youngster. With Carmen's *bitachon*, her trust in the congregation and in the results we might enable, we forged ahead.

Carmen's signal presidential achievement is "Gifts of the Heart," the new system by which members are supporting our synagogue home. Some looked no further than our governing documents, authorizing the Board to levy financial obligations upon the congregation. Carmen pointed out, though, that the Board was not really setting our members' dues. Instead, we had a practice of freewill offerings perceived as taxation. Like Miriam, she asked our leadership to take a broader view of the law. Carmen suggested that the Board might assess annual contributions that members would set for themselves, the only unacceptable amount being \$0. Again, fears understandably abounded. What if, freed from any thought that the Board would set a higher assessment, members would cut their pledges? Again, Carmen counseled *bitachon*, trust – trust, yes, in our congregation, and also in leadership's ability to pivot if necessary. You, the members of Congregation B'nai Israel, have responded to Carmen's faith with tremendous generosity. Carmen, who did not accept the Temple Presidency with fiscal goals in mind, leaves the congregation in a very strong financial position.

As we honor Carmen tonight, let us all learn from her and from Miriam before her. As a community and in our personal lives, let us face our challenges both creatively and directly, never constrained by the narrowness of any one law. And let us proceed with Miriam's *bitachon*, Carmen's trust, to build an ever-brighter future.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 16:5-35, 17:6-13.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 2:1-2

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 2:10.

^{iv} Exodus 1:16, 22.

^v Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 12a, translation from *Sefaria*.

^{vi} Ibid, translation adapted.

^{vii} Numbers 16:3.

^{viii} Leviticus 19:2.

^{ix} Yeshayahu Leibowitz, quoted in Rabbi Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2017, p. 139.

^x My discussion of the soul-trait of *bitachon* is based on what I have learned from the written and spoken words of Alan Morinis.