

## **“From Mariam’s Well”**

**Passover Reflection March 28, 2021**

**Perry Montrose**

On a simple level, Passover can be summarized like every Jewish holiday: they tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat! However, like most meaningful things in life, the holiday contains many layers and veins of interpretation.

Growing up I didn't understand that. Maybe it was because, at our family Seder, we skipped all the rabbinic opinions on the meaning of various parts of the story. As Reform Jews, we were free to jump ahead when dinner was waiting. We were a boisterous family of seven, plus many guests, so the rituals could only take so long before there was going to be mutiny at the table. This was probably the reason for the universal groan when I started questioning moral aspects of the story, future Unitarian Universalist Jew that I was.

I objected to the vengeance and the plagues harming innocent people for the crimes of a ruthless leader and his followers. Some suggested that I just complained about it because I was the eldest child and identified too much with the killing of the firstborn. I objected to my ethical high ground being reduced to amateur psychology, but then my cousin Myryame came to Passover, the eldest of my Uncle Eddie's four daughters. She stated, “I really object to the killing of the firstborn too!” Unbeknownst to me at the time, my cousin Myryame was already a Unitarian Universalist Jew. So, it's still possible that our objections had to do with our principles and not just being oversensitive firstborn children.

As a Unitarian Universalist still connected to my Jewish roots, I find meaning in Judaism's complex mythologies. Rather than focusing on whether the story is true or not and applying a moral litmus test to the literal telling, I focus on what I find to be the symbolic truth in the story.

Moses was separated from his mother and sent downstream. It mirrors the journey of birth. The cord that connects us to life support is cut and we become a separate being facing life's challenges. We are all plagued with human suffering, whether physical illness, emotional struggles that feel like hail raining upon us, the cacophony of voices that give conflicting advice like an overwhelming chorus of frogs, or the seemingly endless darkness of not knowing the way out of a traumatic experience. We sometimes struggle to find our voice and a better path.

What if the “firstborn” represents an original idea, one of the first that you were given, that has enslaved you and hampered your growth? What was handed down to you that has not served you and has only trapped your soul from its next stage of growth? What idea must you end and what must you pass over to free yourself from mental enslavement?

Sometimes it is the plagues, the hardships, that tell us what we need to let go of. There are lessons in those plagues that teach us how to part the seas and pass through to the Promised Land, where we may all live in peace and justice.

Miriam, Moses's sister, is the prophet who shows us the way. She takes that fledgling seed of hope and sets it on a path of freedom so it may grow. She makes sure it is nurtured along the way. In the story, after saving her brother by placing his basket in the river, Miriam asks Pharaoh's daughter if she would like one of the Jewish women to be a nursemaid to the child and enables his mother to secretly care for him. Miriam sees a better future, even when there are seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Sometimes prophecy is a muddy river. We do not have the answers and it's hard to see the way. As much as we try to avoid suffering, with good reason, and run to get away from it, it is our task to move through pain so that we might have a deeper understanding of ourselves and the struggles of others.

When we get through a plague, we cannot truly jump into a new place of wellbeing until we have moved through the emptiness in which we recognize our trauma. We cannot simply leap over the swirling waters of sadness or the barren feeling of loneliness and expect to be fine. We find healing when the waters are parted and we move through them, not around them. Parting the sea is neither staying enslaved, nor drowning in the escape. It is reaching for the outstretched arm, so we can all land in a better place.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a journey through the desert of the unknown, in which we often lose our way. When the Jews wander in the desert after their escape, Miriam is a source of life; it is Miriam's Well that provides water. It has been called a well of wisdom and understanding. When we feel barren and lost in a swirling sand that blinds our way, Miriam is the place inside of us that knows the way. "Trust that what you carry will sustain you." Miriam is the part of us that holds our hope, cares for our dreams, nurtures our soul to blossoming, and heals the pain that we must endure in the process.

We will reach a better land when we honor the Miriam that comforts us, and the Moses that pushes us forward with a strength that we did not know we had. We are all keepers of our own Holy Ark of what we hold to be true and most dear. What is held in your Holy Ark and where does it lead us as a people? You have a part in the story of humanity. We are all prophets in our own time because we are part of the fabric that is woven through time. Our bitterness is mixed with the sweetness of apples and honey because that is the way life comes.

In the desert, Miriam leads the people in song and dance because it is joy and spiritual connectedness that sustains us and kindles our hope, even in the most difficult times. The desert crossing can be slow, but it helps to pick up the timbrel and know how to celebrate. Our Promised Land is not an idyllic Eden, it is a place held in a delicate equilibrium balanced in our hands. Miriam, the very soul of us, will show the way, but it is the outstretched arm that we offer and the strong hand that we reach for that pulls us through. May we always find the wellspring and the fertile land in which to grow that which we know is best in us. May this help us heal the plagues that afflict us in our times and create a world that honors the wellbeing of all.