



5 ways

to remember Miriam

“Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt” (Deut. 24:9). “Remember” says our Torah text. Memory is central to both Jewish and Christian self-understanding. But memory can be selective! Let’s look at five ways in which Miriam is remembered in scripture and tradition.

1. In our Torah text this week (Deut 24:9) Miriam is remembered for her sin and her punishment (see Num. 12:10-15), but not for her leadership role.
2. The medieval Torah scholar known as Ramban discusses Deut. 24:9, underlining the seriousness of Miriam’s sin yet at the same time admitting something of Miriam’s importance in the tradition as a prophetess and righteous woman: If someone as great as Miriam could fall from grace, how much more concerned should we be to avoid the sin of slander.
3. The Book of Micah (6:4) recalls Miriam as one of the trio (Moses, Aaron, Miriam) whom God sent to lead Israel out of Egypt.
4. In Numbers 20:1 Miriam’s death is recorded in a single verse. But it is a powerful memory, associated with the cessation of the Israelites’ water supply. When Miriam died “the community was without water” (20:2).
5. At the Christian Easter Vigil the Red Sea reading and psalm stop two verses short of the scene where Miriam the prophetess enters (Exodus 15:20) singing and dancing.



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 21:10—25:19

Ki Tetze:
‘when you go out’

Why reflect on Torah?

Speaking of both the achievements and challenges that the Church has experienced in its commitment to Jewish-Christian reconciliation since Vatican II, Cardinal Walter Kasper made this comment:

“To have a fine Conciliar statement is one thing, to make it known and have it received in the body of the world-wide Church, and even more so to implement it at the grassroots level, is another thing.”

(Address given at Boston College, Nov. 2002)

Indeed! It takes time, resources and persistent effort for ‘big’ church messages to be heard and assimilated in the ‘little’ churches: our homes and parishes. The movement from church documents phrased in technical language to user-friendly resources at the parish level is an educative feat in itself.

Which is why *Light of Torah* exists. Each weekly leaflet invites parishioners (i) to reflect on an aspect of the Church’s teachings on the Jewish-Christian relationship and (ii) to explore a passage of the Torah in the company of Jewish commentators. In this way Christians further their understanding and appreciation of their biblical and spiritual links with the Jewish people.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 21:10—25:19

In this week's Torah portion we come across a number of laws which reflect a concern for the welfare of women. In our discussion we hear from contemporary perspectives.

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1996); Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford, 2011); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY, 2007). Scripture: *JPS*.

1. Schorsch, 611,
2. Eskenazi and Weiss, 1188.
3. Levine and Brettler, 502-3

Tasting Torah

"When a man has taken a bride, he shall not go out with the army or be assigned to it for any purpose; he shall be exempt for one year for the sake of his household, to give happiness to the woman he has married" (Deut. 24:5).

According to this verse, military service is delayed by one year in order to allow a bride spousal companionship. Interestingly, here the rationale for the law favors the woman. Elsewhere, in Deut.20:7, the same rule is described in terms of the man's interests. [According to Jewish law this exemption did not apply in warfare considered defensive/obligatory, as opposed to 'optional' e.g., initiated by the king for economic reasons.]

Touching Torah

In Deuteronomy we also read of a law which allows time for a female taken captive in war to mourn the loss of her family before an Israelite is allowed to marry her (21:10-14). We read too of laws which prescribe punishment for a husband who tries to defame his wife (22:18-19) and which protect the inheritance rights of a firstborn son when his mother falls from her husband's favor (21:15-17). There is also a law which places restrictions on a man who divorces his wife and later wants to remarry her (24:1). Examining texts like these in the light of other biblical and extra-biblical texts, scholars speculate that marriage and divorce laws in ancient Israel accommodated a range of complexities.

Depthing Torah

Study of these and other verses from Deuteronomy has led one contemporary Jewish commentator to conclude: "Deuteronomy generally displays a high regard for the dignity of women. They are neither property nor domestics to be abused and discarded, but persons entitled to rights and respect."¹

Then again, other Jewish commentators² are more likely to remind us that the reality for women of those times was a far cry from a situation of gender equality as we would understand it today. E.g., a woman found not to be a virgin when she is married can be stoned to death (22:13-21). [Whether this actually occurred is another question, and students of Talmud are familiar with early rabbinic legal adjustments which made capital punishment virtually impossible.]

Both Jewish opinions draw on the same bible text, but each has a different emphasis.

Doing Torah

Like Christianity, Judaism has evolved over centuries and reshaped many of its attitudes and practices, including those concerning women. Conservative versus feminist tensions over the interpretation of texts are as alive today in Jewish circles as they are in Christian circles! In our reading of the bible, it is important to be aware of such developments lest a superficial reading feed stereotypes (see Levine's comment at right).

In the light of your own Torah reading how do you enter this discussion?



Faith & Life

Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish New Testament scholar who doesn't hesitate to correct Christians in a widely-held misconception: that Jesus 'liberated' women against a culture of "early Judaism [that] was so misogynistic that it made the Taliban look progressive by comparison." Historical-critical enquiry simply does not support this damning view of the Judaism of Jesus' day, says Levine. "Judaism of this period was not an egalitarian utopia, but nor was it in general a system that 'cast out' women, children, the poor and sick and so on..."³

Further reading: AJ Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (NY: HarperCollins, 2006).