

Miriam's Well

When the world was created, God also created several miracles. One of the greatest and most wonderful was the miracle of Miriam's well. The way it worked was this: When a special woman of blessing would sing the proper song from her heart, the well would miraculously appear and bring forth water. The Holy Blessed One placed the phoenix over this well to protect it until the time came when people would need it.

The first time the well appeared was when Adam and Eve were forced from the Garden of Eden. Alone in the desert, they needed to find water. That was when Eve asked God for help; she poured out her heart in song. Sure enough, the well appeared, and from that day on until they learned to take care of themselves and find their own water, Eve and Adam were nourished and nurtured by the waters of the well.

Much later the well was summoned a second time, when our mother Sarah was in distress. Sarah was feeling guilty and heartsick after banishing Hagar and Ishmael from her home. Sarah was concerned about their safety and their lives. Just as Eve had done, Sarah poured out her heart in song to God. The result? An angel brought the well to Hagar and Ishmael, who were wandering, sick with thirst, near Beersheba. Because of the healing, nourishing waters of the well, Hagar and Ishmael recovered and continued on their journey.

Some time later our father Abraham sent his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. Eliezer returned to the land of Abraham's family, to the home of Abraham's brother. There he spotted the beautiful Rebecca, who was known among the villagers for her kindness and her compassion. Eliezer watched the way Rebecca offered the villagers water from the well, and he immediately knew that he had found the right match for Isaac. Like Eve and Sarah, Rebecca had that special connection with God, which allowed her to learn the heart song that summoned the well. She took it with her when she made the journey to marry Isaac.

Years later Rebecca's beloved son Jacob fled his family's home in fear of his brother, Esau, whom he had angered. Worried about Jacob's ability to survive, Rebecca taught her son the song to summon the well. When in need, Jacob used the song to make the well appear. It was during this time that Jacob met Rachel, and he immediately knew that he loved her. But legend has it that the song of the well was intended only for a woman's voice, and so it was believed that Jacob had stolen it! And so Jacob's future father-in-law, Laban, took the song and placed it in the voice of Leah, his other daughter, thereby tricking Jacob into marrying Leah rather than Jacob's beloved Rachel. After that the well was resealed and guarded once again by the phoenix.

Hundreds of years passed. Moses, who was in fear for his life, fled Egypt. That's when he came upon the daughters of Jethro, who were attempting to water their father's flock of sheep. Tzipporah, the daughter known for her holiness, had the power to sing for the well. But she and her sisters were being threatened by a group of men who wanted the water for themselves; the men were keeping the women from the well. It was Moses who chased them away, allowing Tzipporah access to the well. The daughters of Jethro were then able to lead the flock to the nourishing water. Tzipporah ran and told her father about the great man she had met, and Moses was promptly welcomed as a prince into the family of Jethro.

After Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he told Tzipporah that he had to return to Egypt. It was time, he explained, for him to help save his people. Tzipporah, being a holy woman, understood and wanted more than anything to help her husband. And so they journeyed together back to Egypt. When Tzipporah met Moses's family, she found a soul mate in Moses's sister, Miriam. Tzipporah taught her sister-in-law, Miriam, the ways of the well, along with the healing powers that she had learned in the desert.

It was in the wilderness that Miriam became the leader of the Israelite women. And it was Miriam who summoned the well to help feed and heal the people in their distress in the desert. There was, unfortunately, a moment of tension and sadness as sister and sister-in-law found themselves in conflict in the desert. This misunderstanding led to a division between them. Miriam was so devastated by the confrontation that it made her ill. The Torah tells us that she became stricken with leprosy. It was the healing waters of the well that revived her and healed her and brought her back to her place, alongside her brothers, as a leader among her people.

After Miriam's death the well disappeared, and we have not been able to summon it since. Perhaps another righteous woman of Israel whose heart is open and pure, who seeks selflessly to care for her people, will once again find the song that touches heaven and brings forth the well. ✧

Rabbi Amy Joy Small

of the Reconstructionist congregation Beth Hatikvah in Summit, New Jersey, selected this story because she believes the Jewish people have not been sustained only by great scholars or words. "I think the Jewish people have been sustained by great mothers and their nurturing, along with all of the great teachings of Torah. And today's generation of women has the wonderful opportunity for the first time to bring those two qualities of sustenance to the Jewish people," Rabbi Small says. "They can be leaders, scholars, teachers—but also nurturers who care for the welfare and the health of the Jewish people as mothers always have, going all the way back to Eve."