

Rabbi Maya Glasser
Parashah Vayigash
January 3, 2020

I, Miriam, stand at the sea and turn to face the desert stretching endless and still.

My eyes are dazzled —
the sky brilliant blue, sunburst sands unyielding white.

My hands turn to dove wings.

My arms reach for the sky and I want to sing the song rising inside me.

My mouth open, I stop.

Where are the words?

Where the melody?

In a moment of panic my eyes go blind.

Can I take a step without knowing a destination?

Will I falter? Will I fall? Will the ground sink away from under me?

The song still unformed — How can I sing?

To take the first step — to sing a new song —
to close one's eyes and dive into unknown waters.

For a moment knowing nothing, risking all —

But then to discover the waters are friendly.

The ground is firm and the song rises again.

Out of my mouth come words lifting the wind,

and I hear for the first time the song that has been in my heart,
silent, unknown, even to me.

This poem, Miriam's Song by Rabbi Ruth Sohn, puts us into the head of one of our people's heroines. Yet, this is not the confident, jubilant, musical Miriam who we often talk about. This is a Miriam who is standing on a precipice. She wants to sing her song, but she panics. Can she take a step without knowing a destination? How can she express herself when she does not quite know what she wants to say, or where she is going?

That first step, that risky movement into the unknown is the hardest one. Yet only by taking that step does Miriam discover that she is strong enough to make it. Blindly figuring out where to go next, even though she is uncertain about what the future holds, helps her to become more self-aware, and to express parts of her that she did not even know existed.

The Miriam in this poem is universal. We've all been there. We know how her particular story unfolds, how she leads the slaves to freedom, redeems them with her song, and travels through the desert with them, providing physical and spiritual nourishment. But, we don't know how our stories will end. We resonate with this poem because we constantly feel like we are standing on the edge of a precipice, not quite sure what will happen next. No matter how much we know ourselves, there are always moments that throw us, that cause us panic and self-doubt. Each of us has a song to sing, but sometimes that song takes more work to bring out. Taking that first step and risking everything is the only way to help our stories unfold. If Miriam had not taken that step, we would not have been accompanied by her spirit and her song through the desert. Things would have turned out much differently, not just for her, but for our people and our narrative. We probably would not even have a Bat Mitzvah with her name.

With the arrival of our secular new year a few days ago, multiple people I know have joked that next year at this time they will look back and comment how "hindsight is 2020." During this cultural moment of both reflecting on the past and looking to the future, it is easy to have hindsight and analyze the choices that we made in the past year. It is also easy to wonder about the future and doubt how we will react as we do our best to move forward. Will we falter? Will we fall? Will the ground sink away from under us? The song still unformed — How can we sing? What will our 2020 vision be? What pages will we write in our personal stories this year? What will happen with our Jewish narrative in our country?

Who will win the presidential election? What will our people's story say next? There are many more questions than answers.

Even though we have just begun 2020, there is not a clean break between the past and the present. Though we want to let go of everything bad from 2019, that is not how it works. We start a new calendar year still in the middle of the same problems, the same worries, the same fears.

Even our Torah portion acknowledges that the pieces of our lives do not always begin and end in the most cleancut manner. This week's parashah, Vayigash, starts with Judah in the middle of taking a bold and risky step, as Miriam did at the shores of the sea. Last week, the story suddenly ended in the middle of a conversation between Judah, one of the brothers who had sold Joseph into slavery, and Joseph, who appeared as a high-up Egyptian official resistant to showing his family mercy. This week, the Torah begins with the words "*vayigash elav Yehudah*" - "and then, Judah went up to him." As the last chapter ended and this chapter began, Judah was doing the exact same action. A story was continuing, just as our stories did not take a pause between last year and this one. Judah was in the middle of standing on a precipice, taking the chance to talk to a high up foreign government official to plead his case. Of course, he did not know that the official was his brother. He did not know in that moment how his story, and his peoples' story would play out, but we do. Hindsight is 2020.

As we stand on the precipice and try our best to sing our songs amidst fear and doubt, looking back at our story thus far can help give us strength to move forward. It can remind us that like Miriam and Judah, we are part of a bigger narrative, one that changes and adapts over time. Our Reform movement published an article a few days ago about a few ways that American Jewish life has changed over the last decade. The article encourages us to balance the doom and gloom that we see in the media, and our despair about rising anti-Semitism, with all of the innovation and developments that we have been a part of in the past years.

Growing anti-Semitism is, of course, one of the major themes of the past decade. But many of the other items on the list are positive developments, including: technology allowing us to access Jewish texts in an unprecedented way, the rise of female leadership across all of the denominations, more Jewish characters in movies and TV and new connections with Israeli culture, greater exposure for Jews of color, Spain and Portugal inviting their expelled Jews back home, and the Pew Study counting American Jews. By the way, 94 percent of Jewish Americans said they were proud to be Jewish.

And so our story continues. We are not solely defined by fear, hate or anti-Semitism. We are standing on a precipice waiting to continue our story, using our 2020 hindsight to create a better world. We are a diverse community, one that loves Fauda and Shtisel, one that studies and soaks up our ancient texts and sees them in modern ways, one that is connected with Israel, one that is led by women and men and people of color, one that will not forget our history. We are like Miriam and Judah, taking bold steps into the future, because the risk is worth unlocking the song in our hearts. We are proud to be Jewish.

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