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THE
FIVE BOOKS
OF
MIRIAM

A Woman's Commentary on the Torah



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from each of the twelve tribes, would then bring their spindles to the well and declare, "Spring up, O Well!" And the water would shoot up from the white stone, as high as the tallest date palms, then cascade into great rivers. And each day the people would sail in ships down these rivers to visit one another. The waters emptied into plains that surrounded the camp and nourished the fruit trees that grew there, bearing fruit year round. Under the trees grew fragrant herbs that the women used as perfume, and soft mosses that provided beds and pillows for the poor.

When Miriam died, the well disappeared and did not enter the Promised Land with the people. In later times, legends arose about the well's fate: Some claimed that it did cross the Jordan with the Israelites and that it sank into the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where it remains hidden to this day. Others say that it traveled with the Jews into exile and appears from time to time to those holy enough to merit its healing presence. Some say it was gathered back up by the Eternal, with whom it will remain until the Messiah comes.

But the truth lies elsewhere—with the Daughters of Miriam, the Keepers of the Well, an uninterrupted line of Jewish women who have safeguarded the secret of the Well throughout the generations. And together with this secret, they have gathered up and safeguarded many legends about Miriam and the other ancient mothers of Israel, lovingly telling and retelling them, mother to daughter, aunt to niece. For legends are fragile things. They need tending to survive the ravages of time. Otherwise they slowly wither away. And the world is poorer for it.

Only fragments of these teachings have survived. Most of the scrolls and manuscripts recording the stories and wisdom of these women have been lost in the endless wanderings of the Jewish People. Here then are the fragments, all that remains of *The Five Books of Miriam*.

 INTRODUCING: DRAMATIS PERSONAE

"At Sinai the divine Voice divided itself into the seventy tongues of the nations so that all might understand"

—EXODUS RABBAH 5:9

TORAH: Before the world was created, I was. Before the sun was formed on the fourth day, I illuminated the void. My words provided the blueprint for creation, and they contain the script for redemption. To some, I speak only the word of God, transcribed at Sinai and echoing down through the centuries in the words of the Rabbis. To others, I myself am but the echo of the Bat Kol, the divine voice, filtered through the imperfect hearing of those who revere the One-Who-Speaks-Truth. To yet others, I am black fire on white fire, my entire body of letters all a single name of God, and even that name only the outer garment of the Holy One. Still others regard me as a patchwork of human voices, sewn together by an expert seamstress. But my guises are inexhaustible. Always there are spaces between the letters, gaps yawning wide for new tales. The tradition teaches: "She is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to her." And I am.

OUR DAUGHTERS: We are today's Jewish women and the women of generations yet to come. We bring to the sacred writings so many questions: Who speaks across the centuries? Are any women among these ancient voices? Do they speak to us? How do their experiences shape ours? How do ours illuminate theirs? Through our questions, we renew the stories that our people told so long ago. Through our questions, we discover new answers to old riddles, and new riddles for future seekers.

OUR MOTHERS: We express the collective wisdom of the Jewish folk tradition. Throughout the centuries, we have told stories, sung songs, enacted rituals, passed down charms and healing remedies, and raised up each generation of Jewish children to cherish and preserve God's teaching among our people. Often we have been unlettered. Usually we speak only the language of the kitchen and the marketplace, not the holy tongue. But without our homespun Torah, the Jewish people would have disappeared among the nations long ago.

OUR BUBBES: We teach the hard-won lessons of those who have lived long and seen it all. We have a proverb for every occasion, indispensable words to the wise. Our children and our children's children have shlepped us across

the face of the earth, and we have always made the best of our lot. Most of us in America trace our roots back to the shtetls of Eastern Europe, where we spoke in *mama loshen* and nourished countless generations with chicken soup and *bubbe maisesh*. We celebrate women's wisdom, the Torah of home and marketplace, of kitchen and birthing stool, of sickbed and nursery.

THE RABBIS: We are the Sages of our people, the inheritors of the priests and prophets who vanished when the Temple was destroyed by Rome. For two thousand years, we have taught God's law and raised up students to pass it down. Sometimes we have had to draw holy secrets out of the laws and stories, searching in the white spaces between the letters for hints of divine purpose. These *midrashim* and legal interpretations were whispered to Moses on Sinai; we have merely caught the echoes and given them voice. Until very recently, we have been an elite community of men; now women have joined our ranks and added their eyes and ears, their hearts and minds, to ours.

THE SAGES IN OUR OWN TIME: We are the rabbis of today, scholars and teachers who continue to search for secrets in the sacred writings. In our quest for truth, we use the most modern intellectual technology—literary criticism, archaeology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, comparative Semitics, feminist theory, social science. We do not fear knowledge; we revere only truth. Our goal is to unravel the tangle of piety and myth obscuring the historical core of the text, to unbind all those spellbound by religion's charms. Yet though we are critics, we are loving ones, for the Torah is our tree of life as well.

LILITH THE REBEL: I am the first woman, created at the same moment as the first man. Together we were *Adam*, a single creature, a being-formed-of-red-earth, the first human. But Adam resented our equal status in the Garden, and so I left Paradise to fend for myself. I am the voice of protest. I challenge received wisdom, especially the truths taught by men who have not consulted their mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters. My goal is to upset the applecart, to bite the serpent back, to look back and see the fire without turning to salt, to give the Rabbis a piece of my mind. I seek the truth buried under the mountain of tradition. My spade is as sharp as my tongue and wit!

SARAH THE ANCIENT ONE: I am the first Jewish woman, the first Jewish wife, the first Jewish mother. As a young beauty, I left my home, my family, my culture, and my faith, and with my beloved Abram set off to follow the

Voice-Without-a-Face. To serve God's will, I braved the harems of Pharaoh and Abimelekh, banished Hagar and her son, subjected my aged body to the travails of birth, and watched my husband lead my only son off to death. I am wise because I have faced impossible choices and have nonetheless chosen. I am shrewd because I have learned to laugh at miracles and thereby to force God's hand.

HAGAR THE STRANGER: I am the outsider, the alien, the rejected one. My name speaks my fate: *hajira*, the wanderer; *ha-gera*, the stranger; *ha-gerusha*, the one-who-has-been-driven-away. At my mistress Sarah's command, I lent my womb to Abraham to sire an heir; at her command, he banished me and my son from his camp. I am Israel's perpetual shadow—Egyptian, Canaanite, Arab. Ishmael's sons still snap at Isaac's heels. His daughters' daughters still tempt Jacob's sons. From outside my master's tent, I see his world quite differently. I have learned to see clearly in the desert's glare.

WILY REBECCA, GRANDDAUGHTER OF MILCAH: Never mind how I get my information! Without me the Jewish people is doomed. Not always is war the sure path to victory, nor is truth or divine voices. Sometimes it takes guile to carry out God's will, sometimes stealth, sometimes even betrayal. But history, especially national history, is a soft touch. In retrospect, even the most dastardly deeds can appear divine. Anyway, we women have been forced for so long to dissemble that it's hard to break the habit, even now that the power's being shared.

MOTHER RACHEL: My poor exiled people! Just as I died on the road to my new home, so have you also wandered far from home these many centuries since Rome crushed Jerusalem. And just as I remain alone in a roadside grave, far from the family cave at Makhpelah, so too your bones are scattered among the nations. I am the voice of compassion, weeping for my children who are lost. Fear not, for I am a shepherd who never abandons the ones who stray.

LEAH THE NAMER: So many children! My own six, whom I birthed, as well as Zilpah's two. Eight names I had to come up with, nine counting Dinah (whose name I gave without a homily, since it was only sons who mattered to Jacob). And so I became expert at giving names, a linguist after a fashion. The Torah is filled with names—mostly of men, of course, but quite a few women as well. Even rocks, trees, and mountains are pregnant with language.

Indeed, the words of scripture, distilled by so many centuries of transmission, have become concentrated like an herbal tincture or like tiny seeds waiting for sun and rain to pry them open.

DINAH THE WOUNDED ONE, DAUGHTER OF LEAH AND JACOB: Hard is the fortune of all womankind. I am the voice of the Victim, the One-Who-Is-Expendable. Unlike my twelve brothers, who learned the destinies of their names, I received just a name, unadorned. Only later did I learn the significance of my name: Dinah, the One-Who-Is-Judged. I speak for all those who have been silenced by violence, by neglect, by abuse, by disdain. I remind all those in power that they stand upon the shifting sands of my weakness; I reassure the weak that they ride upon the strong hips of God. Mine is a still, small voice, but it echoes through the ages.

SERAKH BAT ASHER THE HISTORIAN, GRANDDAUGHTER OF ZILPAH: I am the voice of history. As a child, I sang to my grandfather Jacob of the false death of my uncle Joseph. As a woman, I accompanied Jacob and his teeming family down to Egypt. As an ancient crone, I revealed to our enslaved people where the bones of Joseph lay concealed. To this day, I see the past more clearly than the present or future. I note errors that have led to tragedy, patterns that repeat, footprints left behind in every tale. I am the sentry of memory, the guardian of all tears.

MIRIAM THE PROPHET, DAUGHTER OF YOKHEVED: I am the Singer, the Dancer, the Drummer of Israel. I celebrate the myriad contributions of Jewish women through the ages. I champion their dreams, nurture their desires, encourage them when their spirits flag. When I was but a child of five, I chastised my father and all the Hebrew men for abandoning their marriage beds; when I was a leader of our free people, I upbraided my brother Moses for abandoning his marriage bed. Mine is the voice of joy, of victory, of power. I prophesy the redemption of all our people! My vision is clear and limitless. I see to the last generation!

HULDAH THE PREACHER: Hear my words, O Women of Israel! I am Huldah the Prophet and Teacher. I give counsel to kings and priests. During the reign of the child-king Josiah, it was to me they turned when they dis-

covered the lost Scroll of the Law, now the final book of our sacred Torah. It was I who prophesied the doom of wayward Judah, who promised a brief reprieve thanks to our repentant king. I teach God's Law to all who will heed it. I preach God's retribution to all who will not. Under my tread, the twisting paths of Torah right themselves. Hear me, O Women of Israel, and be guided!

ESTHER THE HIDDEN ONE: Before the Torah assumed concrete form, it shone brighter than any star in the Tohu and Vohu of Eternity. Then God spoke the universe into being, and the fiery light was hidden, leaving behind only ashen traces burnt into parched skin, black letters and white space. Through the centuries, Jewish mystics have explored these vast white spaces and discovered secret worlds, and have pried mysteries from the holy letters. I too am an explorer of secret worlds. My very name means "Hidden One." Just as I concealed my identity as a queen in the palace of Shushan, so too the Torah conceals herself, waiting to be revealed by those who know how to find her. We seek her face, even as She seeks ours.

BERURIAH THE SCHOLAR: I am the voice of Learning. In the noisy academies of ancient Israel, mine was the only woman's voice interpreting the Law, mine the only name recorded as a teacher of Torah. I wrestled beside the men, wresting a thousand rules from each letter of sacred scripture, finding truth in the very crowns of the letters. I speak for all those whose erudition has received no praise, for those whose teaching was stolen from their names. I live for study! The words sing to me, fill my ears like a baby's sweet laughter. Every simple soul I meet is my teacher; every learned sage my student.

WITH CAMEO APPEARANCES BY

EVE THE MOTHER OF LIFE: Wife of Adam, who eats from the Tree of Knowledge and is exiled from Eden

NAAMAH: Wife of Noah (unnamed in the Torah, named by the Rabbis)

AMITLAI: Mother of Abraham, who according to legend saves her infant son from the executioners of the king of Ur (unnamed in the Torah, named by the Rabbis)

EDITH, THE ONE-WHO-LOOKS-BACK: Wife of Lot, who turns into a pillar of salt (unnamed in the Torah, named by the Rabbis)

MILCAH: Grandmother of Rebecca, niece of Abraham and Nahor, Nahor's wife

KETURAH: Third wife of Abraham, mother of six children

BILHAH AND ZILPAH: Leah's and Rachel's maids, Jacob's concubines, mother of four of Israel's tribes

DEBORAH: Rebecca's nurse, the only servant whose death is noted in the Torah

TAMAR THE TRICKSTER: Wife and widow to two of Judah's sons, who tricks her father-in-law into sleeping with her to carry on her dead husband's name; ancestor of Boaz and King David

LUSTY ZULEIKA: Wife of Potiphar, Joseph's master, whose desire for her Hebrew slave lands Joseph in prison (unnamed in the Torah, named by the Rabbis)

ASNAT: Daughter of the Egyptian priest of On, wife of Joseph, mother of Ephraim and Manasseh. Legend names her the daughter of Dinah and Shechem, and the adopted daughter of Potiphar and Zuleika.

SHIFRA AND PUAH: The midwives who defy Pharaoh's orders to kill all newborn Hebrew males

YOKHEVED: Mother of Moses, who saves her baby from Pharaoh's executioners by placing him in a reed basket and setting him afloat on the Nile

PRINCESS THERMUTIS: Daughter of Pharaoh, who rescues Moses from the Nile and raises him as her own son. Her Egyptian name, Thermutis, is changed by God to Batyah ("daughter of God") in reward for her pious deeds (unnamed in the Torah, named by the Rabbis).

FLINTY ZIPPORAH: Daughter of Jethro, priest of Midian, wife of Moses, who saves Moses from a divine challenge as they leave for Egypt with their two sons

ELISHEVA: A Levite, wife of Aaron, mother of Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Itamar

TIRTZAH, HOGLAH, MAHLAH, MILCAH, AND NOAH: Daughters of Zelophekhad, whose suit to inherit their father's land in the absence of sons is granted, setting a precedent for daughters' inheritance

COZBI: Midianite woman, whose amorous liaison with an Israelite results in both their deaths by Aaron's grandson Pinkhas

SHE'ILAH, THE ONE-WHO-IS-DEMANDED: Daughter of Jephthah, who sacrifices her in fulfillment of a foolish vow (unnamed in the Book of Judges, named by the Rabbis)

HANNAH RACHEL, THE MAID OF LUDOMIR: The only woman hasidic rebbe, who wore tallit and tefillin and preached to her hasidim through an open doorway leading into the synagogue

We are your community, your ancestors, your rabbis. Come study with us our holy Book!