

Introduction

*I sing, I sing,
until the lands
sing to each other.*

—MURIEL RUKEYSER, “MIRIAM: THE RED SEA”

Miriam’s song has become an increasingly important theme at women’s seders over the past thirty years. Earlier women’s haggadahs from the 1970s and 1980s, such as *The Telling* and the *San Diego Women’s Haggadah*, scarcely mention Miriam’s song, while newer haggadahs, such as *The Journey Continues*, make it a focal point. One recently published haggadah even draws on this image for its title: *The Dancing with Miriam Haggadah*. For many women, singing Miriam’s song at the seder, in one of its contemporary renditions, is a highlight of the event. Numerous poems and readings in recent women’s haggadahs take Miriam’s song as their subject. What accounts for the widespread interest in the idea of Miriam’s song?

It is often pointed out that while Moses begins his song in the first person singular—“I will sing to the Lord, for the Lord has triumphed gloriously”—Miriam begins in the second person plural: “Sing (all of you) to the Lord, for the Lord has triumphed gloriously,” calling our attention to the fact that Miriam invites the other women to join her song. Significantly, then, Miriam did not sing alone at the shores of the

sea. Her song was not the song of a lone prophet, but the simultaneous, spontaneous outpouring of all the women who went forth from Egypt.

In the interpretation of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who lectured on this topic in 1992, this song was a “female version” of the two songs sung at the sea:

Actually, there are two versions of the Song at the Sea—a male version and a female version. After Moses and the Children of Israel sang their song, “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and dances. And Miriam called to them: “Sing to God, for He is most exalted; horse and rider He cast in the sea. . . .”¹

The women, he suggests, possessed a unique understanding of both slavery and liberation—one that needed to be expressed to make complete our people’s song at the sea.

And yet, Miriam’s song itself appears truncated and incomplete as it is recorded in the Torah. It is, after all, only two short verses: “Sing to God, for God is most exalted, horse and rider God cast in the sea. . . .” Indeed, this song is not really a song at all, but rather a call—an invitation—to sing!

Perhaps this is the power of Miriam’s song for our own day. It hints at the idea of a collective women’s song yet to be fully expressed. As women, as feminists, we have made enormous strides; we have achieved unprecedented levels of access and participation for women in Jewish life. But the task now in front of us is to hear the diverse and robust voices of Jewish women, to think about what they sound like and what they contribute, to imagine a Judaism that truly reflects the wisdom and vitality of the entire Jewish people. This is the promise of Miriam’s song. It is up to us, as it will be up to our daughters, to carry on what Miriam began when she first lifted her tambourine and invited the women to add their voices to the song of our people.

The Women’s Seder Sourcebook is one contemporary expression of Miriam’s song. It gathers the voices of more than a hundred women in the form of readings, personal and creative reflections, commen-

taries, blessings, and ritual suggestions for the Passover seder. It is a resource for women's and feminist seders as well as family and communal seders, for all women and men planning their own seders and creating their own haggadahs.

Among the sources included here are texts from unpublished women's haggadahs created by campus Hillels, chapters of Jewish women's organizations, federations, congregations, and individual women. Until now, these important texts have remained, for the most part, in the filing cabinets and attics of their creators. Here they are made available to a wider community. *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* also collects some of the most interesting and powerful reflections found in the small number of published women's haggadahs.

The vast majority of writings, however, are original pieces solicited from individual women whose perspectives are essential to our evolving understanding of Passover. What new insights do our female rabbis and Judaic scholars such as Lynn Gottlieb, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Ellen Frankel, and Susannah Heschel offer on the texts of the haggadah and the Book of Exodus? What wisdom does a Supreme Court Justice—Ruth Bader Ginsburg—have to share about the pursuit of justice and *tikkun olam*? What challenges and perspectives do brave Jewish activists such as Naomi Klein, Eve Ensler, and Ruth Messinger contribute to the seder table? What new language do our poets—Marge Piercy, Alicia Suskin Ostriker, and Maxine Kumin—give us for the telling? How do our policy makers such as congresswomen Barbara Boxer and Jan Schakowsky understand revolution, liberation, and leadership?

Equally important are other authors' attempts to discover how women's personal experiences shed light on the central ideas of the holiday. In this volume, a recovering anorexic guides us to a new understanding of "Let All Who Are Hungry Come and Eat." A breast cancer survivor teaches us how to appreciate our blessings even in the most difficult situations through a reflection on the meaning of *Dayeinu*. An adoptive mother sheds new light on the courage and character of Pharaoh's daughter.

When Miriam stood at the shores of the sea, she invited *all* of the women to join in expressing their praise and joy. In this spirit, *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* collects the voices of women from a wide variety of fields and backgrounds, who contribute their perspectives on the texts and themes of Passover. This volume reflects and furthers a dialogue among contemporary Jewish women and offers women's seder participants a sense of the larger community that joins them—metaphorically—at the seder table. We hope it will enhance the possibilities for future women's seders as it dramatically expands the range of perspectives brought to bear on the Passover story and the seder experience. Moreover, we hope it will offer families and communities a way to bring women's voices to their seder tables.

What new insights do these diverse women offer? What new questions do they bring to the seder table? As we return to the seder each year, let us listen closely for what they might teach us about the sound of Miriam's song. For what was true at the shores of the sea is true today. When Jewish women raise their voices, they make a vital contribution to our people's song. May we, like Muriel Rukeyser's Miriam, continue to sing until the lands sing to one another.

How to Use This Book

In recent decades, American Jews have increasingly chosen to create their own unique materials for the Passover seder. Whether compiling a haggadah from scratch or supplementing an existing one, individuals preparing for a family or women's seder often incorporate readings from a variety of haggadahs as well as sources from other contexts.

From this project's outset, we have aimed to support this emerging trend. It is an extremely rewarding process for those who undertake it, offering an educational experience that stretches individuals to think critically about their seders. It reflects a growing sense that one can—and should—take an active role in shaping one's own Jewish religious experiences. It allows for the kind of creativity that keeps the seder fresh and relevant each year. In addition, this openness to adapting, supplementing, and creating anew has facilitated the introduction of feminist innovations and women's voices into the Passover seder.

Building on this phenomenon, we have collected in this source-book more than two hundred rituals, readings, commentaries, and blessings for the seder. The materials here do not constitute a complete haggadah, and, of course, far more materials are included in this volume than could possibly be incorporated into a single seder. As the reader, you will be introduced to an incredible range of perspectives

and will choose the questions, ideas, and voices you would like to bring to the seder table each year.

Organization of *The Women's Seder Sourcebook*

The Women's Seder Sourcebook is organized according to the order of the seder. Each chapter of the book is devoted to a particular section of the seder and has two parts: a short introduction and a selection of readings and rituals.

The introduction to the section provides accessible and vivid background information on the particular part of the seder. It also gives an overview of how this aspect of the Passover ritual has been reinterpreted in a feminist context. Whether you wish to orient yourself before attending a seder or refresh your knowledge before leading one, the introductions will provide you with a concise and useful resource. In addition, because the introductions discuss the variety of ways in which women's seders have approached this aspect of the ritual, women's seder organizers may wish to refer to them when making their planning decisions.

The sources constitute the heart of each chapter and include readings, commentaries, blessings, and rituals. Each chapter features a diverse array of perspectives and interpretations. In some cases, these materials serve as substitutes for traditional passages of the haggadah; in other cases, they are intended to be used as supplements to the traditional text. Offering new interpretations and insightful commentaries, the sources can also be read at leisure as part of your preparation for the holiday.

We have placed each reading or ritual into a section of the seder where it can be used so that you are able to easily incorporate these sources into your seder. Indeed, most of the pieces included in this volume focus on a particular part of the seder. However, because the same themes, symbols, and questions are addressed in a variety of ways throughout the haggadah, some of the readings could be incorporated at different points during the ritual. Sections that include several such pieces are Reflections on Preparing for Passover in "Opening the Seder,"

Reflections on Feminine God Language in “Candlelighting,” Readings on the Women of Exodus in “Go Forth and Learn,” and Readings on the Holocaust in “Elijah’s Cup.” We encourage you to incorporate these pieces wherever you feel they will most enhance your seder.

How to Use *The Women’s Seder Sourcebook*

Depending on your particular needs, you may want to use the book in any of the following ways:

If you are creating a haggadah for a women’s or family seder, we recommend that you take some time, well in advance of the seder, to sit down with a haggadah, *The Women’s Seder Sourcebook*, and any additional secondary sources you might like to include in your seder. Spend some time familiarizing yourself with the materials in front of you. If you are unfamiliar with the traditional haggadah, plan to devote time to reading and learning during this process. You may review *The Women’s Seder Sourcebook’s* introductions on each part of the haggadah to get some concise background of the seder. For more extensive information, we recommend Ron Wolfson’s thorough and accessible *Passover: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* (Jewish Lights Publishing).

Next, begin to make decisions about the haggadah you would like to create. We suggest that you follow the traditional framework of the seder—which, after all, means “order.” For each section of the seder, you will need to decide whether you would like to simply include the haggadah’s traditional text or whether you would prefer to replace or supplement this text with a more creative reading.

If you are hosting a seder and want to add some new readings to your haggadah, begin by briefly reviewing the haggadah you plan to use. In addition, take a bit of time to think about the new ideas and information you would like your seder to include. What unaddressed topics, missing voices, or important insights would you like to incorporate or give more emphasis to? For example, would you like to tell the stories of the women of Exodus in greater depth? Include readings

written by contemporary Jewish women? Offer the option of feminine God language in a blessing? Address a particular political or social issue? Have more discussion or participatory components?

If you are short on time or are overwhelmed by the prospect of looking through the entire haggadah to make these choices, simply turn to *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* and select a few favorite readings to supplement the haggadah.

If you are preparing to be a participant at a family or women's seder, there are several different ways to use this book. You may read through some of the materials in order to mark your favorite readings and share them at the seder. Or bring *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* with you and follow along in the book as the group proceeds through the seder, adding a new idea or reading a piece as you come across it.

If you do not wish to introduce new materials to the seder, read from *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* in advance of the seder in order to bring new questions, insights, or interpretations from your reading to the discussion at the seder table.

Beyond these practical applications, reading the materials in advance of the seder will enrich your experience of the holiday. If you have attended seders throughout your life, this book will offer you an array of new perspectives and ideas. If this is your first seder, it serves as a vibrant, engaging introduction to the rituals of the seder and their rich meanings.

Two things to keep in mind when using readings from *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* at the seder:

- Be respectful of copyrights and the requirement for permission (see p. iv) before copying material, and be careful to cite the author of the piece as well as *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* in any work you use from the volume. To find the original sources of previously published readings and rituals, refer to the permissions list at the end of the book (pp. 325–28).
- Responsive readings can work wonderfully at the seder, drawing each guest into an active role in reading the hag-

gadah. We encourage you to read some of these pieces responsively at your seder, marking the parts for the leader and the group yourself.

Finding Rituals and Readings in *The Women's Seder Sourcebook*

There are several different ways to locate specific readings:

- If you would like to incorporate a ritual or reading for a particular part of the seder, refer to the table of contents to find the chapter of *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* focusing on that part of the seder and select a favorite reading from that section.
- If you would like to feature the voice of a particular woman, refer to the index by author.
- If you would like to include a reading on a particular topic, biblical figure, or feminist issue, refer to the topical index.

It is our hope that *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* will be a useful resource for its readers for many Passovers and that it will guide you in taking an increasingly active role in shaping a meaningful seder.