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MIRIAM'S OASIS

*David Nimmer**

On the seventh day of the holiday of Passover, Jews read the Torah portion¹ celebrating Moses' Song of the Sea.² The passage ends with a parallel chant raised by his sister:³

- ²⁰ And Miriam the prophetess,
the sister of Aaron, took a
timbrel in her hand; and all
the women went out after
her with timbrels and with
dances.
- ²¹ And Miriam answered
them,
Sing ye to the LORD,
for he hath triumphed
gloriously;
the horse and his rider
hath he thrown into
the sea.
- (ב) ותקח מרים הנביאה אֶת־הַתִּמְרָל בְּיָדָהּ
וְכָל־הַנְּשִׂיִם אַחֲרֶיהָ
בָּתִּפְּסִים וּבַמְּחֹלֹת:
- (כא) וַתַּעַן לַיהוָה מִרְיָם נְשִׂירָו
לִיקוּקֹךָ כִּי־גָאַה גְּאַה סוּס
וְרֹכְבּוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם: ס

* © 2018 by David Nimmer. Profound thanks to Rabbi Joel Zeff for working through various sources with the author, and for additional comments from Avivah Zornberg, Steven Voth, Robert Smith, Gary Linder, and Menachem Mendel Cohen. My gratitude as well to Dean Harry Ballan and Prof. Samuel Levine for the kind invitation to lecture at Touro Law School in early 2018.

¹ *Exodus* 13:17-15:26. All English translations of the Bible herein derive from the original King James version, in recognition of its literary prowess and effect on Anglophone culture across the centuries.

² The song itself occupies *Exodus* 15:1-18.

³ The passage that follows begins with *Exodus* 15:20. For reasons set forth *infra* note 20 and accompanying text, it includes the final verse of chapter 15, even though the reading for the seventh day of Passover omits verse 27.

- 22 So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. (כב) ויִסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַּר־שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת־יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם:
- 23 And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. (כג) וַיָּבֹאוּ מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתֹּת מַיִם מִמָּרָה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרְאָה שְׁמָהּ מָרָה:
- 24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? (כד) וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר מַה־נִּשְׁתֶּה:
- 25 And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, (כה) וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־יְקֹוֹק וַיֹּרְהוּ יְקֹוֹק עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שָׁם לֹךְ חָק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִסָּהוּ:
- 26 And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee. (כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָע לְקוֹל אֲלֹהֶיךָ וְהִיִּשְׁרָבְעִינִי תַעֲשֶׂה וְהִאֲזִינָה לְמִצְוֹתָיו וְשָׁמְרָתָּ כָּל־חֻקָּיו כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הַאֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא־אֲשִׁים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק רַפְאֵי: ס

²⁷ And they came to Elim,
where were twelve wells of
water, and threescore and
ten palm trees: and they
encamped there by the
waters.⁴

(כז) וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵילָמָה וְשָׁם שְׁתַּיִם
עֶשְׂרֵה עֵינֹת מַיִם וְשִׁבְעִים
תְּמָרִים וַיַּחֲנוּ-שָׁם עַל-
הַמַּיִם:

Who is this featured singer? It is important to focus on both her name and her title: “Miriam the prophetess.” About the particulars of her appellation, more will be developed later. First, though, consider her title. Although a number of individuals prophesy throughout the Five Books of Moses, only a single individual within the Torah merits the title of *prophet*—namely, this particular instance.⁵ The Hebrew term for prophet, in essence, denotes one gifted with speech.⁶ Miriam is therefore the quintessential person to raise her voice.⁷

The Hebrew of our passage is beautiful and poetic throughout. First, it valorizes Miriam as the celebrant of the Israelite’s victory. But then, trouble brews as the ill-fated wells of Marah appear. Without sufficient water to drink, a rebellion threatens to break out. But Moses solves the issue by throwing the right piece of wood into the water, rendering it potable. We then receive a harbinger of the Giving of the Law, with all its therapeutic power—and in marked contrast to the Egyptian diseases left behind.⁸ Finally, the scene ends at a place marked by abundant healing water (twelve springs) with even more abundant healing wood (seventy palm trees).

⁴ *Exodus* 15:20-27.

⁵ In verse 20 quoted above, the Hebrew actually calls her “prophetess.” But whether as *navi* or *n'viah* (masculine and feminine, respectively), the only person throughout the entire Torah to warrant the label is this solitary instance involving Miriam.

⁶ Thus, the Torah records, “And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.” *Exodus* 7:1. Moses was a stutterer, so Aaron became his spokesperson. The intent here is not that Aaron will bring an independent source of revelation denied his brother, but rather that he is the mouthpiece for them both.

⁷ Earlier in the Song of the Sea, the males sing. There, the text records that “Moses and the children of Israel sang this song unto the LORD.” *Exodus* 15:1 (emphasis added). In our verse, by contrast, the soprano has a solo: “Miriam answered them.” *Exodus* 15:21 (emphasis added).

⁸ What is the Egyptian disease? Avivah Zornberg delivered a beautiful speech last year at UCLA Hillel dedicated to my mother’s memory, in which she analyzed it psychologically as being a “sealed self” totally shut out from all human intercourse. Elsewhere, she characterizes it as a “basic indisposition to listen . . . a fantasy of total control, without entry or exit.” AVIVAH GOTTLIEB ZORNBERG, *THE PARTICULARS OF RAPTURE: REFLECTIONS ON EXODUS 108* (2001).

Let us start with those last elements. The people feared death from thirst, to which the solution was water. The Talmud⁹ explains that water represents Torah, quoting Isaiah's admonition "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters,"¹⁰ namely "come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live."¹¹ The "water" is identified with what comes from the mouth of God, slaking spiritual thirst.¹²

What are those twelve wells and seventy palms? The midrash quotes Rabbi Elazar haModa'i explaining that when God created the universe, He designated these twelve wells in honor of each tribe of Israel, along with a palm tree in honor of each of the seventy sages—therefore, the text's reference to "camping by the waters" teaches that they busied themselves at Marah in the teachings of Torah that were imparted to them there.¹³

That Torah is a powerful agent, capable of great things in the right hands—or the opposite. The Talmud quotes the verse "This is the Torah that Moses placed" (*asher sam Moshe*).¹⁴ The verb for *placed* is a homonym for *drug*, thus allowing Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi to explicate it as: "If you are worthy, it is a drug of life; if not, a drug of death."¹⁵

That explication is highly relevant to our passage. Although the above verses mostly deal with bitterness (a theme to be discussed at length below), there is one aspect that shows the opposite. In verse 25, Moses makes the water sweet by throwing the right wood into it. The language used to express that thought is evocative, repeating the same word with a vocalic variation: *sam sham* (he placed there). That phrase emphasizes the subject word even more forcefully than the alternative verse (*asher sam Moshe*) that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi

⁹ T.B. Baba Qama 71b. Note that T.B. refers to the Talmud Bavli, *i.e.* the Babylonian Talmud (as distinguished from the Jerusalem Talmud).

¹⁰ *Isaiah* 55:1. This verse follows Isaiah's statement that "all your children are learned of God and great is the peace of your children," which I have previously explicated. See David Nimmer, *Copyright in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Authorship and Originality*, 38 HOUS. L. REV. 1, 126-27 (2001).

¹¹ *Isaiah* 55:3.

¹² *Isaiah* 55:10-11.

¹³ Mechilta 15:27. The midrash closely follows the text—the verse immediately before encampment at Elim requires that you "give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes." *Exodus* 15:26.

¹⁴ *Deuteronomy* 4:44.

¹⁵ T.B. Yoma 72b.

explicated. In our passage, it is indeed a drug of life when properly imbibed, and one that can provide a cure for the Egyptian disease.¹⁶

As beautiful as the poetry is, some of its text seems so redundant as to cry out for explication. Consider verse 23—the Hebrew repeats versions of the word *marah* (bitter) no less than four times: “They came to Bitter (*maratah*) and they could not drink water from bitterness (*mimarah*) for they were bitter (*marim*); and thus they called its name Bitter (*marah*).”¹⁷ In addition, the word for water (*mayim*) is a near match for bitter (*marim*), differing by only one letter.

The explanation for the redundancy may inhere in a homonym. By the time we reach the third instance in that verse (*marim*), the attentive reader will recall seeing that same word already—for it is spelled exactly the same as the name of the songstress who initiated the chapter. We now return to the name (as opposed to the title) of “Miriam the prophetess.”¹⁸ Her name has appeared twice already, in verses 20 and 21. Aggregating the four instances of “bitter” in verse 23, we now have six variations in the same chapter of one root.

It is a familiar trope that the composition of Biblical texts is marked by seven-fold repetitions.¹⁹ So, to follow classical format, we still need to locate one “missing” instance in this chapter. Careful investigation can unearth exactly what we are seeking. It appears in the last verse, which also sets forth the word “water” twice.²⁰ That repetition of the near match for Miriam’s name signals that the game is afoot. Indeed, our quarry shows up precisely in the form of the palm trees (*t’marim*). That word reflects a repetition of the exact root needed as the seventh instance—it is composed of none other than the word *marim* with a single letter (*tav*) as a prefix.²¹ (We return at the end to the significance of that prefix.)

¹⁶ That disease represents the fantasy of total self-sufficiency; it is a form of deafness, hermetic separation from others. By contrast, those who are willing to *listen* to the expertise of doctors have a far higher likelihood of being cured. See ZORNBERG, *supra* note 8.

¹⁷ *Exodus* 15:23.

¹⁸ Both words are spelled identically: *mem-resh-yod-‘ayin*. Only their vocalization differs, thus yielding the pronunciations *miriam* and *marim*.

¹⁹ See NEHAMA LEIBOWITZ, *STUDIES IN DEVARIM* 312 (1980).

²⁰ See *supra* note 3.

²¹ Gedaliyahu Oren has similarly noticed that the name Miriam is related to water and bitterness—and is elaborated in the word for palm trees as well. See KOLECH, <http://www.old.kolech.org.il/maamar/מריה-של-מררים/> (last visited Sept. 23, 2018).

So Miriam emerges as the key figure here.²² But first we need to explain why, if she is so life-sustaining, Miriam's name is cognate with *bitterness*? Abarbanel explains that her name derives from the time of her birth, at which point the Egyptians were already embittering the lives of the Israelites.²³ Her role was predestined to sweeten exile by drawing redemption from healing water.²⁴

Indeed, she is identified as the source of water throughout her life—so much so, that when she dies,²⁵ the text announces that the water stops²⁶ and the whole congregation complains “neither is there any water to drink.”²⁷ As Rashi explains, “from here we know that the whole forty years, they had the well due to the merit of Miriam.”²⁸

The events that transpire immediately after Miriam's death are the most telling. Just as we saw earlier at Marah, the people complain about lack of water and Moses is forced to act—but this time, Moses and Aaron lack their sister's moderating influence as the quintessential “voice” channeling the divine message of redemption. The key verse is as follows:

²² Of course, it is not only here that she plays a central role. A later book of the Bible elevates her, as a general matter, to parity with her brothers. “For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” *Micah* 6:4.

²³ Abarbanel to *Exodus* 2, https://www.sefaria.org/Abarbanel_on_Torah%2C_Exodus.2.1?lang=bi (last visited Sept. 23, 2018).

²⁴ Indeed, a venerable tradition credits her not only for tending to her baby brother Moses after Pharaoh's daughter found him in the Nile but for the very birth of Moses. In brief, Moses' parents divorced after the cruel decree that all male children of the Hebrews had to be thrown into the Nile, but Miriam remonstrated that her father was being even more cruel than Pharaoh. At that point, Amram and Yocheved remarried and Moses was conceived. *Exodus Rabbah* 1:13; T.B. Sotah 12a. (This explanation also accounts for the fact that the text could announce Yocheved's pregnancy with Moses (*Exodus* 2:1-2) directly following their marriage, even though an older sister existed from their “first” marriage.)

²⁵ *Numbers* 20:1.

²⁶ *Numbers* 20:2.

²⁷ *Numbers* 20:5.

²⁸ Rashi to *Numbers* 20:2. He follows the midrash here, which attributes the manna to Moses, the clouds of glory to Aaron, and the well to Miriam—so “when Miriam died, the well ceased.” *Shir haShirim Rabba* 4.

And Moses and Aaron
gathered the congregation
together before the rock,
and he said unto them,
Hear now, ye rebels; must
we fetch you water out of
this rock?²⁹

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת־
הַקְּהָל אֶל־פְּנֵי הַסֵּלֶעַ
וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׁמַעוּ־נָא
הַמְּרִים הַמִּן־הַסֵּלֶעַ הַזֶּה
נּוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם:

The sequel is little short of cataclysmic. Moses hits the rock with his staff,³⁰ and for that sin suffers the great punishment of his life.³¹ But our focus here is on his absent sister. Without her ability to convert bitterness into life-giving water, the brothers are lost. But the text deftly highlights her absence by subtly invoking her name, even after having just announced her demise. The charge against his faithless flock that Moses levies is to call them “the rebels,” *ha-morim*.

The orthography of that word is striking. To appreciate, first let us take a step backwards.³² The word for a single rebel is *moreh*. It can be spelled either *plene* (Latin “full,” corresponding to the Hebrew מלא) or *defectivo* (the opposite; Hebrew חסר). Elsewhere in the Bible, both usages are attested³³ for the singular of this word.³⁴ In

²⁹ *Numbers* 20:10.

³⁰ The action here superficially parallels that at Marah, in which Moses deploys wood for beneficial results. Yet Moses’ action here leads to dire results. See *infra* note 36 and accompanying text.

³¹ It is as if Moses has only a limited toolkit; as someone who is “slow of speech” (*Exodus* 4:10) he can only resort to his staff. The contrast is pronounced with his sister, “Miriam the prophetess,” defined by speech. Of course, no human being is perfect. Miriam herself committed one great sin, meriting punishment. The essence of her sin was “evil speech,” making her greatest failure consonant with her greatest strength. See *Numbers* 12:10; *Deuteronomy* 24:9.

³² It was noted previously regarding the passage from *Exodus* that the presence of the word *mayim*, a near match for the name *Miriam*, signaled that the game is afoot. Again here in *Numbers*, the same verse that discusses *ha-morim* ends with the word *mayim*.

³³ It always appears in the phrase referring to the rebellious son: *ben sorer u'moreh*. The occurrence is *plene* in *Deuteronomy* 21:18, then *defectivo* two verses later. It appears *plene* in *Jeremiah* 5:23 (actually referring to a rebellious “heart” rather than “son”), *defectivo* in *Psalms* 78:8.

³⁴ A famous explication of the *ben sorer u'moreh* comes in the Talmud, explaining that there has never been such a case and never will be, either—it appears in the Torah solely so that we will “expound it and receive a reward.” T.B. Sanhedrin 71a. Against that humanistic view, however, the pericope records Rabbi Jonathan’s claim, “I saw one and sat on his grave.” The passage then continues to invoke the Torah’s commandment to destroy an idolatrous city (in *Deuteronomy* 13:13-19) and similarly construes it as the null case brought forth solely for exegetical merit. Once again, Rabbi Jonathan defies the scholarly consensus: “I saw one and sat on its rubble.” *Id.*

principle, therefore, the Bible's only instance of using the plural *morim*³⁵ could have been spelled out fully here. That result would have made the word unambiguous, referring exclusively to "rebels." In fact, however, the shorter form is used. The result, therefore, is to render the word polysemous: *mem-resh-yod-ayin* corresponds to the precise spelling for *Miriam*.

The lesson seems clear. At Marah, there was a shortage of water leading to a rebellion. Miriam raised her voice in song, transforming bitter into sweet and thereby restoring harmony. When parallel events later unfolded after Miriam's passing, the bitter remained stuck in the craw of the people, causing their rebellion to burst forth. Without Miriam's modulating influence, Moses' only resort was to his stick—the greatest failing of his life, for which he suffered the ultimate punishment of not being able to enter the Promised Land.³⁶

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav takes the matter even further. Noting the same isomorphism just remarked between *morim* and *Miriam*,³⁷ he posits that disagreement and rebellion arise in any generation only when it lacks a supreme authority, whose Torah is rooted in "coals of fire" and whose fervor therefore reaches the divine source.³⁸ With breathtaking theological boldness, he identities the quintessential lawgiver after the revelation on Mount Sinai as Miriam herself, rather than her brother!³⁹ In this account, her death in the Wilderness of Zin⁴⁰ finds its origin in the root meaning of that place

The sheer improbability of one person witnessing two unrelated and fantastically rare phenomena may point to Rabbi Jonathan's claims being adduced for comic relief. When one reflects that Rabbi Jonathan was a member of the priestly class who was not permitted to make himself ritually impure by sitting on a grave (or, arguably, on the *tel* of a massacred town), the supposition becomes even stronger. (When making my way through that tractate, I wrote to the editor of the ArtScroll Sanhedrin volume to pose my theory that Rabbi Jonathan was a prankster. He wrote back with kind words about my textual acuity, but nonetheless firmly rejected any imputation of levity percolating into the Talmudic back-and-forth.)

³⁵ It is a *hapax legomenon*, whether with or without the initial definite article. See SOLOMON MANDELKERN, *VETERIS TESTAMENTI CONCODANTIAE* 702 (1896).

³⁶ It may seem at first blush that Moses' staff, given to him by God Himself as a tool to defeat Pharaoh's magicians, is an object of praise. On deeper inspection, however, the staff's transformation into a snake carries shades of the deceitful serpent from the Garden of Eden. See ZORNBERG, *supra* note 8, at 28. Much higher than reliance on a staff is reliance on words alone.

³⁷ *Likkutey Moharan* 20:1. I thank Aviva Zornberg for the reference to this source.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Numbers* 20:1.

name as *coldness*,⁴¹ thus simultaneously connecting her death with the end of the well (of Torah)⁴² and the extinguishing of the generation's hot coals (also of Torah).⁴³

The final matter to address is the last destination, Elim. In case we missed its importance the first time, the Torah later summarizes the journey by repeating all the details.⁴⁴ What is its significance? Why emphasize the twelve wells and seventy date palms there? One commentator uses numerology to offer an explanation.⁴⁵ In particular, the *gematria* of Elim is 82⁴⁶—which is the sum of 70 + 12. Under this view, the place name derives from the total number of wells and palms gathered there.⁴⁷

I would like to pose a more thematic explanation. The Song of the Sea represents the final blow to Pharaoh, the last gasp of the Egyptian exile. Still, as stirring as the celebration is, it is only the prelude to full national identity. Two steps still need to occur after the Exodus, namely the Giving of the Law and the Entry into the Land. Wonderfully, verse 27 provides the pivot that incorporates all three.

(1) As just noted, the Song of the Sea represents the culmination of Exile. The journey shortly thereafter to Elim is emblematic of the dawn of national liberation from slavery.

(2) As previously observed, the essence of Elim is the wells and date palms located there. We have already seen that those wells are equated with Torah—as the text makes explicit in the previous verse's rewards that will come “if you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his

⁴¹ See WILLIAM L. HOLLADAY, A CONCISE HEBREW AND ARAMAIC LEXICON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT 308 (1971) (first definition of *Zina*).

⁴² Rabbi Nachman adds the gloss that the word *b'er* (well) is related to the word *bi'ur* (explication [of Torah]).

⁴³ *Likkutey Moharan* 20:1. In other words, after her “fiery coals” of Torah can no longer assure uniform interpretation, dissension results and “the rebels” thus rise to the fore.

⁴⁴ “And they removed from Marah, and came unto Elim: and in Elim were twelve fountains of water, and threescore and ten palm trees; and they pitched there.” *Numbers* 33:9.

⁴⁵ See Keli Yakar to *Numbers* 33:9.

⁴⁶ Actually, its letters total 81; but if we add the one word itself to the sum (which is itself a recognized device of standard *gematria*), we reach 82.

⁴⁷ *Id.* (also invoking *Ezekiel* 17:13). Of course, a host of other interpretations have arisen. The Ba'al Shem Tov offers that (a) the word Elim is an anagram of the initial letters of the phrase *יעקב אבינו לא מת* (Our father Jacob never died), meaning that Torah is timeless and (b) 70 represents the numerical value of *סוד* (secret), meaning that they perceived the esoteric mysteries of the Torah there, not simply its more obvious levels. See Degel Makhane Efraim on Parshat Masey.

commands and keep all his decrees.”⁴⁸ We therefore have a harbinger of the Theophany that is soon to come.

(3) Thus, the only ingredient that is needed to fulfill the complete promise to the fleeing slaves of achieving nationhood is the Land of Israel. It is here that we switch to the date palms. The territory across the Jordan River that the wandering exiles from Egypt will ultimately inherit is known as a “land of milk and honey.”⁴⁹ Though, in our mind, that latter reference may conjure up bees, the biblical intent was different—it had in mind “dates that make honey.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, the presence of seventy date palms at Elim presages the later entry into the Land, making the invocation complete.

We now see that verse 27 brings together at Elim all three elements of the Israelites’ redemption. But our key word *t’marim* accomplishes much more here. As previously noted, it is composed of the word *marim* with the letter *tav* prefixed. It therefore can be taken to reference bitterness, as we have seen above, multiplied by that letter.

Sticking to *gematria*, the value of *tav*, which is the last letter of the alphabet, is four hundred. We therefore see that the Song of the Sea, closely followed by the journey into Elim, marks the close to an era mathematically described as:

bitter x 400

Where does that formula lead us?

The Torah’s first intimation of the Egyptian exile came to Abraham, before he even changed his name: “And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years.”⁵¹ From the outset, therefore, four hundred years of bitterness were decreed for the people. The Song of the Sea celebrates the end of that long national nightmare.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Exodus* 15:26.

⁴⁹ *Exodus* 13:5.

⁵⁰ Targum Yonatan to *Deuteronomy* 8:8. See T.B. Brakhot 41b. As to both *Exodus* 13:5 and *Deuteronomy* 26:2, Rashi interprets the honey with reference to *t’marim* (and in the former case with reference to figs as well).

⁵¹ *Genesis* 15:13.

⁵² The Passover Haggadah cites that verse with the explanation that God “anticipated the end” at Abram’s Covenant of the parts.

שְׁהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא הִשָּׁב אֶת הַקֶּץ, לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּמוֹ שְׂאֵמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ בְּבְרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים
That passage implicates an additional numerical anomaly, somewhat off-track from the instant investigation. Despite the pre-exile prediction that it was destined to last 400 years, a verse afterwards identifies the exile’s actual length as 430 years. *Exodus* 12:40. One solution is to count the 400 years as starting with the pre-exilic birth of Isaac, such that the exile in Egypt

The invocation of *tav-marim* perfectly accomplishes that reference. Hence, verse 27 employs the word *t'marim* to signal the end of the “four hundred” years of “bitterness.” That single word thus encodes an end to Exile at the same time as it connotes the giving of Torah and entry into the Land.

But let us not forget the chief alchemist who could transmute bitter to sweet.⁵³ More powerful than the staff is the voice.⁵⁴ That is why the passage above valorizes Miriam the prophet by referencing her name so explicitly. It begins with verses that list her name twice, then sets forth four instances containing the variant word that means bitterness. The capstone comes in the seventh instance,⁵⁵ namely as part of the *t'marim* that grew in Elim. Those date palms constitute Miriam's oasis, a perpetual reminder to her descendants that the ways of Torah are sweet and that, no matter how bitter the current plight, hope remains for drawing ultimate redemption from its healing waters.⁵⁶

itself endured for 210 years. Rashi *ad loc.* The key word for “end” used in the passage from the Haggadah quoted above is *ketz*, which has a numerical value of 190. Thus, in His mercy, God cut 190 years off in anticipation of the end, such that the intended 400-year exile actually ended after 210 years.

⁵³ See *infra* note 55 and accompanying text.

⁵⁴ The prophecy that Miriam speaks is the antithesis of the Egyptian disease, marked by deafness. See ZORNBERG, *supra* note 8.

⁵⁵ See *supra* note 32.

⁵⁶ To end on a mystical note, the Zohar teaches, “Whoever wants to enter the celestial spheres must be someone who can turn light into darkness and bitterness into sweet.” Zohar *hakdamah* p.4a.