Skin Deep: Scratching the Surface of Miriam in Numbers 12

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I’ve got you deep in the heart of me
So deep in my heart, that you’re really a part of me
I’ve got you under my skin

Frank Sinatra song

“What makes the desert beautiful,” said the little prince, “is that somewhere it hides a well. . .”

Antoine De Saint-Exupery

The Biblical story that most extensively explores the character of Miriam is also the one least visible in Jewish ritual life. Chapter 12 of the Book of Numbers tells the story of Miriam speaking with Aaron against their brother Moses. Two alternate versions are offered for the content of their conversation, alerting the reader to a redaction or splicing of different sources. In one, Miriam and Aaron are talking about a “Cushite woman” Moses married; in the other, they complain that they, too, deserve the right to speak directly to God. While what made their conversation so offensive to God is up for Midrashic and scholarly debate, what is clear to commentators is that Miriam is punished for her behavior. After receiving a scolding from God, her skin is turned mztoraat, leprous “as snow.” In a neat show of spiritual delegation, Aaron appeals to Moses on her behalf, and Moses prays to God to heal her with the brief and famous words El na refana la, “please, God, heal her now.” God orders Miriam to go outside the camp for seven days and the people wait for her to be healed before journeying on toward the Promised Land.

A story rife with the unsaid, in which source cutting and splicing leaves obvious gaps and hints of earlier textual traditions, begs questions. Most commentators and
feminist scholars focus on the initial part of the passage: What was Miriam talking about? Who was this Cushite woman? Speculating on this conversation allows feminists to hear Miriam as justified in her act, so that the punishment of leprosy can be critiqued as unjust and even sexist. Other scholars try to recreate the original stories of Miriam that have been lost to revive Miriam the prophetess, the leader, or even an earlier goddess associated with water. I choose to stay with the text itself. My analysis is equally motivated by literary curiosity and spiritual seeking; it requires me to accept the text as given to me and see what I can find at its core. What interests me most is not what Miriam said, but the story that gets played out silently but powerfully on her skin. Her relationship to God is much more compelling to me than her relationship to her brothers. In this exploration of Numbers 12, I read the injury to Miriam’s skin not as a punishment, but as a fascinating consequence of Miriam’s only encounter with the divine in the entire Torah. To better understand this incident, I need to go deeply into the text, searching below the surface for a depth of meaning.

My model for how to do this kind of literary work is, in fact, Miriam herself. In the midrash, each of the three siblings has his or her own miracle. Moses is connected to the cloud, to direct communication with the divine; Aaron is connected to manna, a sort of translation of the divine that becomes nourishment for the people, and Miriam is associated with the well. What does it mean to have this gift? Anyone who has ever traveled through the Sinai desert knows what an extraordinary gift this is. It would require a certain kind of careful attention that allows Miriam to find water hidden in the seemingly dry desert. She would need a heightened sense of hearing to hear water rushing below the surface, and an intensity of vision to see pools of water beneath the dust and sand. Most of all she would need a faith and a fascination with what lies beneath the surface of things. Perhaps it is that ability that gives her the courage to send Moses down the Nile to safely, when his death seemed impossible to escape, and the gift to celebrate the near-death experience of the entire people at the Red Sea. Miriam dwell in the realm of wells, she dwells in the deep.
I want to approach this text the way Miriam approaches the desert: to look and listen closely for what’s hidden inside, to crack the surface to discover what waters gush forth from within. As Miriam, in my imagination, scans the landscape for clues to the wells buried deep below the ground, I attempt here not to step away from the text, but to go down into it. Because I am concerned with the moment of Miriam’s intimacy with the divine, my narrow focus will be on what happens to her after the cloud leaves. I am not trying to rescue a lost story or provide theories of the life of the prophet Miriam. I want to find a story here, right here, below the surface of the text. My obsession is to look deeper, to see through, peeling back metaphors and laddering my way down the words and grammar of the text, seeking nourishing water in what appears to be a dry text. In making this journey I have to trust that under the dry papery surface of this story hides an untapped depth of words.

This analysis allows me to imagine a woman meeting God in an intimate way, to uncover/create the kind of direct, embodied spiritual experience I crave. What I am seeking is not a well, but the one who carries the well wherever she goes. The rabbis note that the well of Miriam is the only instance of the miracle of a traveling well. Why is the well so miraculous? It is not just that Miriam is attributed with the healing power to keep the Israelites alive on their long journey. The miracle, of course, is that the well traveled. A well gets its water from an underground spring; it is by definition land-locked, rooted in the ground. But Miriam’s well lifts and travels, a rock with the potential of water inside it when needed. Perhaps what is really being said here is that Miriam herself is the well. Not only does she have some special power to both see and listen carefully to find wells where others see only dry land and despair, but she herself carries within her a well of healing water, a spirit, a song, hidden within the traveling landscape of her body.

As best I can, I want to use Miriam’s skills to find Miriam herself, still buried in the text. My motivation is not unlike the Israelite’s need for water; in a landscape of text in which women rarely speak directly to the divine or vice versa, I am thirsty for those intimate moments. Rather than taking the story of Miriam as a gossip punished by God at
face value, I trust that there is another story speaking itself at a subterranean level, like an underground brook. My goal here is to listen as closely as I can.

Placing the story of Miriam’s leprosy in the context of her Biblical life reads like a Sesame Street game of “one of these things is not like the other.” Although the character of Miriam looms large in Jewish ritual life and imagination, her appearances in Biblical text are surprisingly sparse and rare. While her brothers Moses and Aaron have continuous narratives in the text of Exodus and Numbers, Miriam’s story seems to lie beneath the surface of text. At key moments, often alongside water, it rises to the top and we catch glimpses of who she is. Given how fully developed she is in both traditional and contemporary midrash, that Miriam is mentioned in narrative only four brief times in Exodus and Numbers comes as a bit of a shock. In the Book of Exodus, we catch glimpses of Miriam when she rescues her baby brother Moses from certain murder by the Egyptians by sending him down the Nile to safety, and when she leads the women in song and dance after crossing the Red Sea. In the Book of Numbers, an exchange between Miriam and Aaron regarding Moses leads to Miriam’s famous leprosy. Miriam is not mentioned again until a very brief record of her death.

The first two stories, celebrated and popularized through the Pesach seder, emphasize Miriam’s connection to water. Miriam’s death, too, is mentioned in conjunction with water, in this case, the lack of it. The recording of her death is bare bones: “Miriam died there and was buried there.” It is the line after that catches the rabbinic imagination, “And the people were thirsty.” Why does this immediately follow Miriam’s death? It is from this line that the midrash of the well is developed. Just after, Moses is ordered to speak to a rock and strikes it instead; is this the rock that traveled with Miriam in the desert? Or is it perhaps her burial place? After Miriam’s death, the Israelites themselves sing a song of the well to call forth water. Thus all three of these references to Miriam allude to water, its presence or its lack. The recent addition of Miriam’s cup to the Passover table, a cup of water signifying healing, recalls the well and highlights her watery gift.
The story in Numbers Chapter 12, then, is the thing that is not like the other. It is a remarkably “dry” text. Not only are there not allusions to water, but Miriam is punished rather than celebrated. And yet it is the most exciting text of them all. While the other Miriam stories show us her relationship to her brother, to women, and to the people, this is the only text that reveals anything about her relationship to God. Moreover, I would argue that this is the only Biblical text in which Miriam is the central figure. At the Nile river her heroic act sets in motion the life of her hero brother. And at the Red Sea she sings a song celebrating the exodus he led. The passage in Numbers 12 starts with Miriam and ends with Miriam. She is the one who receives the divine punishment or mark on her skin, and it is this tragedy on which the story turns, thus making her the hero, if a tragic one. While it is true that once again Miriam appears to be acting in order to demonstrate her brother’s heroic dominance, the story is remembered as Miriam’s. Ironically, it is the text in which Miriam’s watery, musical self is least visible in which she is most fully developed. If we are going to learn anything about who Miriam is, I believe we will learn it here.

In the Book of Numbers, God, named Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh or Adonai, appears as a “pillar of cloud” that guides the Israelites through the desert. The cloud interacts with Moses throughout; only in this chapter does God speak to Miriam and Aaron. This is a bit ironic, since the debate of the chapter seems to be about who has God’s ear, but the involvement of both cloud and voice make their experience of meeting God a visual, aural, and tangible one. “Adonai descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the opening of the tent and called, ‘Aaron and Miriam!’ and the two of them went out” (v. 5). God scolds the two and leaves. But in v. 10, perhaps because of the seamed redaction of this passage, the cloud departs a beat later. This allows for the impression that Aaron and Miriam were actually inside the cloud, enveloped by the presence as well as the voice of the divine.

What happens when the cloud leaves? It is in v. 10 that I begin to see hints that the landscape of this text is not as dry as it appears. The text states, “And the cloud turned aside from over the tent and suddenly there was Miriam afflicted with leprosy like snow.
Aaron turned to Miriam and there she was afflicted with leprosy.” The surface meaning of the text is understood as Miriam being punished with the skin disease of leprosy as a consequence of speaking out against Moses. But the text does not explicitly say this, and you would expect it to. Instead, the use of the word “hinei,” sometimes translated “behold!” or “look!” precedes the affliction. The word often suggests a sudden appearance; for example, it is used when the ram suddenly appears in the thicket at just the right moment in the akedah story. Putting aside everything I have been taught and reading with innocent eyes, the story only tells us that when the cloud departs, Miriam’s skin is miraculously transformed.

In my reading of the text, this is not a punishment at all, but a natural consequence of Miriam’s encounter with the divine cloud. One might argue that the word mtzoraat, leprous, stands in the way of such a reading. To be inflicted with such a terrible disease suggests a deliberate punishment on God’s part, even if it is not clearly articulated in the text. Out of this passage, a plethora of rabbinic midrash developed interpreting leprosy as a punishment for lashon hara, gossip. In fact, the rabbis take this further, understanding the Biblical leprosy as an allegorical teaching, rather than a real disease – some say the disease never actually existed. Leprosy spreads quickly like gossip; a person who gossips is isolated from the community. The truth is, we do not know exactly how to translate the word tzara; its association with leprosy is based on its symptoms. However, the Biblical plague also appears on the walls of houses. If tzara is a spiritual disease, and if we do not know exactly how to translate it, there is an opening here. While I use the standard translation of leprosy, the mysteriousness of the Hebrew word helps to neutralize the term. Something has happened to Miriam’s skin. We will have to look for clues in the text to understand what that is.

It may seem like a small point, but there is something odd about the repetition of V’hinei mtzoraat, “And look, there was Miriam struck with leprosy” (in the much slower English). The verse demonstrates the possibility threaded throughout the passage that its bumpy, redacted landscape creates a sensation that the story is told from three perspectives simultaneously, that of Moses/God, Aaron, and Miriam. In this verse, the
first appearance of leprosy seems to reflect Miriam’s own surprise (or perhaps the reader’s, or even God’s). The second sighting is clearly Aaron’s. In an interesting dance, as the cloud turns away, Aaron turns to Miriam, only then stunned by her leprous appearance. In this one sentence we get Miriam’s surprise at her own body’s transformation followed by Aaron’s horror. Using Miriam’s heightened sensitivity to watery depths, I notice that only one word distinguishes the first and second description of the leprosy. In the first description, attributed to no one and therefore the sort of reader/God’s eye view of the text, Miriam is stricken with leprosy “like snow.” Aaron, apparently, does not see that. What is its significance? Obviously the word may simply come to describe the appearance of the disease, suggesting that Miriam’s skin has turned white. Many commentators focus on this both because it has the appearance of a medical description of the disease and because of its wholly metaphorical implications: the white contrasts neatly with the implied dark skin of the Cushite woman.

If snow is a metaphor, what is being compared? Is it only color? The text does not say white as snow, so the metaphor provides an opportunity to explore below the surface. Let us take a moment to play with the strange and isolated metaphor that accompanies our first awareness of Miriam’s condition. Snow is white, yes, a color suggesting disease/death but also purity. But focusing on color conceals the surprise of such a metaphor in the middle of the desert! Snow, after all, is a form of water. Here we have the first hint of Miriam’s watery nature in the first Miriam story that does not appear next to a body of water. If we take this metaphor of snow and harden it into a more literal image, perhaps “snow” is what happens when the fiery cloud of the divine meets the watery depths of Miriam, separated only by a thin layer of skin. The cloud itself is paradoxical; the God of Mt. Sinai is fiery and smoky, and the cloud seems to attach itself to the element of fire. But, by definition, a cloud is formed by moisture. Not being a science person myself, I looked it up. A cloud is a “visible mass of water or ice particles in the atmosphere from which rain and other forms of precipitation fall.” In a mystical, paradoxical way, snow makes sense as a consequence of the divine cloud, which perhaps mirrors Miriam’s inner well the way that the words heaven, shamayim, and water, mayim,
reflect one another. The rabbis understood that what occurred in Genesis was a separation of the upper and lower waters. *Shamayim is mayim*, water, with the fiery, sizzling letter “shin” attached to it. (Moshe himself, associated with the cloud and rescued by the Nile, has both these letters in his name, while Miriam’s name is pure water.)

This snowy skin, then, may not be a punishment as much as a souvenir, a tattoo marking the intimate and dangerous moment of Miriam and God, well and cloud, meeting for the first and only time. I see Miriam’s wound as a strangely neutral consequence of such intimate contact with the divine. Two very different elements meet and merge – smoke/fire and water. What happens to that thin divider of skin between them? It gets burned, stripped away. But the metaphor is snow, which is wet. It is unique to Miriam, a residue of a watery encounter. This provides a new explanation as to why Miriam was afflicted and Aaron was not. After all, they were both called to the opening of the tent and scolded for their behavior. One traditional explanation is that she is assumed to be the chief instigator in the conversation with Aaron, because the verb midaberet associated with the two speaking refers to her and therefore suggests emphasis. However, there are many examples in the Torah of this grammatical construct, and it need not mean that one party is more involved than the other in the action described. Another possibility, which I think is more valid, is that in the original text Aaron was also afflicted. Why else would he beg for help for both of them? But for the story we have here, that God’s voice somehow translates onto Miriam’s body tells us more about their elemental relationship than about Miriam’s guilt.

My reading of Miriam’s leprosy as something beautiful and precious, born of seeking intimate divine connections between Biblical women and God, seems in direct contrast with Aaron’s vivid description of Miriam’s plight. When Aaron begs Moses to pray on his and Miriam’s behalf, he implores, “Let her not be as one dead when coming out from his mother’s womb, with half his flesh eaten away.” This, of course, is a much different metaphor than snow. But it is important to note that that is what it is: a metaphor. While at first glance it seems to suggest that Miriam herself is half-dead, that the leprosy is somehow fatal, I do not read it this way. Rather, I read it as a description of

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what Aaron has witnessed on her skin. When Aaron sees what happens to Miriam, he is horrified. The image he describes is of an unnatural state, hovering between death and life. This fits with my understanding of Miriam’s situation – she is in the physical world and yet has been somehow touched by the divine, her surface skin stripped back to reveal the watery depths within. I am fascinated that, in this second metaphor for the leprosy, we again, have a very wet image: that of birth, of a child emerging from its mother’s womb. It seems to me that what Aaron cannot live with is the messiness of what has happened. The surface appearance of Miriam as an ordinary woman has been peeled off, which Aaron compares to a stillborn with “half his flesh eaten away.” Clear divisions between heaven and human, sky and water, have been breached. Aaron, the man who led the building of the golden calf, that neat, visible “god” with its smooth, shiny surface, is just not that good at depths. He is symbolic of the people’s lack of faith, their inability to trust in what they could not see when Moses was late coming down from the mountain.

Rather than feeling disgusted or horrified by Miriam’s half-dead skin, I felt, well, jealous. Miriam experiences an intimacy with the divine greater than even Moses – who sees Adonai’s back and even mirrors God’s light in his face, but does not wear the mark of his contact with God on his skin. My take on the story is that each character experiences the divine according to their own gifts and personalities. Miriam has a very close connection with nature. Her ability to see and draw forth water from the arid desert suggests a gift for “reading” the landscape and seeing beneath surfaces. I know I have to be careful about viewing the woman as the earth-mama here, but she does seem to have that kind of uniquely attentive and magical relationship with water throughout the text. Understanding Miriam this way, it is only “natural” that her too-close experience with the divine might leave its traces on her body. I am particularly fascinated by the play between depths and surfaces. Miriam, who seems to dwell best in what goes on beneath the appearances, who exists just under the story line, coming up for air at just a few brave and significant moments in Exodus and Numbers, has something happen to her skin. Her skin becomes equated for me with the rock Moses strikes rather than speaks to after her
death. Moses, like Aaron, does not trust in depths, does not know how to coax water with words. That is Miriam’s domain.

We have seen how the first two metaphors of our story, snow and stillbirth, can be broken open to reveal both literal and spiritual waters. But God, too, uses a metaphor, and it is a very challenging one. After Moses prays to God to heal Miriam, God responds in what appears to be a very cruel and shaming way: “Adonai said to Moses, If her father had just spit in her face, would she not be ashamed seven days? Shut her outside the camp seven days and after, gather her in.” God’s words seem to seal the deal that the leprosy was indeed a punishment. The metaphor compares Adonai to a father, and the leprosy to a father spitting in his daughter’s face. The only context we have in the Bible for this kind of spitting is actually of a woman spitting in the face of her late husband’s brother if he does not marry her. If not exactly a punishment, it is clearly an act in response to bad behavior. The image is harsh and dismissive. If a father’s mark of disapproval would require seven days of isolation from community, how much more so God’s? Although God is not exactly speaking in clear terms here, the exchange seems to suggest that God will go along with Moses’ request to heal Miriam, but rather than healing her “now,” the offense deserves a seven day healing.

Once again, I want to see if I can read more deeply into these words to reach a different level of understanding. To do this, I attempt to go deeply into the grammar, not necessarily to resolve the offensiveness of the text, but at least to complicate it. Traditionally, God’s strange metaphor is understood as a conditional clause. The “if” is implied because of the “ha’lo” to come. Within this grammatical construct, the infinitive absolute of yarak yarok, a doubling of the word spit, does not connote emphasis, as it usually does, but the conditional status of the metaphor, the if, then. However, there is a tiny opening for a different translation that still fits within the grammatical structure. In this alternative translation, the clause is not a metaphor at all. The vav at the beginning signifies that it refers back to what was just discussed, and I take that literally. When Adonai says “aviyah, her father, perhaps he is talking about himself. Without the conditional “if,” I can now understand the text as not a metaphor at all, and can translate
the infinitive absolute of *yarok yarak* as one of emphasis, referring to a really big “spitting.” Adonai, then, uses the word spit not as an insult, but as a descriptor, following Miriam’s snow and Aaron’s stillbirth. And, once again, the description is wet. Spitting, then, might refer to what happens when the cloud merges with Miriam’s skin. The encounter is not dry, as we might imagine the peeling skin of a leper, but damp, like rain. This image works well because the word spit refers both to saliva, liquid, and to fire.

In order to make this translation work, I re-translated two other words in the sentence. While it is traditionally translated that the father spit “in her face,” I read the word *b’paneah* as “in her presence,” a valid translation that neutralizes the experience. Lastly, I look creatively at what I see as the most difficult word in the text, *tikalem*, be ashamed. It didn’t look like an easy word to get around. In the Biblical lexicon, all the definitions turned on elements of shaming, humiliation, and dishonor. To be “confounded” was not bad – suggesting confusion more than shame. What interested me most was the source of the word. It’s original meaning was either “wound” or “speak with/converse with.” It thus seems to have morphed into a word meaning “to wound through words,” in other words, to humiliate. But I love this idea of wounding through words, because this is precisely what I have been describing: that Miriam wears a sort of tattoo of God’s voice on her skin. In my translation, I reinvoke that lost resonance to hear Miriam’s leprosy as a “wound” caused by this intimate “conversation”, with Adonai, not unlike the wound to Jacob’s thigh in his wrestling with the angel. In my radical rereading of the verse, what I would call a “depth” reading, it goes like this: “Adonai said to Moses, Her Father spit forcefully in her presence, should she not be wounded seven days?” Obviously, this translation required some stretching of grammar, and going so deep into the meaning of words that I bypassed conventional meanings for original sources. My translation is not the “best” one for plain meaning. However, it does allow this underlying story of a close encounter between Miriam and God to be told in a new way, without having to pretend like difficult pieces of the text, such as this one, are not there. I am happy that I could find a way to go into the text rather than around it.
While we hear a negative connotation with the word “spit,” there is not much distance between spit and a kiss. In the Midrash, the rabbis argue that Miriam, like Moses and Aaron, died in a kiss from God. They then ask, why didn’t Miriam receive a divine kiss when she died? The response is that she did merit the kiss of death, but that it would not have been proper because she was a woman. I see God’s image of spit as a coded way of describing her divine kiss, in that liminal life-death world of leprosy, in the stripping away of what divides Miriam from God (her skin). While we are on the subject of fluids, we might take this even further. In rabbinic texts, spitting at times becomes a euphemism for sexual intimacy. Could God’s cryptic words be a lover’s code for a secret tryst that plays out on mystical and physical planes? The Kabbalists of medieval Spain and 16th c. Tzfat yearned for the Shechinah in a way that is laid out in clearly sexual terms. The idea of God as lover is a potent symbol for mystical union. Why not begin to play with models that propose relationships with women as well as men? While God in Biblical text appears to be gendered male, it is possible to peel away another layer of the superficial story to unmask a feminine or beyond-gender God. The relationship between Miriam and God need not be father/daughter or husband/wife – digging a deeper well beneath the text allows gender and hierarchy to flow in countless directions.

In my reading, I imagine Miriam does not want to be healed. She wants to keep this souvenir of God’s kiss as long as possible, to hold on to it as a memory of this rare spiritual experience, an embodied encounter with the divine. No one, of course, asks her. In reading the story, Aaron speaks to Moses on her behalf, and Moses speaks to God on her behalf. But Miriam is not consulted. I imagine that Aaron and Moses are surface guys – it is important to them that everything appear okay and that there are no surprises or rebellions. Look at Aaron, attracted to the shiny, perfectly cast smoothness of the golden calf. They want to fix it. Perhaps they are jealous, as I am, of Miriam’s affliction, her souvenir of divine contact, and want to quickly hide what makes her extraordinary and make her just like everyone else. Who would not feel a certain envy and longing for that intimate, embodied connection with the divine? I feel sadness that the parts of Miriam that were powerful, rebellious, gifted, special, were smoothed over by Aaron and Moses,
who rushed to heal her and make her the object of their subject. This is a story that repeats itself over and over again in our own time-period. Luckily, the text tells us they do not fully succeed in “normalizing” Miriam. The text tells us that the people did not journey until Miriam was gathered back into the community. Her ability to keep the story of Numbers from moving forward attests to her central place in the text, her special place in the heart of her followers.

Perhaps it is this “healing” of Miriam that really kills her, burying her beneath the snowy blank spaces of parchment. After all, we hear nothing about Miriam again until the simple words describing her death and the subsequent cries of thirst by the Israelites. “Miriam died there and was buried there.” I read there, inside the text itself, under the surface. It is as if when her skin was healed, the gaps in the text, too, stitched themselves together, sealing her inside. We see hints in the scars and seams of the story, and these are our ways in to the depth of the text where Miriam dwells. When her skin was described as “snow,” perhaps it did mean white. White, not like a leper’s skin, but like parchment.

The scene in Numbers 12 has always fascinated me because it appeared to me that God’s voice really did get transcribed onto the body of Miriam the way the letters of Torah are inscribed onto parchment, something that I, as a poet, find provocative, erotic, mystical, and wonderful. Miriam is not just a character in the story; her skin is the parchment (and here it is parched) on which the story plays itself out. In Numbers 12, we can peel back the surface layers of text to find a deeper, richer, wetter story of Miriam, in an exact mirroring of the way in which her own skin is stripped away to reveal her inner well and its closeness with the divine cloud. Above and below meet in a mystical encounter of fused elements that, to me, overshadow all other aspects of this story. Despite my rational awareness of the Torah as a historical document with layers of redaction, on Shabbat morning, kissing the Torah feels to me like a spiritual experience that is tender and close. When I chant from the Torah, I get lost in the beauty of the crowned black letters and the rich, delicate, tangible holiness of the worn parchment. I think of the unforgettable experience years ago when the one Orthodox synagogue in
Tzfat that allowed women to dance with the Torah and kiss it, many seeing and touching it for the first time without the “cloud” of the mehitzah curtain. Torah, text, is a magical place of encounter.

Thus, we come full circle to the three “skins:” the landscape that conceals a well, the skin that conceals a watery depth of a woman, and the parchment that conceals a deeper story. All of these superficial layers conceal deeper essences and all of them are ways in.

Ultimately, my intimate encounter with the divine occurs through this entering into the depths hidden below the surface of text, down to the sod, the secret teachings concealed in the white fire surrounding the black fire of the text. My attempt here to read this story differently, not as a punishment for Miriam, but as a natural and uniquely her own consequence of an intimate encounter with the divine, reveals secrets about Miriam, God, and myself and mimics my own experience of reading. Like Miriam, I have to get close, maybe too close, to the words and letters to listen for the murmurings below. My approach is less literal and more fluid; it peeks underneath. Torah is often compared to water; this is how I drink.