

To You, Miriam

Malka Heifetz Tussman

Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein

To you, Miriam the prophet,
To your song,
To your feet, joyously bloodied,
Dancing on desert sand,
My heart goes out again
In envy and in longing.
You sang at a time
When God was righteous,
When it was wonderful to lead Israel's daughters
In a sacred dance.
How shall I exalt the women of my generation?
How shall I bring them joy?
No longer does a light-filled eye watch over us,
No compassion from above.

With his right hand, God the Master
Has opened abysses of destruction.
Hear and be astonished, oh, Miriam:
From the deep precipice, like lightning,
Erupts praise of his beloved Name.

And there, in our darkness, a Sabbath table is laid,
But the sanctity sputters and goes out.
The candle flames duck

In shame.
 And he sent men to punish us again.
 They chastise with whipping tongues.
 They find offenses within us.
 God's braggarts command us to repent.

But I, oh, poet, my sister, will defend myself.
 —Forgive my strength...
 I no longer accept God's wrath
 As well and good.

Who am I, you will ask,
 Who am I to make demands and stand against him?
 Do not refute my right, Miriam.

I stem from a martyr to the people, and
 My image of God sits within me.

Still more—
 I lodge another complaint.
 I stand up to him and accuse him
 With his own Ten Commandments.

Abandoning us to destruction, he has put us
 At his mercy.
 And nowhere, anywhere, is any hint,
 Nowhere any sign of a redeemer.

I vow!
 No longer shall a Jew's last breath ignite the torch—
 "Hear, O Israel."
 Mute, with gall,
 Shall be
 The final fall.

(1945)



MALKA HEIFETZ TUSSMAN (1893-1987) was born in the Ukraine, came to the United States in 1912, and lived in Chicago, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Berkeley. She began to publish poetry in Yiddish in 1919 and was associated with the Yiddish modernist poets of the Introspectivist movement. Tussman published six books of poetry between 1949 and 1977. "To You, Miriam" is from her first book, *Lider (Poems)* (Los Angeles, 1949).

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