“Miriam stole Torah from God at Sinai and gave it to a poet. The poet threw it out her window and conked a madwoman on the head, making her inexplicably sane. The madwoman left the Torah in a shopping cart where it was snatched by a desperate housewife. ...A secretary made copies and delivered them to a midwife and a pair of jazz musicians. The midwife gave it to doctors, professors, teachers....

...Do you dare transmit this Torah?

These words come from Rabbi Jill Hammer’s poem, *Pirkei Imot 1:1*.¹

It is daring Torah. Unlike in much of our tradition, the women of this poem are subjects, not objects. The Torah they transmit is something to be shared, and not to be kept to oneself. It’s a fantasy of women determining their own destiny. I call it a fantasy, because even today we are still products of a Judaism defined and transmitted by men.² Even in Reform Judaism, our founding statements--our platforms--enshrined the patriarchy of earlier ages.

Now, in the century of Donald Trump and Brett Kavanaugh and #MeToo--and also the century of Kamala Harris and The

¹ Hammer, Jill. “Pirkei Imot 1:1 (Sayings of the Mothers),” in *New Menorah*, no. 67, spring 2002/5762, as quoted in Dame, Enid. “A Paradoxical Prophet: Jewish Women Poets Re-Imagine Miriam,” in *Bridges*, vol. 12, no. 1 (“Sister Miriam”), spring 2007
² Susannah Heschel said, “It doesn’t matter if rabbis say something positive about women, what matters is who are the rabbis, who’s doing the talking. We hear only men talking, not women, and that’s a problem. The issue is who’s having the conversation” (http://www.freshinkforteens.com/articles/10-questions-susannah-heschel). Heschel’s right--who speaks, who responds, and who listens matter.
Notorious RBG, it’s time for us to write patriarchy out of our story with a new platform that speaks to women’s equal participation and presence in our leadership and in our theology.

This may not be easy. Because the dominant voice of patriarchy is embedded in all of our sacred texts--texts like this week’s parashah, B’shalach.

After safely crossing the Sea of Reeds ahead of Pharaoh’s pursuing armies, Moses leads the Israelites in a song of victory and thanksgiving. He sings:

חַיֶּ֖ה לִֽיהוָה כְּגָנַ֗ה נָא
סְוָא וִלְכָּא רָםָ֖ו יִתְבָּא
עַדּ יִמְרָא יִזְיוּלִי לִיָּֽוָשוּע

"Let me sing unto Adonai, who truly triumphs; horse and rider God lifted into the sea.
The strength and song of God was my help."

For the next 18 verses, Moses sings about his God--a God of strength--a warrior, a destroyer, a king. This is Moses’ song about his thoughts, his beliefs, and his gratitude.

It seems that there would be nothing else to say beyond praising the God Moses knows personally. But then we are introduced to another leader, with a different message--

מֵרִיאָה הנבִּיאָה

Miriam, the prophet.

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3 My own translation based on Rashi’s commentary on Ex. 15:2
Miriam is the only woman to be described in the Torah as a prophet. Until this point, the term has been used to describe only Abraham, and Aaron. To bestow this title on Miriam—a woman—is extraordinary… and was troubling to some commentators. Some ignored the title entirely, others minimized it. But not Rabbeinu Bachya. In his medieval commentary on these verses, Bachya explained that many of the great truths, the great ikarim, of the Torah are explained by women—women being as capable of prophecy as men, since women are equally human.

Rashbam also accepted Miriam’s elevated status—saying that the title of Navi or N’viah is only given to those who speak compellingly or are able to inspire other people. This is exactly what Miriam does at the shores of the sea—inspiring her peers, leading the women of Israel in joyful dance following Moses’ song.

And then, she transmits her own Torah, responding to her brother with a song of her own:

All sing unto Adonai, who truly triumphs;
horse and rider God lifted into the sea.

That’s it. One verse. After Moses’ 19 verses of song, Miriam responds with these nine words, alone.

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4 Rashi, Bartenura, Bemidbar Rabbah, Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, etc. on Ex. 15:2: Miriam was only a prophet because, as a child, she had foretold Moses’ birth—not because of any great vision or leadership of her own
5 Rabbeinu Bahya on Ex. 15:20:
6 Rashbam (late 11 - 12 c.) on Ex. 15:20:
Miriam’s song is remarkably similar to Moses’--with one key difference. Moses sang Ashirah Ladonai, “let me sing unto Adonai.” Miriam sang Shiru Ladonai, “all sing unto Adonai.”

ALL SING UNTO ADONAI.

Miriam plays off Moses’ song—using the words of his story to tell a new one. Women have used this approach for millennia, snatching existing, male-dominated stories, and twisting them until they also speak of women. But Miriam is doing more than just including women in her new story.

By singing “Shiru” instead of “Ashira,” Miriam invites all of Israel to join her in this experience of joy and thanksgiving. It is a recognition that leadership—and life—can’t happen alone, but to be successful must be done in community—and must include the perspectives of both men and women. Miriam the Prophet defines a new, inclusive style of leadership—the first woman in our tradition to do so--by changing just one word.

Moses is the model of the charismatic male leader—bringing his people along through vision and sheer strength of will. But his Ashira style of leadership involves his one-on-one relationship with God, and his struggle to balance the needs of all the Israelites on his shoulders. His leadership leaves the people dependent on his presence and guidance. In contrast, Miriam presents us with a different model—Shiru leadership—feminist in style. By asking that all of the Israelites sing together, Miriam gives us a vision of a people cooperating in its own redemption; a grassroots rather than a top-down, “follow me” approach.

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7 Is hers the original song, and his the expansion of an older text? See Sperling Original Torah.
Last Purim, in a guerilla art project, I taped “masks” over the faces of the three dozen male instructors whose portraits hung outside our classrooms in this building. I covered male faces with female faces—the faces of the trailblazing women who have shaped the Reform Judaism we receive and create today. My intention was to honor, not dishonor; to subjectify, not objectify; and to assert women as the equals of their male predecessors. But, by obscuring the faces of the male teachers, the story I told erased men in order to celebrate women. My project didn’t invite all members of the HUC-JIR community to feel ownership over the story of our institution’s history—it encouraged women to see themselves in this history, and for men to reconsider what had been presented as a monolithic male story. I’m proud of this “masking” project, but I also recognize that it was an Ashira response.

Rabbi Rachel Adler recently described the work facing us in trying to build a Shiru response to our world. She wrote, “As we tell new stories, and hear stories that were previously silenced, we build a bridge\(^8\) from the known moral universe to the new moral universe we envision. [Torah] began the process. #MeToo stories and our responses to them drive the new vision. Our job is to get out there and work on that bridge.”\(^9\) Adler describes new stories joining old ones—a growing body of sacred texts pulling us toward the next age.

Shiru, that new story told by Miriam the Prophet in just one word, is part of that bridge—a keystone, even. But, it will take more than just changing one word to remake the imperfect world we live in.

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\(^8\) Adler riffing on Robert Cover’s interpretation of halacha as ethics, as a bridge to the world we want to activate.

Smashing the patriarchy and dismantling sexist systems and ways of thinking is part of becoming free. So is building equality and erecting new, unbiased systems and ways of thinking.

Over the past few decades, we have begun a feminist and egalitarian remaking of Judaism. As Reform Jews, we take great pride in blazing the path of liberalism and equality. But the one story, the one sacred text, we haven’t touched in these decades of building is the defining text of our movement--our platform.

In 1885, our forebears--the great men of the American Reform movement--envisioned a Judaism that spoke to and for modern Jews. The theology, political philosophy, and ethics they wrote into the Pittsburgh Platform spoke to that generation’s understanding of human needs and human dreams.

Their platform concluded with the words: “we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”

One of the greatest tasks of our times--in 2019--is to solve the problems still presented by sexism, and to reorganize Judaism and society as equitable for all genders. Our current platform, adopted in 1999, committed to the full equality of women and men. But it provided no roadmap for making this vision a reality. 20 years later, it’s clear that we need a new platform—that

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10 Rabbi Adler, to her students at HUC LA: She’s angry at the world because she cares—love being the flipside of anger; but resting in anger is crippling; instead, she sees what the world is not yet, and tries to remake it into what it can be.

charts a path forward to achieve this vision of women’s and men’s sacred and shared humanity. The Reform platform I propose is a theological roadmap to a better world, built on three familiar pillars: God, Torah, and Israel.

The first pillar in our new platform should be God—a God that is no longer the paternalistic and Aristotelian God of the Pittsburgh Platform. In this new platform, we must speak of a God that reflects our people, just as b’tzelem Elohim, we reflect God.

We need more language, more prayers, and more scholarship that speak to the diversity of God’s images. Not just Moses’ warrior-destroyer-king, but the mother, the midwife, and the Shechinah—as well as the indwelling presence, the nourishing table and the encompassing pattern of life. In writing a theology of inclusion, we’re fortunate to have English, a less-gendered language than Hebrew. Let’s embrace that, in sacred texts that broaden the masculine, the feminine, and the non-gendered possibilities of understanding God.

Our platform can embrace a God of presence, the companion embodied in that word Shiru. Our God stands with us, supports us, sings the song of our lives with us—accompanying us when we come together in our shared and equal humanity.

In our second pillar, we need a Shiru approach to all of Torah. Our platform should profess an expansive sense of “Torah”—not just a document, but personal compendia of wisdom. “Torah” in our platform should be defined as the immortal ideas we

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receive and create—whether or not those ideas shine with the patina of age. As Reform Jews, we get to break apart our mythologies, and rebuild them using the parts that serve us today. We can dissect the “Ashira” Torah that demands & commands; and find “Shiru” moments of creating and building.

Dr. Judith Plaskow raised her prophetic voice to make us aware of the erasure of women as subjects in our tradition. Our Reform Torah can amplify these formerly silenced voices—we can seek out women’s stories told in their own words. Our holy canon of immortal ideas can be a co-creation of men and women, past and present; preserving and transmitting inspiration for the lives we want to live today.

Finally, in our third pillar, the platform would need to embody who we hope to become as the People of Israel—the real-world implications of our theology. We need a Shiru, inclusive movement, in which women’s leadership is promoted on all levels. Our movement and our platform must guarantee equal compensation for women’s work. We might even envision a new, Shiru model of cooperative leadership.

Built on these three pillars, our next platform should be a sacred text, a new story growing out of the old, a vision of an equal future.

In parashat B’shalach, Miriam sings a communal prayer, Shiru. Shiru is a call by a prophet, a call for cooperation and participation, a call I feel compelled to answer. We have the opportunity to answer together, to co-create a new, sacred

13 Gordon Lathrop, Lutheran pastor and author, in conversation with Tisch fellows, 9 January 2019
14 Rich Harwood, founder of the Harwood Institute, in conversation with Tisch fellows, 8 January 2019
platform for Reform Judaism--one that welcomes all of our prophetic voices, raised harmoniously. Like Miriam, we stand at the shores of a sea--and now it’s up to us to take our movement’s old stories and make them new. It’s up to us to build a bridge to the better, more equal future we envision. It’s up to us as a Reform movement to remake our world into a place that values each of us equally--no matter our gender.

This is the Torah I dare us all to transmit.