

Features

# Woman rabbi offers context for understanding of Mary

By Lee Strong

According to St. Luke's account of the visitation, Elizabeth greeting her pregnant cousin Mary by crying out, "Blest are you among women?" "My soul rejoices in God my savior," Mary responded.

This song of thanksgiving and praise — both as the "Magnificat" and the Cantic of Mary — is consonant with the Hebrew scriptural tradition of women singing God's praises, according to Rabbi Judith Cohen-Rosenberg.

Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg discussed this tradition in her homily at Temple B'rith Kodesh's Sabbath morning service on January 30. The gathering served both as the temple's regular service and as a special Marian Year event sponsored by the diocesan Commission on women in the Church and Society.

A temple service may seem an unusual way to celebrate the Marian Year, but according to Father Thomas Mull, director of the Office of Liturgy, it was a logical part of the diocesan focus for the international Marian Year — which ends August 15 on the Feast of the Assumption.

"One of the goals for this year is to see Mary in a different type of experience than the one traditionally portrayed in images of her," Father Mull explained. "(We are focusing) not so much on Mary as mother, as on Mary as a woman of faith." The B'rith Kodesh service, he added, fit in with this focus because it explored the faith tradition in which Mary lived.

Although the service was a Marian event, Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg avoided mentioning Mary specifically in her homily. She said she did this because did not feel comfortable preaching about someone she — and the regular members of the temple — did not know a great deal about. Instead, what she tried to present were the "traditions for women that Mary might be familiar with," noting that the listeners could then draw their own conclusions based on what they knew and believed about Mary.

Several hundred people — whose differing faith traditions were revealed by a mixture of habits and yarmulkes, prayer shawls and Roman collars — listened as Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg instead discussed Miriam and Deborah, the two Hebrew women mentioned in the day's readings. Calling the two "the singers of our people," she pointed out that in Hebrew scriptures "positive and strong women" like Miriam and Deborah are frequently associated with key events in Jewish history.

The first reading for the service included the song of rejoicing Miriam offered after God drowned Pharaoh's forces in the Red Sea. Miriam is described as a prophetess, who, along with Moses and Aaron, led the Hebrew

people out of Egypt. Earlier in the Bible, she is described as the one who watched over the infant Moses the Nile, Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg pointed out.

Scripture tells us little about Miriam, but according to the Midrash — the extra-biblical rabbinic commentaries that fill in the stories in the Bible — she was indirectly responsible for Moses' conception. Moses' father had considered separating from his wife in order to avoid the conception of boy children, who would be fated to die because of Pharaoh's decree that all male Jewish babies be killed at birth. Miriam talked him out of the separation, saying that even if the boys were killed, his daughters would live and could preserve the Hebrew race and faith.

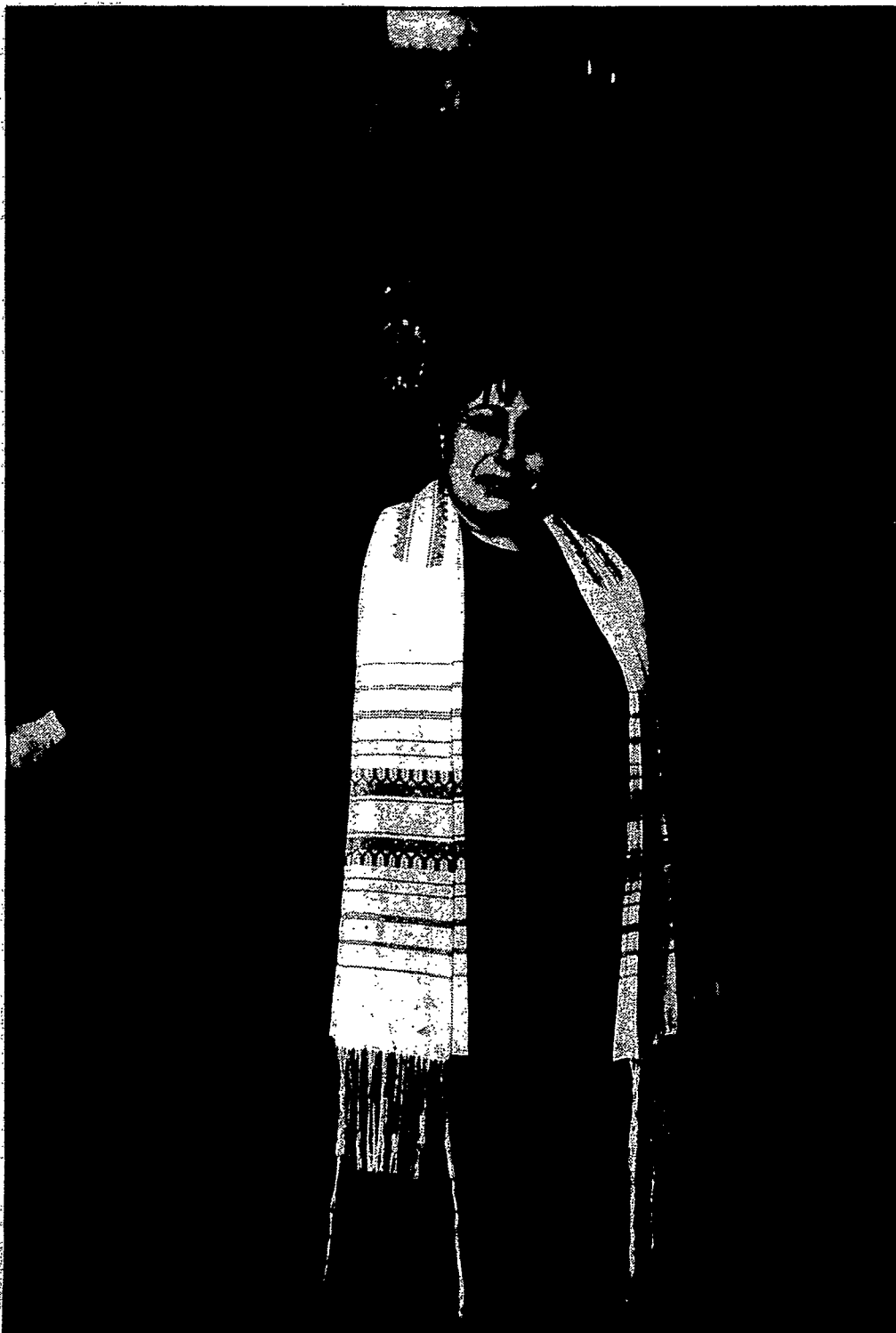
Once Moses was born, Miriam arranged for his own mother to serve as his nurse and teacher — thus ensuring that he would learn Hebrew culture and faith. Later, when the Hebrews were in the desert, the Midrash notes Miriam taught them to get water by singing, the rabbi added.

Although like Miriam, Deborah was a prophetess and a leader of the Hebrew people, she was a different kind of leader, Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg observed. Deborah was a judge and a military leader who led the Israelites to victory in battle. The Cantic of Deborah — quoted by Elizabeth in her greeting of Mary, and considered by scripture scholars one of the oldest writings in the Bible — celebrates this victory.

Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg said both Miriam and Deborah, as leaders who were women, stand out as anomalies in Hebrew scriptures. Whenever such women appeared, rabbis added explanations for the women's roles or shifted the focus from them. For example, the Cantic of Deborah is attributed to both Deborah and Barak, the general who, under Deborah's command, actually led the Israeli troops into battle. The earliest versions of the song, however, name Deborah as the singer, Barak's name and added later.

"The explanations were more a reflection of the ideas during the time they were written, not of the times the stories were about," the rabbi said. The ancient Hebrews who had told the earlier form of Deborah's story appeared to have few qualms about a woman as a leader. The rabbis did, however, modifying the story in to the version that now appears in the Bible. "We take it all together — the original stories and the added explanations — and treat them all as 'gospel,' and that's not always the case," Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg noted.

In her homily, Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg said that the sketchy nature of Bible stories concerning Miriam and Deborah allows readers to ask questions: What were these women like?



Rabbi Judith Cohen-Rosenberg poses in front of the ark containing the Torah — the Hebrew scriptures — at Temple B'rith Kodesh. Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg preached about traditions of Hebrew women at an unusual Marian-Year celebration.

What was their source of strength?

Such questions cannot be answered definitively, the rabbi stated adding, "we're given the freedom to infuse our hearts and our minds into the answers." She concluded her homily with, "let us each sing our own song of God."

This input from individual understandings and perspectives is also being incorporated into diocesan Marian year activities, Father Mull noted, citing two other activities planned by the women's commission. On Friday, April 8, at Nazareth College, Dr. Christine Bochen, the head of the college's Religious Studies Department, will talk at about "Images of Mary in Theology." An arts festival is scheduled for Friday, April 29, at St. Augustine's Parish. The

festival will feature song, music, dance and audio visual displays all based on Marian themes.

In addition, parishes and schools are being encouraged to develop their own programs and activities, Father Mull noted. "To me, the Marian year would not have a lot of worth if we just left it to diocesan celebrations," he remarked.

Father Mull also said that he was particularly impressed by the cultural diversity the celebrations have revealed. "Hispanic, Afro-American, Polish, German and other groups are celebrating in ways that reflect their own experience," he said.

Or, as Rabbi Cohen-Rosenberg suggested, they are singing their own songs.

## Presentation on AIDS planned for Sacred Heart Cathedral

Catholic Family Center is planning a presentation on AIDS for all of its certified foster parents, friends and neighbors. The event will take place at Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park, Rochester, on Tuesday, Feb. 9 at 7:30 p.m.

The program will be conducted by former foster parent and registered nurse, Gayle Radnich.

Anyone interested in finding out more about AIDS or who needs help in order to attend should call (716) 546-7220, ext. 683.

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