

Scot Free: Parashat B'haalotcha

A man and a woman plot together about how to take down a more powerful colleague, someone they have worked with for a long time. They claim he's undeserving of the position he's acquired. They criticize decisions he's made in his personal life, throwing in a racial slur for good measure. In the end, the two individuals are put in their place by an even more powerful third party – their boss' boss, as it were. The woman is punished severely, first physically disciplined and then suspended from work for a period of seven days. The man gets off scot free.

While this real-life scenario may sound as if it's ripped from the headlines, it's actually a far older tale – the plot, in fact, of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'haalotcha*. Some of us will remember the story – how, while encamped at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron speak out against their brother, Moses, rebuking him for having married a Cushite woman and complaining: “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well” (Numbers 12:2). The two halves to the siblings' complaint feel a bit like a non-sequitor, the connection between Moses' marriage and his unique relationship with God seemingly unrelated, leading many commentators to see these words as a desperate attempt to throw anything they can against Moses in order to undermine his authority and subsequently shore up their own. In the end, Miriam is stricken with leprosy and quarantined outside the camp for a week. Aaron, on the other hand, escapes unscathed.

Biblical scholars are quick to point out that the verb *va-tedabber*, used to describe the “speaking out” against Moses perpetrated by his sister and brother, is in the feminine singular perhaps indicating that Miriam was the prime instigator of the attack and that Aaron, generally known as a passive, peace-loving soul, simply went along with the gossip. They also note that Miriam's name appears first in the

verse, “And Miriam and Aaron spoke out,” (Numbers 12:1) which is unusual in the male-centric textual tradition of Torah. As the medieval commentator Rashi writes, “[Miriam] began speaking first, therefore Scripture places her first” (Rashi on Numbers 12:1). Since Miriam was the chief architect of the siblings’ assault, it is she who is punished most harshly.

Even if we accept this somewhat thin justification for Miriam alone bearing the brunt of the siblings’ deception, we notice that the verb *va-tedabber* is used only in the first part of the complaint, when Miriam criticizes Moses for having married a Cushite woman, and not in the second part of the complaint where it clearly states “*Vayomru harak ach b’Moshe diber Adonai* – THEY said, ‘has the Lord spoken only through Moses?’” (Numbers 12:2). And this is not the only curious aspect of the censure of Moses’ wife! As we know, Moses married a woman named Zipporah back at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, a Midianite whom he met while fleeing from Egypt. Midianites and Cushites are not at all the same people, Cush being a descendent of Noah’s son, Ham, whereas Midian is a descendent of Abraham’s second wife, Keturah. Furthermore, Moses and Zipporah have, by this time, been married for many years which makes it odd that Miriam would now suddenly declare: “[Moses] married a Cushite woman!” (Numbers 12:1).

The majority of the ancient commentators, unable to accept that Moses would have taken a second wife without Torah having explicitly told us so, believe that the Cushite woman spoken about in our *parasha* must be Zipporah, understanding the adjective “Cushite” either as meaning “dark-skinned” or as simply being slang for “beautiful.” A minority of the sages disagree, indicating that Moses, at some point, must have married again – this time to a Cushite woman – which is not so unfathomable given that patriarchs Abraham and Jacob also had multiple wives. But despite the *p’shat* (plain meaning) of the text which seems to indicate that whoever this woman was, the problem that Miriam had with her was related to

her ethnic identity or the color of her skin, the weight of tradition goes in an opposite interpretive direction entirely. The rabbis see Miriam berating Moses not for having chosen a Cushite wife but rather for having neglected her in his zeal to serve his people.

In the chapter just before the story we've been exploring, there is an episode where God democratizes the spirit of prophesy, causing it to rest on two men, Eldad and Medad, and the seventy elders of the community. According to midrash (rabbinic legend), when Miriam heard that these men had all been selected for special service she essentially said: "Woe to their wives, because if the elders are now filled with spirit just like Moses, they will do just as Moses has done – that is, discontinue marital relations with their wives." The midrash draws upon the fact that back in Exodus, at the time of Revelation, the Israelites are instructed not to go near a woman for three days so that they could receive Torah in a state of ritual purity; apparently, Moses, too, learned from this experience that he, as God's most important prophet, should remain forever pure and thus abstain from sexual relations with Zipporah. It is perhaps for this reason, too, that Moses' two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, remain so absent in the Biblical text. In his dedication to leadership of the community, Moses often overlooked his very own family.

With this interpretation in mind, we can perhaps understand a bit better why Miriam is the primary instigator of her brother's attack and also what connects the two parts of her complaint. When Aaron and Miriam together say, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?" they are not challenging their brother's authority as much pointing out that they, too, share in the leadership of the people and yet have not neglected their own spouses in the process. Perhaps as a fellow woman Miriam is particularly sensitive to Zipporah's (or the Cushite woman's) plight which is why she takes the lead on this campaign, speaking up not as a way of taking Moses down but rather as a way

of imploring him to reexamine his priorities. Perhaps this is why, too, Moses is so quick to forgive Miriam and pray on her behalf when she is stricken with leprosy, understanding that she ultimately only wants what is best for him and his family.

I find it meaningful that the words we recite each week here at BHBE when we stand at the Torah and pray for healing come from this *parasha*, from the very words that Moses speaks upon learning that Miriam is sick. “*El na refa na la,*” we say, “Please God, heal her please” (Numbers 12:3). In addition to the stark simplicity of the language – more poetic utterances difficult to produce when we are consumed with worry for those we love – the context of this phrase is significant, a brother praying for the very sister who just criticized and undermined him. In our own families, too, many of us carry burdens of anger or hurt, resentment or competition. But when a person is ill, hopefully these petty (and not so petty) grievances can fall away as we remember what is truly important. *El na refa na la* – Let’s forget the past and move towards a place of healing.

To be sure, it is difficult to create good balance in today’s frenetic, over-programmed world. Most of us are constantly juggling work and home, friends and family, volunteer commitments, health and exercise, time for self. Those in the sandwich generation are stretched between younger children and aging parents. With many of us living farther away from family than ever before, we may have less help and more difficulty being present at all the times that we’d wish to be. While an outsider’s candid observation may feel painful or unwelcome, there are times that it takes a gentle reminder from someone who truly has our best interests at heart to point out when our calibration system has gotten too far out of whack. I like to imagine Miriam as the loving, if slightly over-bearing, older sister mustering up the courage to say what is difficult to say out of love for her sister-in-law, her nephews,

and ultimately her brother himself. I like to see her less as a back-stabbing nemesis and more as a slightly catty sibling whose heart is ultimately in the right place.

I'm still not entirely comfortable with the way that justice is meted out in *Parashat B'haalotcha*. If it had been up to me, Miriam and Aaron would both have been punished equally, or perhaps not punished at all given that their intentions were (mostly) pure. Leprosy is seen by the rabbis as an example of *middah k'neged middah* (measure-for-measure punishment) with Miriam becoming isolated and ashamed by a contagious, difficult to stop disease that mimics both the spread and effect of the very gossip that she instigated. But it's not clear from the Biblical text to whom, if anyone, Miriam actually spoke these words. And besides, if we take this approach, listening to injurious speech without protesting against it as Aaron did is equally damaging. The siblings together should have borne the consequences of their actions.

What ultimately stands out to me from this *parasha*, however, is not the criticism or infighting or sibling rivalry or pettiness, it's the reconciliation, the immediacy with which Moses put aside any lingering bad feelings to cry out to God to heal Miriam the second he saw that she was ill. He might have been guilty of under-appreciating his wife but in this moment Moses demonstrated his ironclad love for family and was willing to try and utilize his relationship with God to grant healing and fast. Siblings may compete and fight and gossip and criticize but in the end they have our back and will protect us without question. They'll also speak to us honest truths, difficult as it may be to hear them.

El na refa na la – May this week bring great healing, of bodies and of relationships. And may we work to set our priorities in their rightful place.

Shabbat Shalom.