

## The neglected spouse

### Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Behaalotecha*, we read about a puzzling incident:

1. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. 2. They said, "Has the Lord spoken only to Moses? Hasn't He spoken to us too?" And the Lord heard. 3. Now this man Moses was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth. 4. The Lord suddenly said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Go out, all three of you, to the Tent of Meeting!" And all three went out. 5. The Lord descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tent. He called to Aaron and Miriam, and they both went out. 6. He said, "Please listen to My words. If there be prophets among you, [I] the Lord will make Myself known to him in a vision; I will speak to him in a dream. 7. Not so is My servant Moses; he is faithful throughout My house. 8. With him I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of the Lord. So why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses ? 9. The wrath of the Lord flared against them and He left. 10. The cloud departed from above the Tent, and behold, Miriam was afflicted with tzara'ath, [she was as white] as snow. Then Aaron turned to Miriam and behold, she was afflicted with tzara'ath. 11. Aaron said to Moses, "Please, master, do not put sin upon us for acting foolishly and for sinning. 12. Let her not be like the dead, which comes out of his mother's womb with half his flesh consumed!" 13. Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "I beseech you, God, please heal her." 14. The Lord replied to Moses, "If her father were to spit in her face, would she not be humiliated for seven days? She shall be confined for seven days outside the camp, and afterwards she may enter. 15. So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not travel until Miriam had entered. 16. Then the people departed from Hazeroth, and they camped in the desert of Paran. [Numbers 12:1-16]

### Explanations

Zipporah was a daughter of Jethro, a shepherd and priest of Midian. Moses married her and they had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer.

She was not a Cushite (Ethiopian). So why does Miriam call her that?  
-Some speculated Moses had two wives. [Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel]

-But Talmud: “Kushite” simply means one who is different:

[The Book of Psalms refers to] Cush the Benjamite. [Ps. 7:1] Was Cush [really] that Benjamite's name? Was not his name Saul? But, just as a Cushite [Ethiopian] is distinguishable by his skin, so was Saul distinguished by his deeds. In like manner you explain:

[And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses] because of the Cushite woman that he had taken for his wife. [Num. 12:1]

Was she a Cushite [woman]? Was not her name Zipporah? But, just as a Cushite woman is distinguishable by her skin, so was also Zipporah distinguished by her deeds. In like manner you explain:

Now Ebed-Melek the Cushite . . . heard. [Jer. 38:7ff]

Now, was his name Cushite? Was not his name Zedekiah? But, just as the Cushite is distinguishable by his skin, so was Zedekiah distinguished by his deeds. In like manner you explain:

Are you not as the children of the Cushites [Ethiopians] to me, O children of Israel, says the Lord? [Amos 9:7]

Now is their name [children of] Cushites? Was their name not [children of] Israel? The truth is that, just as the Cushite is distinguishable by his skin, so are Israel distinguished by their ways from all other nations. [Mo'ed Katan 16b]

The Midrash adds:

Everyone acknowledged her beauty just as everyone acknowledges a Cushite's blackness. The numerical value of “Cushite” [*kushiṭ*] is the same as that of “beautiful in appearance” [*yefat-mar'eh*]. [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

Midrash: Before Exodus, Moses sent wife and sons back to Midian for safety, on the advice of Aaron:

Aaron goes forth to greet his brother with hugs and kisses.

He asks him: “Moses, where were you all these years?”

To which Moses answers: “In Midian.”

Aaron further asks him: “Who are these children and women with you?”

Moses replies: “My wife and my sons.”

Aaron continued to question him: “And where are you taking them?”

The answer: “To Egypt.”

Aaron then tells him: “We are grieving for the first ones [the Israelites who are enslaved in Egypt], and now shall we grieve for these, as well?”

Moses accordingly tells Zipporah: “Go to your father's house.”

Zipporah then departs for her father's home, taking her two sons.

[Mechilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhta de-Amalek, Yitro 1]

So Zipporah and sons did not experience Exodus. [Or slavery.]

After Exodus, Jethro brings Moses' family back to him:

When Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses, and for Israel his people, and that the Lord had brought Israel

out of Egypt... he took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her back, and her two sons... and brought them to Moses in the wilderness. [Exodus 18:1-5]

Midrash: Later, Moses asks God to appoint one of his sons as his successor. God responds:

Your sons sat and did not occupy themselves with Torah. Joshua, who served you, is fitting to serve Israel. [Tanchuma, Pinchas 11]

Midrash: Moses divorces Zipporah for her sake [Mehilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta de-Amalek, Yitro 1], because he no longer has time for her. Basis is in Torah:

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the repetition implying: And has now divorced her. [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

Now, Miriam criticizes Moses for neglecting his wife. Torah says that a man owes his wife three things: Food, clothing and intimacy. Sex is a man's duty and a woman's right:

If he takes for himself [a] wife, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her conjugal right. And if he does not do these three things, [she can ask for a divorce]. [Ex. 21:10-11]

So sex clearly not restricted to procreation. Also, "be fruitful and multiply" applies only to men.

How did Miriam know Moses neglected his wife? Midrash:

Miriam saw that Zipporah no longer adorned herself with women's jewelry, and asked her: "Why have you stopped wearing women's ornaments?" Zipporah answered: "Your brother no longer cares about this." Thus Miriam learned that Moses had abstained from intercourse [Sifrei on Numbers, 99].

Another midrash:

Zipporah [was next to Miriam and] said: "Woe to the wives of prophets, for they will separate from their wives just my husband separated from me." [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

A third midrash:

Miriam exclaimed: "Happy are these [prophets], and happy are their wives!"

Zipporah corrected her: "Do not say, happy are their wives, rather, woe to their wives. From the day that God spoke to Moses your brother, he has not lain with me." [Sifrei Zuta 12:1].

But prophecy does not exempt a man from conjugal duties, so Miriam says:

Has the Lord spoken only to Moses? Hasn't He spoken to us too?

Meaning: We are prophets too, and were not told to abstain from marital relations. [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

But the Midrash explains:

[The Torah says]:

The Lord suddenly said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam...

[Why does it specify “suddenly”? Because] God revealed Himself to them “suddenly”, when they were ritually unclean following marital relations. [They needed water to purify themselves] so they cried, “Water, water!” So Moses had done right in separating from his wife, since the Divine Presence revealed itself to him frequently and without warning, and he would never have time to ritually clean himself after marital relations, and so had to abstain from them. [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

The Midrash notes that the Torah seems to sanctions this:

After the Giving of the Torah, God tells Moses:

Go, say to [Israel], “Return to your tents.” But you remain here with Me.

[Deut. 5:26–27]

So Israel may return to their wives, but Moses may not. [Tanhuma Tzav 13]

The Talmud confirms:

Moses separated himself from his wife... He reasoned: If the Israelites, with whom God spoke only once... and said [to them], “Be ready for the third day; do not come near a woman”, I, with whom God speaks at all times without announcing a [definite] time, how much more so! And how do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave his approval? Because it is written, Go, say to [Israel], “Return to your tents”, which is followed by, “But you [Moses] remain here with Me.” [Deut. 5:26–27] [Shabbat 87a]

Why was Miriam punished? Wasn't she expressing a legitimate concern? Because she spoke ill of Moses. Rashi:

If Miriam, who had no intention of speaking ill of Moses, was punished, all the more so someone who [intentionally] speaks ill of his fellow.

But why was Aaron not similarly punished?

-Miriam (mentioned first) spoke to him; he just listened.

-God showed compassion for the loss of his sons Nadav and Avihu.

## **How often should couples have sex?**

Mishnah:

Students may go away to study the Torah without [the] permission [of their wives for] thirty days; laborers [only for] one week.

The [minimum] times for conjugal duty prescribed in the Torah are:

-For men of independent means, every day.

-For laborers, twice a week.

-For ass-drivers, once a week. [They carry produce from farm to market, which requires their absence for a week at a time.]

- For camel-drivers, once every thirty days. [They travel longer distances with caravans.]
- For sailors, once every six months. [Sea voyages keep sailors away for months.]

### Gemara:

Rabbah son of R. Hanan said to Abaye: What [is the law if] an ass-driver becomes a camel-driver? [And thus earns more money.] Abaye replied: [The wife decides whether to let him, but] a woman prefers one measure of food with intimacy to ten measures of food without intimacy.

For how long [may husbands go away to study] with the permission [of their wives]? R. Eliezer [said:] For as long as they wish...

Raba stated: [Those who are not home at the time they promised their wives] risk [losing] their lives. [Rashi: They die before their time as a penalty for neglecting their wives.]

[Here is an example:] R. Rehum, who was frequenting [the school] of Raba at Mahuza, used to return home on the eve of every Yom Kippur. On one occasion he was so involved in his studies [that he forgot to return home]. His wife was expecting [him every moment, saying:] "He is coming soon, he is coming soon!" When he did not arrive, she became so depressed that tears began to flow from her eyes. At that moment, he was sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed under him and he was killed.

How often are scholars to perform their marital duties? Rav Yehudah replied in the name of Shmuel: Every Friday night. [Because on weekdays they study late into the night. [Maharsha, Mishna Berurah 240:6]]

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] was engaged in preparations for the marriage of his son into the family of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra. It was agreed that [his son] should [first] spend twelve years [studying] at the academy. When the girl was led before [the son, and he saw how beautiful she was], he said to them, "Let's make it [just] six years!" When they made [the girl] pass before him [a second time] he said, "[Actually,] I would rather marry [her first,] and then go [to the academy.]" He felt ashamed [by his fickleness], but his father said to him: My son, you have the mind of your Creator. In the Torah, [God] first says:

You bring them in and plant them. [Ex. 15:17]

But then later [God] says:

And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. [Ex. 25:8].

[Ketubot 61b, 62b]

In other words, God first told the Israelites to build the sanctuary after they settled in the promised land, but then He ordered them to build it while they were still in the wilderness, so He could be with them even sooner!

### Questions

Was Moses right in releasing his wife? Was Miriam right in criticizing him? Should spouses wait faithfully at home for long periods, or demand a divorce?