

**If I am not Myself**  
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“The way we’re working isn’t working. Even if you’re lucky enough to have a job, you’re probably not very excited to get to the office in the morning, you don’t feel much appreciated while you’re there, you find it difficult to get your most important work accomplished amid all the distractions, and you don’t believe that what you’re doing makes much of a difference anyway. By the time you get home, you’re pretty much running on empty, and yet still answering emails until you fall asleep.”

These words are excerpted from the Rabbinical Council of America newsletter. . . . No I’m just joking. They’re taken from the front page of the Sunday Review. In a piece titled, “Why You Hate Work,” Tony Schwartz and Christine Porath summarized the findings of the wide-ranging survey they conducted on workplace efficiency and job satisfaction. Even among top executives, they identified patterns of under-engagement and unsustainable performance. Their goal was to understand the factors that contribute to these uninspiring outcomes.

To put it in 21<sup>st</sup> century terms, there’s another kind of workplace chatter that occurs at the end of our Parsha this morning.

א ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה, על-אדות האשה הכשית אשר לקח: כי-אשה כשית, לקח.

Miriam and Aharon, who are prophets by profession, are guilty of discussing something related to Moshe’s prophecy and its impact on his relationship with his wife. “Why,” Miriam wants to know, “is it necessary for Moshe and Tziporah to separate from one another. After all, Aharon and I are prophets, too, and our prophetic duties don’t come at the expense of our family lives.”

Of course in the end it’s Hashem himself who explains that Moshe is sui generis. פה אל פה אדבר בו – I speak to Moshe face to face, God says. He simply cannot be compared to any other human being.

There’s just one question about this episode that requires a little exploration. And that is:

How did Miriam know? Who told her that Moshe and Tziporah had separated? How would she know anything about the private lives of her brother and sister-in-law?

To answer this question, Rashi cites an extraordinary Midrash that fills in the narrative gap in the story. Let me share with you the background. Just a few pesukim earlier, we read about two characters called Eldad and Medad. They were prophesying in the camp and Yehoshua considered it a great affront to Moshe. He wanted to incarcerate them, but Moshe let it go. All of this is plainly articulated in the text. What the Midrash adds is this:

When Moshe got wind of the fact that these two men were prophesying, he wasn't the only one to react. Tziporah was by his side and she reacted, too. Here's what she said:

אוי לנשותיהן של אלו אם הם נזקקים לנבואה, שיהיו פורשים מנשותיהן כדרך שפירש בעלי ממני.

I feel so bad for the wives of those prophets – for it means that they're going to have to separate from their husbands just as my husband separated from me.

It was this comment that Miriam overheard – Tziporah's own confession – that led her to question her brother's behavior.

I find this Midrash extraordinary – not just because it helps makes the text more readable – but because of the kind of picture it paints of Tziporah – a foundational character in the Torah about whom we tend to know next to nothing.

Tziporah is the paradigmatic outsider. She's different in every imaginable way:

- She's a Midianite
  - She comes from a different background and a different culture
- She's described as a כושית – she looks different – or as חז"ל say she was exceptionally beautiful – which would set her apart no less.
- And by virtue of being married to the greatest prophet in history, she's the only married woman in the Torah who cannot have a normal married life.

And yet she doesn't flee from the parts of her identity that make her different. She embraces them. And then she transmutes them into a source of empathy for others.

When she hears about Eldad and Medad prophesying, her first thought is – what will that mean for their wives? The conclusion she reaches isn't even the correct one. She assumes that all prophets have to separate from their spouses. Why would she think otherwise? But it's not even true. Her case is sui generis; there's only one Moshe and the workaday prophet doesn't have to separate from his/her spouse. But it's not Tziporah's conclusion that's important; it's the process by which she arrives at it.

By recognizing what makes her different from other people, she's instinctively sensitive to what might make others feel equally different. Her experience as the outsider – her experience as the other – has allowed to her cultivate this capacity for empathy – this capacity to appreciate those who are undergoing challenges of their own.

Tziporah is never depicted as attempting to shed her identity or become just like everyone else. Ever comfortable in her own skin, she embraces her individuality and calls on her own experience to more readily relate to those around her.

Schwartz and Porath reached a number of notable conclusions in their study. But I just want to share one. In their survey of 12,115 predominantly white collar workers worldwide, the element

they found most often lacking in work life was regular time for creative thinking. Only 18% of those surveyed said they had it in sufficient measure.

Which is a different way of saying: Too often – even among executives and people running their own businesses, people in the workforce feel like cogs in a wheel. They simply don't have the license to be themselves.

Tzipporah reminds us that – whatever our life circumstance – it's OK to be ourselves. And it's probably what Hillel meant, too, when he said:

אם אין אני לי מי לי

If I am not myself, who will be me?

Of course we're always straddling the fence between autonomy and conformity – balancing the needs of the individual versus the community. But the goal is not for us to produce automatons. The goal is for each of us to seize upon the parts of us that are unique and transform them into opportunities to serve Hashem and the Jewish people.

Perhaps Tzipporah learned this message from her own father. Having been a journeyman and a leader among his own people, Yisro shared his experiences with Moshe, a contribution the leader of the Jewish people found invaluable.

The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tiananmen Square just passed. And who can forget that iconic photograph of one individual standing squarely in front of that column of tanks. What a metaphor for our irrepressible instinct to preserve our individuality.

Today we're blessed to be celebrating Zachary's bar mitzvah. And it's quite an apt occasion to be thinking about this very lesson. When a young man joins the ranks of those who are obligated in Mitzvot, he becomes part of two communities. One is the literal community of the men and women who are bonded by their shared love and commitment for Torah. And the second is a community that transcends time: Jews throughout the ages who took responsibility for maintaining and transmitting our treasured Mesorah. While holding firm to the Torah and Mitzvot, Zachary – you'll bring to bear your own talents, your own strengths and your own unique experiences – and you'll contribute them – to lift up others and lift up yourself in the process.

It's a message no less relevant to each of us. Whether it's because of the ethos of our workplace, implicit or explicit pressure from our friends or peers, cultural expectation or an unconscious desire to fit in, we're all guilty at one point or another of failing to give enough air time to our true selves. It won't hurt us to breathe a little more freely, to tap into a little more of our own creativity and to share a little more of our own identities. It's a good bet that doing so will make us better employees; it's also a good bet that doing so will make us better עובדי ה'.