FOR HE TOOK A CUSHITE WOMAN

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INTRODUCTION

In Numbers 12 we read about Miriam and Aaron's slander of Moses and the consequent punishment meted out to Miriam. Our sages and medieval commentators dispute what exactly it was that Miriam said. The verses are a bit obscure and all we know is that *Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, "Has the Lord spoken only to Moses? Hasn't He spoken to us too?" And the Lord heard*. (Num. 12:1-2). Before we explain these verses, we will first contextualize this incident and then see how the main midrash, which many rely upon, views this story in context.

CONTEXT

From a narrative perspective Numbers seems to get off to a slow start with the first two sidras offering great details but little narrative. Suddenly when it comes to Behalotcha (Numbers 8:1 – 12:16) we are bombarded with a flood of mini episodes that seem to follow one another. One of the challenges an interpreter is faced with is trying to make sense of the sequence of events.

There is a midrash (which will be discussed shortly) that connects the story of the two peripheral prophets, Eldad and Medad with the story of Miriam's (and Aaron's) slander of Moses, but before we address this midrash we propose two understandings which provide a more textual explanation for linking these episodes.

From a narrative/political perspective there is some logic to Miriam deciding to attack Moses' character immediately after the story of the peripheral prophets, and of the subsequent plague that engulfed the nation. Indeed, whenever a nation suffers some calamity its leader is more susceptible to attack. While, not as cruel as her cousin Korah, who attacks Moses following the spy debacle, Miriam does seem to have exploited the opportunity of Moses' weaknesses to share her uncomplimentary news of Moses (the contents of which we shall discuss shortly).

Thematically, we can also see some connections between the two stories. In the first, Eldad and Medad, without Moses' authorization, prophesy in the camp. This angers Joshua who suggests to Moses that they be locked up. Moses rebuffs this suggestion, urges Joshua to curb his zeal and to appreciate that there is no monopoly over prophecy. To the contrary the ideal situation would be that every Israelite be able to prophesy in his or her own way.

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In the second story Miriam seems to take this statement of there being no monopoly over prophecy to a new level. She imagines that all prophecies are on an equal footing. She justifies her libel of Moses on the fact that like her youngest brother, she and Aaron are also able to communicate with God and therefore he cannot be above criticism. Here though, God reminds Miriam and Aaron that their prophecy is nothing like that of Moses. For the temerity of speaking libelously she must be punished with leprosy. Ironically unlike Moses who surrenders his honor and is able to forgive challenges from Eldad and Medad, God is zealous for Moses's dignity and punishes Miriam accordingly.

MIDRASH

Interestingly the midrash that we shall partially look at does not offer any of these explanations for the nexus between the two incidents. Many versions of the Midrash exist, so it is best to use that which Rashi uses. "R. Nathan says: Miriam was beside Zipporah when Moses was told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp. When Zipporah heard this, she said, "Woe to their wives if they are required to prophesy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband separated from me." From this, Miriam knew [about it] and told Aaron."

To understand this midrash, we have to accept that the content of Miriam's libel was that Moses had separated from Zipporah. When Miriam told Aaron *regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman* (Num. 12:1) the Midrash interprets this to somehow mean that Moses divorced his Midianite wife Zipporah. In a somewhat strained fashion it is explained that the Cushite is in fact a euphemism for Zipporah and that *he married a Cushite woman* means that Moses divorced her. Miriam and Aaron then wondered what was so special about Moses that he could neglect his spousal duties. They too had prophesied and did not abandon their duties. God disagrees and tells them that because Moses had to be ready at all times for God's communications he had to remain ritually pure the entire time and therefore had to abstain from marital relations

THE LITERALISTS

Unable to accept this interpretation the more literalist commentator, the Rashbam, looks to other sources to explain the verse. Relying on a work called the *Chronicles of Moses*, the Rashbam suggests that Moses had indeed married a Cushite. This however had occurred years before, during Moses' 40-year rule over the Cushite kingdom. Up until then so it seems, no one knew about this hidden past and Miriam decided now to reveal it. While this explanation seems more in line with the text we are still left wondering why it should be of interest that in the past Moses had married a Cushite before assuming his role as leader of the Israelites.

Taking a braver stand, R Joseph Bechor Shor suggests that according to the literal interpretation Moses had in fact taken a second wife who was a Cushite.[1] In this interpreta-

tion the reason why Miriam and Aaron mention the fact that they too communicate with God is because they believed that Moses' choice of a non-Jewish woman at a time when so many Israelite women were available was an affront to the People. God however feels differently and reminds them that since Moses enjoyed a special type of prophecy it was not their place to question his conduct.

IBN CASPI'S OBJECTION

The medieval commentator Joseph Ibn Caspi who spanned the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and lived in Provence and Spain was more forthright in his objections than his likeminded literalist interpreters, (to whose commentary he probably was not exposed). In a very broad critique he declares:

> I am amazed by what the earlier exegetes wrote . . . How could they imagine that it was permissible to interpret a phrase in the Torah as saying the opposite of what is written? …What gives them the right to add words that say the opposite after the phrase "he married a Cushite woman," as if the Torah had written "he left or sent away the Cushite woman that he had married"? If that is what the One who gave us the Torah meant, why didn't He write that? Why did He write the opposite? …Who gave the rabbis of the Talmud, or Ibn Ezra, who agreed with him the power to do this? Why shouldn't we do this, too, and have everyone interpret any way they want. The interpretation of "he *lakh* a Cushite woman" has to be that he "took." That is the meaning of the Hebrew root *l-k-h*; the Hebrew root *a-z-v* is its antonym. This is the agreed-upon understanding in the [Hebrew] language.[2]

We soon however discover that it is not merely a perversion of the original meaning that is objectionable. Rather it is the implied ideology that distresses Ibn Caspi. The midrash clearly implies that Moses was celibate and in this commentator's mind this means that celibacy is an ideal value. He argues however that Moses could not have been celibate:

> Such behavior [sexual activity] is especially fitting for the best and most perfect human beings. If we were to say that Moses, completely separated himself from women, as the ancient [rabbis] maintained, basing themselves on groundless "hints" in the text, then he would not have been the greatest man of all generations.[3]

This is indeed a bold accusation against the rabbis' suggestion that Moses was celibate. However, as Marty Lockshin shows the rabbis generally encouraged marriage, declaring procreation to be a crucial mitzvah. By suggesting Moses was celibate one may reach the wrong conclusion that such conduct was an elevated value. We thereby turn Moses, God forbid, into "a Franciscan or Dominican, an Augustinian or a Carmelite [monk]!" This would leave the reader with the mistaken impression that abstinence from sexual activity

makes you a better person. Ibn Caspi, believed this was untrue and that "Judaism teaches that sexual activity is a physical need, so that celibacy is unnatural and injurious."

According to Ibn Caspi: Aaron and Miriam spoke out against Moses, figuring that one [wife] should suffice for a faultless man. For he really did marry [an additional wife,] a Cushite woman . . . perhaps Zipporah had some vaginal illness; perhaps she rebelled against him [i.e. refused to continue having relations with him]."[4]

The problem was that Miriam and Aaron did not give Moses the benefit of the doubt. Their sin according to Ibn Caspi, was that; they did not assume that Moses had good reasons for doing this. As with the Bechor Shor, the reason the Torah tells us that Moses' prophecy was on a much higher level was merely to tell us that his siblings had no right to insert themselves into Moses' private life. However, his greater powers of prophecy, in and of themselves had nothing to do with taking a second wife.

DISCUSSION

It would appear from the above that there are two main ways of interpreting Miriam's slander. Literally, that somehow Moses had taken a Cushite wife, or homiletically that he had separated from or divorced his wife Zipporah. According to Ibn Caspi such a reading does not only do a disservice to the plain meaning of the text; it also implies that celibacy is a supreme value. Indeed, early Christians exposed to the texts upon which this Midrash is based (if not to the Midrash itself) believed that Moses was celibate and since he was the greatest of prophets and presumably the holiest of men it would follow that abstinence is holiness. Indeed, the Syrian third century church father, Aphrahat, went as far as to suggest that the commandment to *Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy* (Ex. 20:8) implied that one was forbidden to engage in marital relations on the Sabbath Eve.

Appropriately the Talmud, in response to this and other likeminded Christian innovations mentions a specific custom of Talmudic scholars to be with their wives on the Sabbath Eve (TB *Ketubot* 62b).

Similarly, in his epic work on the *Sifre,* Talmud scholar Prof. Menachem Kahane is of the opinion that this Midrash supports the notion that celibacy is an elevated value, for after all God Himself defends Moses' decision. Offering an alternate reason for why the Midrash does not interpret Miriam's words literally, Kahane suggest that the Midrash wishes to disabuse the reader of the notion that Moses would have intermarried. It seems that there are various views in the Talmud as to whether marrying a gentile is forbidden explicitly by the Torah (see for example TB *Yevamot* 76a). This would explain why rational commentaries such as *Ibn Ezra* and Rabbi S. R Hirsch would adopt the Midrash as the plain meaning. Similarly, it would explain why the Rashbam would rely on an odd source, that he himself criticizes in other places, in order to explain that Moses' marriage to a Cushite preceded the giving of the Torah. It was only the Bechor Shor and Ibn Caspi

who confidently felt that Moses would reasonably be allowed to marry a foreign woman or that perhaps the reader would deduce that Moses' wife would have converted.

Kahane however allows for the possibility that this Midrash itself is in fact opposed to idealizing celibacy. Indeed, we believe that a careful reading of the Midrash may lead one to conclude that it opposes abstinence. The reason why one would think it favors abstinence is because we discover, as the Torah explicitly tells us that Miriam was in fact wrong and that Moses was right to separate from Zipporah. Yet another way of looking it would be to justify Miriam's claim that abstinence is not normally required for prophecy, and that the prophecy that she and Aaron received did not require severing relations with one's spouse. Miriam's mistake then was *not* her failure to appreciate the purported holiness of celibacy. Rather her mistake was to equate regular prophets for whom celibacy is wrong with Moses, who was an exceptional prophet who was specifically commanded by God to separate himself.

The Second Temple scholar, Adiel Schremer in his book *Male and Female He Created Them* argues that it is precisely from this Midrash that we see the Jewish polemic against the Christian ideal of celibacy. When speaking of Miriam's misdeed, the *Sifre* states: "If Miriam, whose intent was not to berate her brother, but to praise him, and not to diminish procreation (in Israel), but to increase it, . . . If she was thus punished, then one who intends to speak against his brother, in defamation and . . . to diminish procreation and not to increase it, . . . how much more so"

On this Schremer comments:

> It would appear that with these words the midrash is alluding to the Christian sermonizers who would deliver public sermons denigrating marriage and sexual relations, records of which may be found dispersed among the writings of the Church fathers. Indeed, when the Midrash states in the next paragraph: "And they said: Is it only with Moses that the L-rd has spoken?" Did He not also speak with our *forefathers*? And they did not separate from their wives! "Has He not spoken also with us?" And we have not separated from our spouses! This language was especially designed to refute the thinking of the Church *fathers*. For that reason, the author of the Midrash placed these words squarely in the mouths of Miriam and Aaron clearly declaring that prophecy does not require sexual abstinence (emphasis mine).[5]

How then are we to deal with the fact that the Midrash after all defends Moses' voluntary celibacy? Quoting from the Midrash two paragraphs below Schremer notes that on the words in the text which say that *God spoke to Moses mouth to mouth*:

> "*Mouth to mouth I spoke to him*: Mouth to mouth I told him to separate from his wife." In other words, only that person to whom God speaks to mouth to mouth, and only that person who God explicitly commands to separate is permit-

> ted to do so. However, anyone else, even if they aspire to be a prophet and even if others consider them a prophet are prohibited from avoiding marriage".[6]

Thus, it is Schemer's view that the midrash far from justifying celibacy, discourages it. Indeed, we find this a plausible explanation. More so, we believe that, with minimal exceptions, this lesson extends to everyone at all times.

HALACHIC TRADITION ON CELIBACY

Notwithstanding the polemical arguments against celibacy proposed by Ibn Caspi and later by Schermer, they are not entirely reflective of Halachic tradition. While emphasizing the great importance of the obligation to marry, whether or not one produces offspring (Even Ha'ezer 1:1 and 1:18), R Yosef Karo following the lead of Maimonides and the Tur grants one exception. In Even Ha'ezer 1:4 he states: "He who spends all of his entire life engrossed in Torah study like Ben Azai and did not marry a woman is not considered a sinner, [provided] his urges did not overcome him." Nevertheless, this ruling is not included in the Alfasi, and as the Taz notes, the expression "not considered a sinner" (which is taken from Maimonides *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Ishut* 15:3) suggests that such conduct would only be permitted post facto. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to argue with the *Arukh Hashulkhan* (*Even Ha'ezer* 1:14) that throughout history there was only one Ben Azzai and such an exception is extremely rare.

"BE HOLY"

In Leviticus 19:2 it states: *Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, your God am holy*. Commenting on that verse, Rashi says blandly: "Separate yourself from sexual immorality and from sin" In contrast Nahmanides takes it much further and cautions holy behavior even if it is not mandated. Inter alia he says: "one should minimize sexual intercourse, similar to that which the Rabbis have said, and he should not engage in it except as required in fulfilment of the commandment thereof." It would appear that for Rashi holiness entails sticking to the guidelines of the Torah. Nahmanides on the other hand demands that we go against our natural desires, and through that we somehow reach a higher level of sanctity.

Based on what we have said it seems that Talmudic tradition would mostly prefer Rashi's view, and it is only specific sexual prohibitions that we should avoid. To be holy does not meant to be above nature, but within nature. Indeed, the Torah's rules are hard enough that we need not look for further restrictions.

None other than the Hatam Sofer, who holds the (perhaps unfair) reputation of being a separatist appears to back our contention that holiness means being confined to this world. As he states:

> Be holy, for I am holy, the Lord God - there are many puritans among the gentile saints, and they are more disconnected from this material world, than the righteous

> of Israel, and it is true that their withdrawal from the world and its desires cause them to hate the world, for they have investigated and have found that everything is vanity and toil, and humans will end up dying like the beast. Not so! We who adhere to the Living God. We do not separate ourselves because of hating the world, but love humanity because God loves his creatures and created in the world good creations and good trees for humans to enjoy, but we separate ourselves to the extent that we resemble God , so that being holy is because *I am holy, the Lord God*, as Rashi explains below at the end of the next chapter that when God says *and I will separate you from the peoples* (*Ibid* 20:26) it means that one should not say, "I find pork disgusting ", or, "I have no desire to wear clothes which are a mixture of wool and linen", but one should say, "I would, indeed, like them, but what can I do since my Father in heaven has imposed these decrees upon me"? Because Scripture states: "I have separated you from the peoples to be for Me", your separation from them (from their doings) should be for My sake – to keep aloof from sin and take upon yourself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven (*Sifra*, Kedoshim, Chapter 12 23).

HUMILITY AND HOLINESS

If we revisit Numbers 12 we discover that God's defense of Moses to Miriam and Aaron does not point to Moses' sanctified and elevated level. Quite the opposite. The biggest compliment that God can give Moses is that he was "exceedingly humble". In God's eyes it is our humility that demonstrates our greatness. Indeed, humility more than anything else brings us closer to the Divine and reflects our internal holiness.

NOTES

1. How exactly Moses was able to find such a woman while sojourning in the desert is an interesting question. The scholar, Dr. Neria Klein suggested to me that itinerant traders would often pass by the Israelites so hat they did have some contact with the outside world.
2. Marty Lockshin "Did Moses Become Celibate" available at https://www.thetorah.com/article/did-moses-become-celibate. All quotations of Ibn Caspi are direct quotes of Lockshin's excellent translation.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. A. Schremer, *Male and Female He Created Them: Jewish Marriage in Late Second Temple, Mishnah and Talmud Periods* (The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2003), p. 53.
6. *Ibid.* 54.