

6/2/07 – Parasha – B'Ha'alohtekha
by Deborah Shapiro

My drash is based on ch. 12, verses 1 and 2

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: He married a Cushite woman.” They said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?”

Miriam appears six times in Scriptures, twice in Exodus, twice in Numbers, once in Deuteronomy and once in the book of the prophet Micah. In the first two appearances - the rescue of Moses, and leading the rejoicing at the Red Sea - she is a heroine. At the rejoicing at the sea, she is designated a prophetess, the first woman in the Bible to receive that title.

Today's parasha is the only one in which she commits an act unacceptable to God and is severely punished for it. Later in Numbers 20, verse 3, her death is reported. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses, speaking of the importance of following the instructions of the priests in treating skin disease, says, “Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt.” The final reference in the book of Micah is one in which the prophet reminds the people of the exodus, saying, in God's name, “I set before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam,” giving her equal status with her brothers.

She is arguably the most important woman in the Hebrew Bible, after the Matriarchs. One can make a case for Ruth and Esther but they are the heroines of single stories, which take place much later. Miriam is there in the most crucial period in the development of the nation.

So Miriam's digression deserves special attention. The story begins with this odd reference to Moses' presumably second marriage, which has been puzzling commentators for centuries. No details are given, not even the wife's name, but the fact of the marriage is repeated and we've been taught that repetition suggests importance. But then the narrative jumps immediately to Miriam and Aaron's complaint about the inequality of their status as prophets which has no obvious link to the marriage. What does his marriage have to do with their right to prophesy?

Moses does not respond to the attack; instead he leaves it up to God to rebuke them directly. Miriam is stricken with a disease which turns her skin white. Aaron then pleads with Moses to intervene with God, with the result that Miriam survives her affliction but must remain outside the camp for seven days. Incidentally, most commentators agree that the disease called tzaaras is not what is now known as leprosy since it was unknown in the Middle East in Biblical times. Whatever it was called, it was clearly a severe and disturbing condition.

There are two schools of thought on the subject of the Cushite wife. The first, that the Cushite wife is really Zipporah (i.e. there is no second wife) as noted in Soncino comes from Rashi, and is endorsed by many contemporary feminists. Rashi explains that Moses had to be ready to hear God's word at any moment so had to be ritually pure at all times which meant that he had to refrain from marital relations. This, the story goes, was a private matter between him and Zipporah until she heard about Eldad and Medad who, as we heard earlier, prophesied on their own. Moses, instead of punishing them, said, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put his spirit upon them!"

Zipporah's comment was, "Woe to the wives of these if they have anything to do with prophecy for they will separate from their wives just as my husband has separated from me." Miriam, according to the drash, overhears this and not realizing that Moses is acting under God's instructions, feels his behavior is an unjustified affront to Zipporah. She tells Aaron, pointing out that she and he are both prophets, since God speaks to them, but they did not need to separate from their spouses. So who does Moses think he is? Does he think he is holier than they are?

The other interpretation takes the statement about the marriage at face value. The wife is not Zipporah; Cush is Ethiopia, which is nowhere near Midian. If the Cushite is Zipporah, why would Miriam and Aaron complain about the marriage years after it took place? Leibowitz quotes a medieval commentator, Ibn Kaspi, who is very critical of this explanation saying that its authors have no business tampering with the text. Moses took another wife for reasons best known to himself, Kaspi says, and it is not our business to pry into his motives. (I found it very interesting to find a defense of privacy rights expressed in the Middle Ages.)

I liked that interpretation better than Rashi's drash, which strikes me as too much of a stretch but it still leaves unanswered questions.

What did Miriam and Aaron disapprove of? Polygamy was acceptable in those days. Was it the suspicion of foreign women? But Zipporah was also a foreign woman. Some see an element of racism. Cush is Ethiopia so the wife must have been a black woman. Some commentators have said that Miriam's white skin was a punishment for disapproval of a black wife but I don't think that there is much evidence of racism in the Bible at least in the sense that we know it. In the Song of Songs, we are told that black is beautiful.

A contemporary scholar, Daniel Hayes, wrote an article in the Bible Review which makes the case that the statement about the Cushite woman can be taken literally. During the period in question, Cush, under Egyptian control, was practically part of Egypt. Thousands of Cushites lived in Egypt and permeated all levels of society so Moses may very well have known some. The Egyptians persecuted the Cushites as well as the Israelites. In Exodus 12, we were told that "many other peoples . . . a mixed multitude" left Egypt with the Israelites.

This scholar thinks that the basis of Miriam's complaint was hostility towards an interracial marriage but again, what does that have to do with prophesying? As he notes, there is no indication that God disapproved of the marriage.

Another question that obviously comes up, especially among feminists is, why does Aaron go unpunished while Miriam does not? It is true that she is the instigator of the complaint but he was her ally. Didn't he merit punishment? One explanation is that, with the heavy demands for ritual purity made on the priesthood, it would have been too disruptive to the community if he were to be punished since that would make him impure. That may be the case but I was surprised that none of the commentators I read noted something that seems obvious: Aaron repents his action, then pleads that Miriam's punishment be less harsh, and directs that plea, not directly to God, but to Moses, thereby acknowledging his brother's superior status as a prophet. Miriam doesn't repent, accepts her punishment, and is never heard from again. The fact that her death and burial in Kadesh comes shortly after, suggests like Sarah's death after the akedah, that God's rebuke was a devastating experience that left her heartbroken.

Commentators also note that the community refuses to continue on the journey until she is able to rejoin them, which is seen as an indication of her status in the community. The fact that the waters dried up immediately after her death is seen as symbolic of her powers, and is part of the legend that Miriam was responsible for a well which followed the people throughout the wilderness.

So what is Miriam's problem?

Rabbi Steinsaltz in his book *Biblical Images* subtitles his chapter on Miriam as *The Big Sister*. He spends most of the essay describing her role as a leader but devotes only one sentence to the episode in this parasha, "It seems that Miriam never quite got over being the older sister." I think that provides a possible clue to the link between the marriage and the complaint about not being treated as Moses' equal. Miriam's achievements – the rescue of Moses and the rejoicing at the sea – are in the past. She is not involved in any of the issues that have faced him – receiving the Torah, the Golden Calf, defining the commandments, building the ark, prescribing the rituals. I hear echoes of the proverbial Jewish mother whose son never calls her; now this brother to whom she has functioned as a mother, takes a second wife whose name isn't even worth mentioning and he didn't even bother to tell her . . . this is then a "last straw." She has played no role in his life in all this time. Why does he ignore her? Who does he think he is? Why aren't his siblings as good as he is?

Another point worth noting: One of my sources pointed out that Miriam is the only woman in the entire Bible who is not identified as a wife or mother. Even the other prophetesses – Deborah and Huldah – are first identified as wives even though they carry out actions with which their husbands are not involved. Furthermore, the wife-mother and mother-son are unequal relationships but being a sister is another matter. She comes out

of the same gene pool as her brothers, which implies equality and Miriam is not only a sister but oldest of the three. Why is she ignored?

Feminist scholars have interpreted the rebuke to Miriam as a put-down inflicted by a Patriarchal society on women who are too assertive. One can make a case for that assertion; for example, all Moses can say about her when he does the summing up in Deuteronomy is to call attention to the way in which she was punished. But I wonder whether the message of this passage - that leaders are chosen by God - is intended mainly for women.

In two weeks, we will have the story of Korah, also a relative of Moses, but not as close. (I hope I'm not intruding on whoever is going to do that drash but it's easy to lose sight of connections between parashot) Korah's assertions are similar to Miriam's - the language is different: she speaks of her equality as a prophet; he asserts that all the community are holy and that Moses has no right to "raise himself above the congregation." The difference is that Miriam's complaint is kept within the family and she allies herself only with Aaron. But Korah's complaint is on behalf of the whole community and he has created strong political support: 250 leaders, etc. Well, you know the rest. Moses arranges for a test and the ground opens up and swallows Korah and all his supporters: "They went down alive into Sheol with all that belonged to them." This is the worst possible punishment for an operation, initiated entirely by men. In other words, the message applies to everyone: God decides who is in charge and neither women nor men may challenge his choice.

As I was doing my homework for this drash, I found myself sensing a great deal of confusion about the relationship between holiness and prophecy on the one hand and leadership or authority on the other. What are Miriam and Aaron saying about Moses' leadership? That he should give more consideration to their opinions? Do they want a share in his powers? Do they think they could lead as well as he?

I think it's hard to discuss such questions without getting entangled in the problem of biblical language. Since we live in a society in which the dominant religion is Christianity, we absorb some of its concepts. With Christianity, holiness becomes associated with sainthood; to say that someone is holy is to say he or she is an exceptional person, capable of performing miracles, dedicating his or her life to others, committing no sins. Today, if anyone claimed to be holy, one would look for the nearest psychiatrist. In this parashah, we see assertions that that the exceptional person, the leader, is not the only one capable of prophecy, i.e., hearing God's word - and the later parasha goes even further with the assertion that everyone is holy, that all are capable of prophecy. But is everybody is capable of prophecy? Is everybody capable of leading? Apparently, the message again is that only God knows who can lead and his decisions on that score must be accepted.

But, suppose we bypass the biblical language and use contemporary secular terms. A modern Miriam might say we are all capable of thinking, analyzing, learning, intuiting, having insight, and predicting what might happen in the future i.e., prophesying. These characteristics are gifts of God and therefore we can claim, as in Biblical times, to be holy. At the same time though, we are aware - or become aware – especially in a democracy that these gifts are not all equally distributed so our leaders should be those who have more of these gifts than the rest of us. But how do we know? Here the message is God decides. Is there any other answer? That's my drash.