

## Miriam's Lesson from *Matan Torah*

By Sandra E. Rapoport and Shera Aranoff Tuchman

Barely three months after the Exodus from Egypt, we encounter the Israelites encamped at the foot of God's mountain in the wilderness of Sinai (Exodus 19). They are poised to experience redemption. The drama of the ten plagues in Egypt; the long-awaited release from the rule of the Pharaoh; the despair and jubilation at the splitting of the Red Sea; the miraculous victory over the Amalekites—all these events have brought them here to receive the law from their all-powerful God.

The Israelites have placed their trust in the hands of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and almost meekly they agree to do as God bids them (Ex. 19:8). In preparation for receiving the Torah, the Almighty commands the people, via Moses, to begin a three-day sanctification process. This process includes a thorough washing of all their clothing, a warning not to touch or even approach the mountain of God lest they suffer the punishment of death, and—importantly for this analysis—a command to refrain from sexual relations (Ex. 19:9-15). All this is to prepare them for the singular event to occur on the third day: the revelation of God's law.

Considering the Israelites' fractious nature, it is interesting to note that Exodus 19 reveals not a murmur of protest. After their hasty forced march out of Egypt, their ambush by a fierce enemy, and the hardships of living in encampments, they could easily under-

stand why God would wish them to cleanse themselves and their road-weary Egyptian clothing in preparation for the holy event. Nor did they balk at the command to keep their distance from God's mountain. Finally, the people also accepted without protest Moses' command (Ex. 19:15) that they not draw near to their wives (*al tigshu el isha*).

Indeed, it would have been unseemly for them to have approached God's revelation without some form of advance preparation. According to the commentator Sforno, such special ablutions and temporary requirements of celibacy served to highlight the coming event and caused the people to focus on its serious and awesome nature.

It is the unusual third requirement—that the Israelites remain separate from their wives—that is the focus of this article. Understanding its place in the biblical narrative and the attention that the commentaries lavish on it will help us appreciate why this stricture is central to the lesson that Miriam—and Aaron—will learn from God Himself in Numbers 12.

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 87a) explains that, when Moses instructed the people in God's name to purify themselves, he logically included himself in the prohibition, and he abstained from sexual relations with his wife Zipporah. But the Talmud adds that Moses took this command even further, separating

from Zipporah *forever*. Moses' reasoning was that if God required all the Israelites to abstain from sexual relations in anticipation of their *one-time* encounter with God, how much more so should he—Moses—abstain from sexual intimacy *at all times*! As Moses was expected to be in a constant state of readiness to receive God's prophecy face-to-face *at any time*, so the Almighty expected him to leave no room in his life for human intimacy. It is both this assumption by Moses and his continued celibacy that are the subject of Miriam and Aaron's ill-fated conversation in Numbers 12.

After encountering the command in Exodus 19 that the Israelites not draw near to their wives—*al tigshu el isha*—we do not meet up with it again until Numbers 12, the portion of the Bible that deals with Miriam's leprosy. And nowhere in Numbers 12 is the command, "not to draw near to your wives," explicit in the text. But it is front and center in the Talmud and in the commentaries' discussions of the conversation between Miriam and Aaron, and it leads ultimately to their chastisement and punishment. Why is this so?

The first two verses of Numbers 12 present the conversation between Miriam and Aaron as follows:

And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses, concerning the Kushite woman that he took, for he took a Kushite woman. And they said, "Is it only through Moses that God speaks? For He also speaks through us." And God heard.

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temporary society, We must bear in mind R. Henkin's own important caveat: "certainly the principle of habituation has the potential of being abused and misused by the irresponsible."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, careful and judicious application of this principle may ease some of our potentially discomfiting situations and merits further attention as we commemorate *Matan Torah* on Shavuot.

*Daniel Sperber is the Milan Roven Professor of Talmudic Research at Bar-Ilan University and Rabbi of the Menachem Zion Synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem.*

1 *Midrash Eliezer* is a midrashic text that was probably composed in *Eretz Yisrael* in the mid-8th century, and is so called because it begins with R. Eliezer b. R. Yose ha-Galili's *baraita* of 32 Rules. It is also called *Midrash Agur*, as it is also an exposition of Proverbs 30: 1-2 ("The words of Agur the son of Jakeh...").

2 *Shana be Shana* 5749 (1988), 182-196.

3 A *baraita* is a *tanna'itic* teaching not included in the Mishnah. The *tanna'im* were the scholars from the time period of the Mishnah.

4 Ed. J. Freimann, Berlin 1903, reprint Jerusalem 1969, *Yoreh De'ah*, 37.

5 Author of the famous *Terumot Hadeshen* and of the school of R. Meir of Rothenberg.

6 "*Ikka d'Amrei / Others Say: The Significance of Habituation in Halakha*" (*Tradition*, 34: 3, 2000). His thesis was vigorously contested by R. Emanuel Feldman (ibid: pp. 49-57) in a response entitled "Habituation: An Halakhic Void with Risky Implications". However, I find R. Henkin's argument exceedingly convincing.

7 *Tziz Eliezer* vol.9, no.50, sect.3, 195.

8 Compare Shlomo Eidelberg, *Jewish Life in Austria in the 15th Century* (Philadelphia 1962), 84 where he writes as follows: Despite their opposition (to gambling and card-playing) the rabbis were forced to tolerate gaming, and turned their efforts to restraining it in various ways. This is evidenced by their admonition against playing cards in the period between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. (*Leket Yosher* 11, p. 118). Here too, we see how these authorities came to grips with the reality presented by their times.

9 This is Feldman's formulation, *Tradition*. 49.

10 R. Yehuda Henkin, op. cit. 45.

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There is a wealth of commentary on the subject and meaning of their conversation, but for our purposes let us concentrate on Rashi's assumption that Miriam and Aaron are discussing the fact that Moses has separated himself completely from his wife and that Zipporah now occupies a separate tent. Rashi explains verse 1 saying, "on account of the woman" means he married her and then he sent her away." Rashi then explains verse 2 saying, "Does not God also speak to us? And yet we have not continued to refrain from behaving in the natural way [with our spouses]." Rashi's commentary is seminal, as he connects verse 1, which deals generally with Moses' *Kushite woman*, to verse 2, which seems to be an independent statement about the prophesying abilities of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Rashi is making the bold inference that Miriam and Aaron's conversation is not only about Zipporah but also about Moses having continued to keep himself separate from her, which is against the expected code of behavior.

Implicit in Rashi's explanation, and in the discussions of numerous commentaries, is that Miriam befriended her sister-in-law Zipporah and that the two women developed an empathy for one another, born of their close personal relationship. We can appreciate this intimacy, because both Miriam and Zipporah shared a vital life-mission and *raison d'être*: loving and caring for Moses. Miriam watched over her brother until he was taken into the palace as a prince of Egypt; Zipporah assumed this mission when she married the fugitive Egyptian and began to build him a home in the wilderness beyond Midian.

At this juncture, in Numbers 12, the commentaries connect these two heroic women—Miriam, Moses' sister, and Zipporah, Moses' wife—through *midrashic* conversation. According to Rashi, Miriam and Zipporah were standing next to one another when, in Numbers 11:27, a runner announced to Moses that two Israelite men, Eldad and Meidad, were prophesying in the camp. Zipporah leaned over to Miriam and whispered, "Woe unto their wives! For it is a lonely life they will lead as wives of prophets of God. Their husbands will surely remain separate from them as my husband has separated from me." It is from this astonishing whispered confidence that Miriam learned that Moses no longer visited Zipporah's tent,

and this piece of information, says Rashi, is what she discloses to her brother Aaron in Numbers 12:1.

Alsichich proposes that the reason Miriam speaks first in the fateful conversation with Aaron is that Miriam was troubled by Zipporah's presumptive loss of face among the Israelites because of Moses' continued absence from her tent. According to Alsichich, *this* is the subject that she broaches with Aaron.

Thus, the Talmud and the commentaries on Numbers 12:1 and 2 teach us that Miriam and Aaron's conversation could have occurred as follows:

**“Torah is a part  
of one's life, not  
apart from it.”**

And Miriam said to Aaron, "Brother, I need to talk to you about Moses' wife, Zipporah. Daily I watch as she goes about her chores. She holds her head high, but I can see that she is saddened. She no longer dons her colorful Midianite robes, and she dresses her hair in a plain fashion (*Sifrei*). Zipporah is pining for our brother, Moses. Ever since the eve of receiving God's Torah, when we were all commanded to separate from our spouses, Moses has ceased to visit her tent. This is surely not God's way, and it breaks my heart to encounter our sister-in-law daily, and witness her misery and longing for Moses (*Yalkut Shimoni*). Surely God did not intend for Moses to be more strict in his sexual abstention than all of us! Why, we are prophets, too, and we were permitted, as was all of Israel, to resume family intimacy after the revelation! Why does Moses hold himself above us, and cause such suffering in Zipporah, a goodly and God-fearing woman and the mother of his sons (*Chatam Sofer*)?"

Of course, the actual Torah text ends verse 2 with the words, *And God heard*. Verses 4 through 10 present God's chastisement of Miriam and Aaron, His defense of Moses' behavior, His description of Moses as unique among all prophets past, present, and future, and His anger at Miriam and Aaron, culminating in the visitation of the punishment of leprosy. Miriam and Aaron's prime transgression, as inferred from God's words, was their effrontery in comparing their level of prophecy with that of Moses. God is explicit: "My servant Moses is a special prophet

in a class by himself; alone do I speak with Moses mouth-to-mouth."

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, in his commentary to *Shabbat* 87a, explains that Moses' extraordinary extension of the sexual abstention was excusable *only* because the divine presence hovered over Moses day and night, requiring his constant state of readiness. This sexual abstention would have been *incorrect* and *unwarranted*, though, if applied to the Israelites at-large.

We learn from God's reaction that Miriam and Aaron's deep concern for Zipporah was ill-expressed and, furthermore, that their concerns, however legitimate, still did not alter her fate: her husband, Moses, once he became *ish ha-Elokim*, a peerless man of God and an intimate of the Almighty, remained estranged from her forever.

It therefore falls to Torah students to discern a vital message from the brief but nonetheless heartbreaking drama that is presented in Numbers 12 and that reverberates from *Matan Torah* in Exodus 19. The prime message that is conveyed by Moses' separation from Zipporah is that it is the exception that proves the rule. The "rule," or code of behavior to live by, includes necessary, intimate, and ongoing relations between wives and their husbands. The only time that it was commanded that this natural rule be suspended was in preparation to receive the Torah in the Sinai desert at the foot of God's volcanic mountain. Logically, the fact that refraining from sexual relations had to be prohibited fairly shouts that the normative code was precisely the opposite. And the single person who was permitted to extend that interdiction was Moses, God's intimate servant.

Miriam was correct: Judaism does not require an unbridgeable gap between humankind's physical and spiritual self. Miriam, Aaron, and the people of Israel were permitted—and expected—to resume normal sexual relations with their spouses in order to live out the *mitzvot* of God's Torah. Embracing God's Torah does not require a concomitant split from the physical or an embrace of asceticism. Miriam's unsung, hard-won lesson from the preparation for *Matan Torah* is that the Torah is a part of one's life, not apart from it.

*Sandra E. Rapoport and Shera Aranoff Tuchman are the co-authors of The Passions of the Matriarchs, a textual and midrashic study of the book of Genesis (KTAV 2004). Their upcoming book (also from KTAV) focuses on the women of Exodus and will be available early in 2008.*