

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A Strong Sign

Rabbi Nicole Wilson-Spiro, PhD Candidate in Rabbinic Literature, Gershon Kekst Graduate School, JTS



The author at her bat mitzvah

I offered my very first *devar Torah* on this portion as I became a bat mitzvah 25 years ago. My memory of my early thoughts on this portion is admittedly hazy, but I am quite sure I did not pick up on the age requirements given in the portion for serving as a Levite. According to Numbers 8:24–25, a Levite man was required to be between 25 and 50 years old to perform the duties associated with the Tabernacle. Rashi notes that Numbers 4:3 states that the minimum age for service is 30 years, and not 25, as in our portion. He suggests that at 25 a Levite man began to study the laws of sacrifice, and after five years of study, at the

age of 30, he was prepared to take on his Levitical duties.

Rashi adds: “From here (we learn) that if a student doesn’t see clear improvement (literally, ‘a strong sign’) in his studies after five years, he won’t see improvement going forward.” This is a clever way to reconcile the two biblical verses. It also allows a glimpse into Rashi’s perspective regarding Jewish education. We too view five years as a period of time during which one may acquire sufficient proficiency to begin working as a rabbi or professor. As a graduate of rabbinical school and as a current PhD candidate, I know that five years is merely, as Rashi says, “a strong sign,” the beginning of a journey that ideally lasts a lifetime.

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit www.jtsa.edu/torah



Beha'alotekha 5777

בהעלתך תשע"ז



Let's Talk about Sex

Dr. Michal Raucher, JTS Fellow and Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies, University of Cincinnati

There are many unanswered questions about the now-infamous incident of God chastising Aaron and Miriam and then inflicting Miriam with *tzara'at*, or leprosy, at the conclusion of Parashat Beha'alotekha. Primarily, there are questions about what exactly Miriam and Aaron did to receive God's rebuke, and why Miriam is the only one punished. Many interpreters have considered Miriam's wrongdoing in two ways: either she is guilty of racism towards Tziporah, or God scolds her for the presumption that she and Aaron are prophets just as important as Moses.

Those who accuse Miriam of racism focus on her statement in the beginning of the incident: “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: ‘He married a Cushite woman!’” (Num. 12:1). “Cushite” was understood to refer to someone from Ethiopia, and so they may have been disparaging Tziporah as a dark-skinned woman (e.g. Rashi). Others look at Miriam and Aaron's question, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?” (12:2) to mean that Miriam and Aaron were asserting their own prophetic authority.

Rashi, however, suggests an alternative interpretation to Miriam's statements about Tziporah and Moses, and his interpretation influences the commentary in the *Etz Hayim* and the ArtScroll *humashim*. Rashi presents us with a more positive view of Miriam. Instead of focusing on the word “Cushite” in those verses, he looks at the word “married.” Rashi insists that everyone thought highly of Tziporah, but that Moses no longer spent time with her—or perhaps had even divorced her. Miriam and Aaron, then, were concerned about Moses's decision to separate from a wonderful human being like Tziporah. The *Etz Hayim humash* clarifies, “In Rashi's view, Miriam was motivated more

by concern for Moses's wife than by feelings of jealousy or rivalry" (833). The ArtScroll *humash* provides a more elaborate description of the affair. Based on a comment in Sifrei, it states, "Since Moses had to be ready to hear God's word at any moment, he had to be ritually pure at all times, which meant that he had to refrain from marital relations with his wife Zipporah. This intimate matter remained their private affair until Miriam learned of it from a chance remark by Zipporah" (974–975).

With these interpretations, I'd like to recreate the scene for you. Tziporah shared with Miriam (perhaps indirectly, according to Rashi) that she had not been intimate with Moses for quite some time because of Moses's commitments to God. Miriam, recognizing that she had slightly more influence, was therefore empowered to speak up on behalf of her outsider sister-in-law and decided to share this knowledge with Aaron so that they could figure out how to broach the topic with either Moses or God. She said, in essence, "Moses is *married!* He has obligations to his wife and he's neglecting them." In this light, when Miriam asserts that God has also spoken through her, she might be saying, "I, too, am a prophet, and I don't neglect my spousal commitments merely because God speaks to me" (cf Rashi on 12:2).

God's punishment could still be a correction to Miriam's assertion that God speaks to her in the same way that God speaks to Moses. But Miriam's initial concern for Tziporah is ignored as the scene continues. It seems that Miriam is concerned that Moses's religious commitments are taking precedence over his marital commitments in a way that is damaging his relationship with his wife. Furthermore, perhaps Miriam is trying to encourage more discussion about sex so as to ensure healthy sexual relationships. She is attempting to open up this conversation with Aaron and Moses, particularly in relation to religious commitments, and she is summarily punished for suggesting that anything should come before Moses's connection with God.

Thankfully there are a few individuals in today's Jewish world who could be considered modern-day Miriams for their efforts to make discussions of sex less taboo. They, in turn, want to demonstrate the value of healthy sexual relationships, particularly when religious traditions are a significant factor in regulating sexuality.

Dr. Ruth Westheimer has long been known as a Jewish sex therapist. She spoke about topics like same-sex relationships, sexual pleasure, and the

importance of foreplay when everyone else thought they were too taboo to address. In a recent article in *Lilith* magazine, Dr. Ruth is quoted as saying, "A woman must take responsibility for her sexual satisfaction." As a proudly Jewish advocate of sexual education and sexual communication, Dr. Ruth has led this discourse in the Jewish world for decades.

Dr. Batsheva Marcus is a sex therapist who serves the Orthodox Jewish community, because she understands how religious legal restrictions can affect women's and men's sexual health and enjoyment. Dr. Marcus finds that she often has to teach married couples about male and female anatomy and how to enjoy sex. She has many patients who are Haredi and fear that any additions or variations will be contrary to halakhah, Jewish law. Although Haredi rabbis often refer couples to Dr. Marcus, these same rabbis then vet her suggestions for their appropriateness within the bounds of Jewish law. She "reminds them that God wants a husband and wife to be close and assures them that she is 'leading them to a better marriage and to being closer to God'" ("The Orthodox Sex Guru," *New York Times Magazine*, January 22, 2015). Dr. Marcus realizes that although religious regulations sometimes discriminate against certain sexualities and sexual preferences, and can be applied in harmful ways, healthy sexual relationships within the bounds of religious law are possible.

Dr. Ruth and Dr. Marcus are carrying a torch lit by Miriam in this parashah as they recognize that while many may see sexuality as a threat to religious devotion, in many ways the two can enhance one another. In most of the Tanakh, we think about Miriam as a wonderful role model, pointing to her courage while following baby Moses down the Nile, her leadership in song after the crossing of the sea, and the immense sadness in the camp at her death. Therefore, the fact that most commentators—and God's punishment—focus on her own comparison to Moses is unfortunate. In light of the interpretations brought here, I would assert that the prominent negative view of her in light of her statements in this parashah misses one of Miriam's most important contributions to the contemporary Jewish world. Let's also reclaim Miriam as our role model for promoting healthy sexual relationships.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (ז"ל) and Harold Hassenfeld (ז"ל).