

Parashat Shemot

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THE MARRIAGE OF MOSES AND ZIPPORAH

- Why does Moses marry Zipporah, a gentile woman and the daughter of a Midianite priest?
- Why does Moses stay in Midian for sixty years, during which he was cut off from his people?
- Why does God seek to kill Moses on his way to Egypt?
- Why is Zipporah the first to react and circumcise her son?
- Did Moses remain married to Zipporah when he returned to Egypt?

A. Moses' Flight to Midian and His Marriage to Zipporah

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE REDEMPTION FROM EGYPT

Parashat Shemot opens the book of Exodus – the book of redemption – with a description of the nation of Israel's enslavement in Egypt and the introduction of Moses' mission. Moses is the central figure in the story of the nation's liberation from Egypt. The *parasha* begins with a general description of the slavery in Egypt, and then narrows its focus to Moses.

**Female
Figures
in the
Process of
Redemption**

However, the Torah does not only follow Moses and his mission – it also mentions a number of other individuals who are vital to the process of redemption:

A.

The midwives who disobey Pharaoh's commandment to kill the male babies thus saving them (Ex. 1:15-18).

B.

"The daughter of Levi" whose name is not mentioned but we know is Jochebed (Ex. 6:20). She gives birth to Moses and hides him, ensuring his survival despite Pharaoh's decree (Ex. 2:1-3).

C.

Moses' siste, who is also not mentioned by name but who is identified as Miriam (Ex. 15:20). She watches over her brother from afar and offers Pharaoh's daughter to bring a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby (Ex. 2:4-9).

D.

Pharaoh's daughter who violates her father's command and saves the baby boy from death, naming him Moses and raising him herself (Ex. 2:5-10).

1 The fact that the text does not mention the names of secondary characters in the story – Moses' parents and sister, Pharaoh's daughter – is intended to focus the reader's attention on Moses. This theme of not mentioning characters' names in order to focus on a specific point will be seen again later on.

**The
Importance
of Women
in the
Process of
Redemption**

It is interesting to note that all of the important characters involved in giving birth to, saving and raising Moses are women. The significant role played by women is described by the following *midrash*:

"Beneath the apple tree I awakened you" (Song. 8:5) – the Sages explained: in the merit of the righteous women who were in that generation, they were redeemed from Egypt. (*Yalkut Shimoni Shir HaShirim, remez* 993)²

התחת התפוח עוררתוך – דרשבא: בוכות נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו ממצרים. (ילקוט שמעוני שיר השירים, רמז תתקצג)

According to the *midrash*, not only did the women directly involved in saving Moses and other children play an important role in the redemption – all of the women in the nation played a role.³ The Torah states that, despite the grueling slave labor, the nation continued to reproduce:

And as much as they tortured [the nation], so it increased and burst forth. (Ex. 1:12)

...וְכַאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנּוּ אֹתוֹ כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וַיִּבֶן יִפְרֹץ. (שמות א', יב)

Every woman who was willing to become pregnant and have children in Egypt, despite the terrible

2 The source for this *midrash* is the Babylonian Talmud (*Sotah* 11b); see note 5.
3 Some *midrashim* consistently link the redemption from Egypt to the actions of women. See for example *Bamidbar Rabba* 3:6; *Mechilta DeRabbi Shimon ben Yochai* 13:4; *Bereshit Rabba* 88:5; tractate *Hulin* 92a; *Seder Eliyahu Rabba* 27.

conditions⁴, was a part of the redemption.⁵

4 The despair was caused by Pharaoh's decrees is illustrated by the following *midrash*:

עמרם גדול הדור היה כיון שגור פרעה הרשע כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכוהו, אמר: לשוא אנו עמלין! עמד וגירש את אשתו. עמדו כולן וגירשו את נשותיהן. אמרה לו בתו: אבא קשה גירתך יותר משל פרעה, שפרעה לא גור אלא על הזכרים ואתה גורת על הזכרים ועל הנקיבות, פרעה לא גור אלא בעולם הזה ואתה בעולם הזה ולעולם הבא, פרעה הרשע ספק מתקיימת גירתו ספק אינה מתקיימת אתה צדיק בודאי שגירתך מתקיימת, שנאמר (איוב כ"ב, כח): "ותגור אומר ויקם לך". עמד והחזיר את אשתו. עמדו כולן והחזירו את נשותיהן.

Amram was the greatest man of his generation. When the evil Pharaoh decreed that any son to be born should be cast into the river, he said: We are toiling in vain! He got up and divorced his wife, and all of [the men] got up and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him: "Father, your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh, for he has decreed only against the males, while you have decreed against both males and females; Pharaoh's decree affects only this world, while yours affects both this world and the World to Come; the evil Pharaoh's decree may be upheld or it may not, while you are a righteous man and your decree shall surely be upheld, as it says: 'What you decree shall be established for you' (Job. 22:28)." He got up and remarried his wife, and all of [the men] remarried their wives. (Tractate *Sotah* 12a)

5 As the Talmud states:

דרש רב עזריא: בשכר נשים צדקניות שהיו באותו הדור נגאלו ישראל ממצרים. בשעה שהולכות לשאוב מים, הקב"ה מומן להם דגים קטנים בכדיהן ושואבות מחצה מים ומחצה דגים ובאות ושופות שתי קדירות אחת של חמין ואחת של דגים, ומוליכות אצל בעליהן לשדה, ומרחיצות אותן וסכות אותן ומאכילות אותן ומשקות אותן ונוקקות להן בין שפתים, שנאמר (תהלים ס"ח, יד): "אם תשכבון בין שפתים וגו'" – בשכר תשכבון בין שפתים וכו' ישראל לבית מצרים, שנאמר (שם): "כנפי יונה נחפה בכסף ואברותיה בירקרק חרוץ". וכיון שמתעברות באות לבתיהם, וכיון שמגיע זמן מולדיהן, הולכות ויולדות בשדה תחת התפוח, שנאמר (שיר השירים ח, ה): "תחת התפוח עוררתני".

Rav Avira taught: in merit of the righteous women who were in that generation, [the nation of] Israel was redeemed from Egypt. When they went to draw water, God would place small fish in their jugs, so that they would draw half water and half fish. And they would come and boil two pots, one of stew and one of fish, and bring them to their husbands to the field, and wash [their husbands] and anoint them and feed them and give them to drink, and

IS MOSES ISOLATED FROM THE NATION IN MIDIAN?

**The
Marriage
of Moses
and
Zipporah**

Another female character in this *parasha* is Zipporah, Moses' wife. Zipporah is first mentioned by name when she marries Moses:

And Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses. (Ex. 2:21)

וַיֵּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְשִׁבֶת אֶת הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּלָה לְמֹשֶׁה. (שם ב', כא)

The story of Moses and Zipporah's marriage raises a number of questions: why does Moses choose to marry a Midianite woman?

**Zipporah's
Influence on
Moses vs.
the Israelite
Women's
Influence
on Their
Husbands**

The story of Moses and Zipporah's marriage seems to contrast to the verses and *midrashim* quoted above, where the female figure in the family takes initiative and acts to bring about the redemption. Moses escapes to Midian, where he meets and marries Zipporah. From that point, Moses lives in his father-in-law's house sixty years.⁶ Moses' marriage to Zipporah

have relations with them among the campfires, as it says: "If you lie among the campfires" (Ps. 68:14) – because of the fact that they lay among the campfires the nation merited the riches of Egypt, as it says: "The wings of the dove are covered in silver, and its feathers in green gold" (ibid.). And when they became pregnant they would come to their homes, and when they were due to give birth, they would go out and give birth in the field under the apple tree, as it says: "Beneath the apple tree I awakened you" (Song. 8:5). (*Sotah* 11b)

6 The number of years Moses spent in Midian can be calculated by subtracting his age when he fled to Midian from his age when he stood before Pharaoh. The verse states: "And Moses grew up and went out to his brothers" (Ex. 2:11). The

seems to have distanced him from his brethren, who are still suffering in slavery in Egypt as their wives encourage them to await the redemption and not to despair.

Israel's
Redeemer,
Marrying a
Gentile?!

Moreover, Moses' marriage to a gentile woman (the daughter of a Midianite priest, no less⁷) ostensibly

commentators present three possibilities for Moses' age at the time. According to Ramban, Moses was 12 (Ramban on Ex. 2:23). The *Panim-Yafot* maintains that he was 13 (*Panim-Yafot* on Ex. 2:11). The *midrashim*, however, express the opinion that he was 20 years old when he went out to his brothers and ended up fleeing Pharaoh: "And some say [he was] twenty [years] in Pharaoh's house, sixty [years] in Midian and forty in the desert" (*Tanhuma* on *Shemot* (8)). Similarly, another *midrash* states: "'And Moses grew up' – he was twenty years old" (*Sechel Tov* [Buber] on Ex. 2:11). The next day Moses escapes Pharaoh's house (Ex. 2:11-15). When Moses returns to Pharaoh to request the nation's freedom, he is 80 years old (Ex. 7:7). Therefore, we can conclude that Moses spent at least sixty years in Midian.

7 *Ba'al HaTurim* writes the following:

יתרו היה כומר לעבודה זרה, וכשנשא משה בתו הוצרך משה לידור לו שבן הראשון שיוולד לו שיהיה כומר לע"ז. וזה היה כוונתו כי ידע שיחזיר את חמיו למוטב כמו שעשה שהרי נתגייר. מכל מקום נענש שבן בנו נעשה כומר לעבודה זרה שנאמר ויהונתן בן גרשום בן מנשה (שופטים י"ח, ל) גר"ן תלוייה ודרשו חז"ל (בבא בתרא קט, ב) בן משה היה אלא שתולין הקלקלה במקולקל.

Jethro was a priest of idol worship, and when Moses married his daughter, Moses was obligated to swear that the first son born to them would be a priest of idol worship. And this was his intention: he knew that he would bring his father-in-law to the right path, as he did, for [Jethro] converted. In any event he was punished, as his grandson did indeed become a priest of idol worship, as it says: "And Jehonathan, son of Gershom, son of Menashe" (Judg. 18:30) – [Menashe is written] with a small letter *nun*, and our Sages interpreted: "It was Moses' son [Menashe without the letter *nun* becomes *Moshe*, Moses], but we hold the corrupted responsible for his own corruption)" (*Bava Batra* 109b). (*Siftey Cohen* on Ex. 2:16)

harms his worthiness to fulfill the Divine command of liberating the nation of Israel. After all, the nation was redeemed through their merit that they kept themselves separate from the Egyptians⁸ (*Bamidbar Rabba* 13:20, s.v. "*Bayom hashishi*"). How could Moses, their future redeemer, marry a gentile woman?!

Why does Moses choose to stay with Jethro in Midian and marry one of his daughters? Does Moses stay in Midian only due to fear of Pharaoh's retribution should he return to Egypt? Why does he cut himself off from his people for such a long period of time?⁹

8 A. The problematic nature of Moses' marriage to Zipporah is expressed in the following *midrash*, which recounts the dialogue between Moses and Zimri ben Salou, regarding Kozbi bat Zur:

אמר לו (זמרי למשה): בן עמרם! זו אסורה או מותרת? ואם תאמר אסורה – בת יתרו מי התירה לך?...

He said to him (Zimri to Moses): Son of Amram! This one is prohibited, while that one is permitted? And if you say she is prohibited – who permitted you [to marry] Jethro's daughter?... (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

B. Miriam's speech about Moses – "And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses, regarding the Cushite wife that he had taken, for he had taken a Cushite wife" (Num. 12:1) – can be interpreted as criticism of his marriage to Zipporah. However, most commentators do not subscribe to this view, instead interpreting Miriam's words as criticism of Moses' separation from his wife due to his high prophetic status.

9 The *midrash* explains that Moses had even sworn to Jethro that he would not leave him:

"ולא נשבע למרמה" – זה משה, כשהלך אצל יתרו נשבע לו שלא ילך חוץ מדעתו וכשהלך בשליחותו של הקב"ה הלך אצל יתרו והתיר שבועתו. הדא הוא דכתיב: "וישב אל יתרו חותנו".

"And does not swear deceitfully" (Ps. 24:4) – this is Moses, when he went to Jethro he swore to him that he would not leave without [Jethro's] consent, and when he left as

Moses' marriage to Zipporah, described only briefly in the text, must be examined closely to understand its roots and significance.

B. Who is Zipporah?

God
Chooses
Moses
After His
Marriage

In later verses, it is evident that God does not find fault with Moses and Zipporah's marriage –it is after this marriage that God selects specifically Moses to take the nation of Israel out of Egypt.¹⁰

the messenger of the Holy One, Blessed be He, he went to Jethro and annulled his vow. As it is written: "And he returned to his father-in-law Jethro." (*Shemot Rabba* 4:1)

A few medieval commentators explain that Moses' decision to settle in Midian was caused by fear:

אף על גב דיתרו השביע למשה, כדכתיב: "ויואל משה לשבת את האיש ויתן לו את צפורה", אפילו הכי משה רבינו לא היה נשבע אלא מתוך שהיה ירא מדתן ואבירם, ולפיכך פתח לו הקב"ה כי מתו כל האנשים המבקשים את נפשך.

Even though Jethro made Moses swear, as it is written: "And Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses" (Ex. 2:21), even so our teacher Moses would not have sworn had he not feared Datan and Abiram, and this is why the Holy One, Blessed be He, began [by saying] to him, "For all of those who sought to kill you have died" (Ex. 4:19). (*Ran on Nedarim* 64b)

10 The midrash (*Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*) extends this positing by stating that Jethro gave Zipporah specifically to Moses knowing that Moses would redeem the nation of Israel from Egypt:

כשבא משה לתוך ביתו נכנס לגן ביתו של יתרו וראה את המטה וקרא את האותות אשר עליו ושלף ידו ולקחו וראה יתרו למשה ואמר זה עתיד לגאול את ישראל ממצרים לפיכך נתן לו את צפורה בתו לאשה שנאמר: "ויואל משה לשבת את האיש".

And when Moses came into his house, he came into Jethro's garden and saw the staff and read the signs that were upon it, and he reached out his hand and took it, and Jethro saw this about Moses and said, "This one shall liberate Israel from Egypt," and therefore he gave [Moses] his daughter

Moses is
Saved by
Zipporah

This notion is reinforced in chapter four by the incident that occurs on Moses' way from Midian to Egypt:

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמְּלֹךְ
וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֹשׁ
הַמֵּיתוֹ: וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה
צֶרֶת וַתִּקְרָת אֶת עֶרְלַת
בְּנֵהּ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו
וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתָן דָּמִים
אַתָּה לִּי: וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ
אִזְ אִמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים
לְמוֹלַת. (שְׁמוֹת ד',
כד-כו)

And it was on the way, at the inn,
and God met him and sought to
put him to death. And Zipporah
took a stone and cut off her
son's foreskin, and she touched
it to his feet and said, "For you
are a husband of blood to me."
And He released him, and so she
said, "A husband of blood, of
circumcision." (Ex. 4:24-26)

God has sent Moses on a mission to redeem the nation from Egypt. As Moses is in the process of fulfilling this command, God attempts to kill him" and it is Zipporah who saves him from death. This story raises a number of questions, which will be dealt with later

Zipporah for a wife, as it says: "And Moses agreed to stay with the man." (*Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 39)

11 Later on, we will see that certain parallels emerge between Moses and Jacob, one of which is demonstrated by this incident. Both Moses and Jacob were commanded to return to the land of their birth; on their way to fulfill that command they are met by a messenger of God, who fights with them and nearly defeats them, but does not manage to stop them. This happens to both of them at night: Jacob is described as fighting "until the dawn," while Moses is "at the inn," a place to stay for the night (see Gen. 31:3; 32:25-32). However, there is a difference between the two episodes: Jacob is described as fighting with a messenger of God – "And a man fought with him," while Moses is detained by God himself: "And God met him and sought to put him to death," and it is Zipporah who saves him.

on, but it is clear from the story that Zipporah is the one who saves Moses and **makes the process of redemption possible**. She thus joins the list of women in whose merit the nation of Israel was redeemed.

THE MYSTERY OF ZIPPORAH AND MOSES' MARRIAGE

This incident, in which Moses is saved by Zipporah, is the only time the Torah mentions anything about Zipporah and her deeds until the nation leaves Egypt. Later on, she is mentioned twice more:

Reuniting with Jethro and Zipporah

The first time is when her father, Jethro, comes to Moses in the desert, bringing Zipporah and her sons with him (Ex. 18:1-6). This reveals incidentally that Zipporah has been with her father in Midian, and not with Moses and the rest of the nation. She only rejoins them with her father before the Torah is given at Mount Sinai. Here, too, the narrative raises more questions than it answers: when did Zipporah return to Midian? Does Zipporah's being "sent away" mean that she and Moses divorced,¹² or only temporarily separated?¹³ What was the reason for their separation?¹⁴ Will Zipporah now resume living

12 This is implied by the fact that the same expression of "sending away" is used in a number of other places in the Torah referring to divorce: "And she shall be a wife for him, for he has violated her; he cannot send her away all of his life" (Deut. 22:29); "And he shall write her a document of divorce and put it in her hand and send her away from his house" (Deut. 24:1); and Deut. 21:14. See also *Mechilta, Parashat Yitro, parasha I*.

13 As some commentators explain (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra on Ex. 18:2).

14 See Rashi's commentary quoted in note 45.

with Moses normally?¹⁵ These are difficult questions and the commentators suggest a number of possible answers.¹⁶

Miriam's Speech about Moses and His Cushite Wife

Zipporah is mentioned a second time in the book of Numbers, when Miriam and Aaron speak about Moses' "Cushite wife." Here, Moses and Zipporah's marital life is explicitly questioned:¹⁷

And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses, regarding the Cushite wife that he had taken, for he had taken a Cushite wife. And they said, "Has God spoken only to Moses? Has He not spoken to us as well?" And God heard.	וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכּוּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי אִשָּׁה כּוּשִׁית לָקַח: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֵךְ בְּמִשְׁחָה דָבָר ה' הֲלֹא גַם בָּנוּ דִבֶּר, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה'. (במדבר י"ב, א-ב)
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Zipporah is referred to by her nickname, not her true name¹⁸. This adds to the mystery surrounding Moses

15 As Ramban explains:

כי לקחה יתרו להשיבה אליו אף על פי ששלחה ממנו, בעבור ששמע כל אשר עשה אלהים למשה, כי מעתה ראוי ללכת אחרי המלך בכל אשר ילך.

For Jethro took her to return her to [Moses], even though he had sent her away, for he heard everything that God had done for Moses; for now it was fitting to follow the king [i.e., Moses] in everything he does. (Ramban on Ex. 18:2)

16 See notes 12-15.

17 Regarding the identification of the "Cushite woman" as Zipporah, see Rashbam and Ibn Ezra on Num. 12:1. Below we will cite commentaries which explain that this woman is indeed Zipporah.

18 The commentators attempt to explain this puzzling detail: see Rashi and *Ba'al HaTurim* on Num. 12:1, and Rabbenu Bahya and *Hizkuni* ad loc.

and Zipporah's marital life.¹⁹ Miriam's words must be explained – what did she mean? What fault did she find with Moses' marriage, and why is it unworthy of a prophet?

To understand these enigmatic episodes involving Zipporah, we shall suggest an explanation that will give meaning to Moses and Zipporah's marriage and answer the questions raised above.

C. Moses and Jethro

MOSES' DOUBLE ESCAPE TO MIDIAN

Let us first review the broader context of Moses and Zipporah's marriage.

Moses'
Flight from
Pharaoh

The reason for Moses' arrival in Midian is given by the text:

And Pharaoh heard this thing, and he sought to kill Moses, and Moses fled from before Pharaoh and he settled in the land of Midian, and he sat by the well. (Ex. 2:15)	וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהָרֵג אֶת מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיָּשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְיָן וַיֹּשֶׁב עַל הַבְּאֵר. (שמות ב', טו)
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Moses flees from Pharaoh, who seeks to execute

¹⁹ Even if we accept the opinion that the "Cushite woman" is not referring to Zipporah, this episode raises other questions: who is the second woman that Moses married? Why did he marry her, and why are we not told anything about it? See Rashbam and Ibn Ezra on Num. 12:1 for further discussion of these questions.

him for killing an Egyptian who was beating one of Moses' Israelite brethren. Is Pharaoh so dedicated to his people's protection that he would be willing to kill Moses over this?

Moses the
Rebel

It seems that Moses' death sentence is not a result of his murdering the Egyptian – it is due to Pharaoh's fear of him. When Moses kills the Egyptian, Pharaoh recognizes the first hints of rebellion. Moses, who grew up in Pharaoh's house, begins to rebel against the injustice perpetrated by Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian people, and might eventually lead a full scale rebellion.²⁰

Unplanned
Rebellion

Still, the fact that Moses flees indicates that he had no imminent plans for a full-scale revolt. Had Moses wanted to rebel against Pharaoh, he would not have left so fast – he might have hidden in Egypt or somewhere nearby and continued working against Pharaoh from there. Running away does not suit a man who seeks to head a rebellion.

²⁰ While this episode is presented in the text as a one-time incident, we view it as a defining moment which characterizes Moses' behavior and morals. Some of the commentators also understand Pharaoh's desire to kill Moses as stemming from his fear that Moses would use his power to cause damage to Pharaoh. *Siftei Cohen* writes:

שמע שהרג בדיבור, וזהו "את הדבר הזה", ולזה היה הוא מבקש כיצד יהרגהו, שהיה מפתח שלא יהרגהו משה בדיבור.

He heard that [Moses] killed with speech [*dibbur*], and this is what "this matter [*davar*]" is referring to, and for this reason he sought to find a way to kill him, **for he was afraid that Moses would kill him with speech.** (*Siftei Cohen* on Ex. 2:15)

Moses' Flight
- From His
Brethren

Perhaps Moses is not only fleeing Pharaoh, but his own people as well after what was said to him on “the second day”:

And he went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting,²¹ and he said to the offender, “Why do you strike your fellow man?” And he said, “Who made you minister and judge over us? Do you intend to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?”... (Ex. 2:13-14)

וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וַהֲגִה שְׁנֵי אֲנָשִׁים עִבְרִים נֹגְצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְרִשָּׁע לָמָּה תִכָּהֶרֶץ: וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שָׂמַךְ לְאִישׁ שֶׁר וַשְׁפֹּט עָלֵינוּ הֲלִהְרַגְנִי אֶתְּהָ אָמַר כְּאִשֶּׁר הִרְגַתָּ אֶת הַמִּצְרִי... (שם, יג-יד)

Moses sees that unjust acts are committed within his own people as well, and that the people are not interested in correcting this. He perceives that the wicked man’s reaction to his attempt to rebuke him is representative of the general spiritual state of the nation – they prefer to continue living as they are and are not interested in anyone trying to influence them or change their way of life. Moses feels that the people he wants to save are not ready to rebel against their oppressors as long as they are willing to perpetrate injustice amongst themselves.

Furthermore, Moses realizes that not only are the people not ready for rebellion, they might actually cooperate with their oppressors and betray him to

²¹ Although this is also presented as a one-time incident, it too can be interpreted as a defining moment which may have actually occurred several times in different forms.

Pharaoh:²²

...And Moses was afraid, and he said, “Indeed, the matter has become known.” (Ex. 2:14)

...וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן נֹדַע הַדָּבָר. (שם, יד)

Moses
Despairs of
Redeeming
the Nation

In light of the above, Moses might have left Egypt for reasons beyond fear of Pharaoh. He leaves Egypt with the sense that there is no way to repair what has been done. There is no way to save the nation of Israel as long as they themselves are not interested in fixing their shortcomings.²³ They must be willing to

²² The *midrash* explains Moses’ flight from Egypt in this way as well:

ומדרשו – נודע לי הדבר שהייתי תמה עליו מה חטאו ישראל מכל ע’ אומות להיות נרדים בעבודת פרך, אבל רואה אני שהם ראויים לכך.

And interpreted homiletically – it was known to me, as I wondered what the sin of Israel was that they, out of all 70 nations, were enslaved in hard labor, but now I see that they are deserving of it. (*Shemot Rabba* 1:30; see also *Tanhuma* on Ex. ch. 10, quoted by Rashi in his commentary on Ex. 2:14)

²³ This observation of Moses’ is stated explicitly in the book of Ezekiel:

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נִשְׂאתִי יָדִי לָהֶם לְהוֹצִיאֵם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֶל אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְחַץ לָהֶם וְבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבֶשׁ צְבִי הִיא לְכֹל הָאָרְצוֹת: וַאֲמַר אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ שְׂקוּצֵי עֵינָיו הַשְּׁלִיכוּ וּבְגִלְגֹּלֵי מִצְרַיִם אֶל תַּטְמְאוּ אֲנִי ה’ אֲדַלְהֵיכֶם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ בִי וְלֹא אָבוּ לִשְׁמַע אֵלַי אִישׁ אֶת שְׂקוּצֵי עֵינֵיהֶם לֹא הִשְׁלִיכוּ וְאֶת גִּלְגֹּלֵי מִצְרַיִם לֹא עָזְבוּ וַאֲמַר לְשַׁפֵּךְ חַמְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם לְכֹלֹת אֶפְי בָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

On that day I raised My hand to them to take them out of Egypt, to a land that I had explored for them, flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all the lands. And I said to them, “Let each man cast off the abominations of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” **And they rebelled against Me and were not willing to listen to me; each man did not cast off the abominations of their eyes, nor did they leave the idols of Egypt,** and I resolved to pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger upon them within the land of

Egypt. (Ez. 20:6-8)

Even after the encounter at the burning bush when Moses came to the people bearing news of the redemption, the nation's reaction is disappointing:

וידבר משה בן אל בני ישראל, ולא שמעו אל משה מקוצר רוח ומעבדה קשה.

And Moses spoke thus to the nation of Israel, **and they did not listen to Moses on account of despondency and hard work.** (Ex. 6:9)

The commentators disagree regarding the meaning of the nation's refusal to listen to Moses. Rashbam explains that the nation was disappointed by Moses' previous attempt, which resulted in an increase in their workload; they were therefore skeptical about Moses' claims. In contrast, Ramban and *Hizkuni* suggest that the nation was afraid to listen to Moses after Pharaoh's decree, which was meant to threaten them not to associate with Moses and Aaron. *Mechilta* interprets this episode differently from the other commentators, explaining it in light of the verses from Ezekiel quoted above:

ר' יהודה בן בתירא אומר: הרי הוא אומר "ולא שמעו אל משה מקוצר רוח וגו'". וכי יש לך אדם שהוא מתבשר בשורה טובה ואינו שמח? נולד לך בן זכר, רבך מוציאך לחירות, ואינו שמח? אם כן, למה נאמר "ולא שמעו אל משה"? אלא, שהיה קשה בעיניהם לפרוש מעבודה זרה שנאמר (יחזקאל ב', ז): "ואומר אליהם איש שקוצי עיניו השליכו ובגלילי מצרים אל תטמאו", ואומר (שם, ח): "וימרו בי ולא אבו שמוע וגו' ואעש למען שמי לבלתי החלי וגו'".

Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira said: For he says, "And they did not listen to Moses due to despondency, etc." And is there any man who receives good news and is not happy? You have borne a son, your teacher is bringing you to freedom – and he is not happy? In that case, why does it say, "And they did not listen to Moses"? Rather, it was difficult for them to leave the idolatry, as it says: "And I said to them, 'Let each man cast off the abominations of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt'" (Ez. 20:7), and further says: "And they rebelled against Me and were not willing to listen to me, etc., and I acted for My name's sake so it would not be desecrated, etc." (Ez. 20:8). (*Mechilta, Parashat Bo, pascha 85*)

The nation's refusal to listen was actually a refusal to leave the idolatry of Egypt. The news of redemption was not only a promise for a better future; it held a clear obligation: "And I

cooperate with a leader who is attempting to transform the moral state of the nation, which will lead to a change in their physical circumstances – i.e., their enslavement to Pharaoh.²⁴ It is possible therefore that Moses' journey to Midian was not only an escape from Pharaoh, but a decision to leave the corrupted society of his people and settle in a different place.

MOSES' CONNECTION WITH JETHRO AND HIS HOUSE

Focusing on
Moses' Moral
Action

By the well in Midian, Zipporah – Moses' future wife – enters the narrative anonymously:

וַיָּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְיָן...
וַיֹּשֶׁב עַל הַבְּאֵר:
And the priest of Midian had

shall be a God for you, and you shall know that I am the Lord." This demand included abandoning the worship of idols, which the nation refused to do, as stated above.

²⁴ This point is emphasized during the encounter of the burning bush, when God asks Moses to redeem the nation of Israel and Moses tries to refuse. Moses' excuses do not include his fear of Pharaoh at all, but his impression that the nation is not yet ready to be freed and that he personally is not suited to the task:

...וַאֲמַרוּ לִי מַה שְּׁמוֹ מַה אֵמַר אֲלֵהֶם (ג', יג).
...וְהֵן לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקִלִּי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ ה' (ד', א).
...And if they say to me, "What is His name?" what shall I say to them? (Ex. 3:13)

...And they will not believe me and will not listen to my voice, for they will say, "God has not appeared to you." (Ex. 4:1)

God's answer to Moses is in kind – the nation is indeed ready to be redeemed and Moses will be able to convince them through signs and other means.

seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away, and Moses got up and saved them and watered their flock. (Ex. 2:15-17)

וַתְּבֹאנָה וַתִּדְלְגוּ וַתִּמְלְאֵנָה אֶת הַהֲרֵטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶן: וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁעֶן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת צֹאנָם. (שם, טו-יז)

This incident does not focus on Zipporah alone – all seven of Jethro’s daughters appear. The names of Zipporah and her sisters are not mentioned and even her father Jethro is not mentioned by name but by description (“the priest of Midian”).

The focus of the story seems to be Moses’ moral actions, as opposed to Jethro’s daughters. Consistent with his earlier actions in Egypt, Moses continues to oppose injustice wherever he encounters it²⁵.

25 For discussion of the necessity of all three incidents’ inclusion in the biblical narrative, see Nechama Leibowitz on *Parashat Shemot*:

אילו סופר רק המקרה הראשון, היה מקום לתלות את תגובתו החריפה של משה ברגש אחווה לבן עמו, ו**שנאה** לזר המכה אותו, ואילו סופר על המקרה השני, ניתן היה לומר שמשה אינו יכול לסבול כיעור ב**תוך עמו**. אך הנה בא המקרה השלישי שבו **גם העושה וגם העשוק נכרים**. ואף על פי כן אין משה יכול לראות מעשה עוול והוא מתייצב לימין הנרדף.

Had only the first story been told, one could have interpreted Moses’ harsh reaction to his feeling of fraternity with his fellow Israelite, and **hatred of the stranger** beating him. Had only the second story been told, one could have said that Moses could not stand malice **within his people**. But here, in the third story, **both the perpetrator and the victim are gentiles**. And even so, Moses cannot bear to see injustice done, and he comes to the aid of the persecuted. (Nechama Leibowitz, “Parashat Shemot,” *Iyyunim BeParashat HaShavua*).

Jethro, Priest of Midian, Hosts Moses

The absence of names highlights the fact that Moses first meets to Zipporah’s family as the family of the “priest of Midian.”

Later on, Zipporah is still not mentioned by name, as the narrative focuses on the speech of Reu’el (another name for Jethro):

And they came to their father Reu’el, and he said, “Why did you hurry to come back today?” And they said to him, “An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds, and he surely drew water for us and watered the flock.” And he said to his daughters, “And where is he? Why have you left the man? Call for him and let him eat bread.” (Ex. 2:18-20)

וַתְּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבֵיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מֵדוּעַ מְהֵרָתָן בָּא הַיּוֹם: וַתֹּאמְרֵן אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם הִצִּילֵנוּ מִיַּד הָרְעִים וְגַם דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת הַצֹּאן: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל בְּנֹתָיו וַאֲיֹ לָמָּה זֶה עָזַבְתֶּן אֶת הָאִישׁ קְרָאֵן לוֹ וַיֹּאכֵל לָחֶם. (שם, יח-כ)

Moses’ Marriage to Zipporah’s House

Moses arrives at Jethro’s house at Jethro’s invitation to “eat bread,” not specifically for the purpose of marriage. Zipporah is only given to him later:

And Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses. (Ex. 2:21)

וַיִּוָּאֵל מֹשֶׁה לְשֵׁבֶת אֶת הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת צִפּוֹרָה בִּתּוֹ לְמוֹשֶׁה. (שם, כא)

We are not told why Moses is given Zipporah specifically; we do not know anything about Moses’ relationship with her, nor about her deeds or character. It seems that the primary bond is between Moses

and Jethro, which is cemented by Moses' marriage to Zipporah.²⁶ Moses is devoted to Jethro, and therefore he marries his daughter and continues to live with them for many years, voluntarily shepherding Jethro's flock.²⁷

Why does Moses devote himself to Jethro? The Torah does not say.

**The
Wilderness
and the
Nearness of
God**

It is possible that Moses' primary goal in staying with Jethro was **staying in the wilderness**, which is conducive to solitude and achieving closeness with God. That solitude, while shepherding the flock in the wilderness, led Moses to the burning bush. It was Moses' occupation as a shepherd that made him worthy of God's revelation to him at the burning

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26 The parallels between Moses and Jacob are striking here: both flee from a man seeking to kill them; both sit by the well, where they meet shepherds, as well as the woman they are destined to marry; both save the woman – Jacob by rolling the stone off the well, and Moses by driving away the shepherds; both water the flock; both are invited to the home of the father of the woman, and only discuss marriage later on; both shepherd their father-in-law's flock; both ask their father-in-law's permission to return to their homeland, and God appears to both and commands them to return to their homeland.

On the other hand, this comparison highlights the clear differences between them: Jacob first meets Rachel, who is mentioned by name, and is interested in marrying her; this is why he must stay in Laban's house, despite the fact that his relationship with Laban is strained. Moses decides to stay in Midian because of Jethro, and his marriage to Jethro's daughter is a result of the good relationship between them.

27 As opposed to Jacob, who shepherded Laban's flock in exchange for marrying his daughters.

bush and the divine mission he received there.<sup>28</sup>

## JETHRO'S SPIRITUAL NATURE

In addition, there might have been **something special about Jethro specifically** that drew Moses to him:

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28 Rambam points out in his **Guide for the Perplexed**:

“תחילת מעלות הנבואה, שילווה את האדם עזר אִלֹהִי, יעוררו ויזרוו לעשות טובה גדולה בעלת ערך, כגון הצלת קבוצת חסידים מידי קבוצת רשעים... וימצא מצד עצמו לכך התעוררות ודחיפה לפעולה. וזה נקרא רוח ה'. והאדם אשר ילווהו מצד זה, אומרים עליו שהוא צלחה עליו רוח ה'... וזו היא דרגת כל שופטי ישראל... וזוהי גם דרגת כל משיחי ישראל החסידים... ודע כי בדומה לכוח הזה, לא נפרד ממשנה רבנו מעת שהגיע לגיל הבגרות, ולפיכך נתעורר להרוג את המצרי ולנוף בחוטא משני הניצים. ומחמת תוקף הכוח הזה בו, אפילו לאחר שפחד וברח, כאשר הגיע למדין והוא זר ירא, כיון שראה דבר עושק, לא יכול להימנע מלסלקו ולא היה בכוחו לסובלו, כמו שנאמר: זיקם משה ויושיען (שמות ב', י"ז).”

“**The first of the levels of prophecy** is that **divine aid** accompanies the person, encouraging and hastening him to do great and valuable good, such as saving a group of righteous people from a group of wicked people... and he shall find within himself something that spurs him to action. This is called the spirit of God. And it is said of the person in this state that the spirit of God is upon him... and this is the level of all of the judges of Israel... and it is also the level of all of the righteous Messiahs of Israel... And know that a force of this kind did not leave our teacher Moses from the time that he reached adulthood, and therefore he was moved to kill the Egyptian and rebuke the sinner of the two men who fought. And such was the strength of this force in him, that even after he had fled in fear and arrived in Midian as a fearful stranger – when he saw wrongdoing, he could not help but avert it and he could not stand it, as it is said: “And Moses got up and saved them...” (Rambam, **Guide to the Perplexed**, part II:45)

Rambam understood that Moses' actions were no coincidence – they were steps along the path to his development as a prophet. In that case, it is possible that Moses' flight from Egypt was also a necessary part of his process of becoming a prophet, as discussed above.

Rashi explains:

”And to the priest of Midian” – the greatest of them, and he abandoned idol worship, and they cast him out from among them. (Rashi on Ex. 2:16)

”ולכהן מדיין” – רב שבהן, ופירש לו מעבודה זרה, ונידוהו מאצלם. (רש”י שמות, ב’, טז)

Ibn Ezra’s interpretation extends even further:

And any priest in the Bible is either a servant of God or of idols... and Jethro was a servant of God... (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 2:16)²⁹

... וכל כהן שבמקרא משרת הוא לשם או לעבו”ם... ויתרו היה כהן לשם...

According to these interpretations, Jethro was not a priest of idol worship,³⁰ but a servant of God and a spiritual figure of great significance.³¹

29 See also Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Ex. 18:7:

”ויצא לקראת חתנו” – בעבור כבוד יתרו וחכמתו... וקראו הכתוב רעהו, בעבור גודל מעלתו בחכמה.

”And he went out to greet his father-in-law” – in honor of Jethro and his wisdom... and the text called him “his friend,” in honor of the greatness of his wisdom. (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 18:7)

30 Other interpretations and *midrashim* present Jethro in a negative light. According to these interpretations, it is difficult to understand why Moses would stay with such a man for so long, marry his daughter, and later on be so glad to reunite with him that he suggests Jethro stay with the nation (see Ex. 18:1-7; Num. 10:29).

31 When Jethro and Moses reunite after the exodus from Egypt, Jethro says to Moses: “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all of the gods” (Ex. 18:11). What does this mean? Has Jethro only now recognized God’s greatness? Rashi explains:

”עתה ידעתי” – מכירו הייתי לשעבר, ועכשיו ביותר. ”מכל האלהים” – מלמד שהיה מכיר בכל ע”ז שבעולם ולא הניח ע”ז שלא עבדה.

The Spiritual Connection between Jethro and Moses

This understanding of the text makes Moses’ devotion to Jethro more understandable. Moses stays in Jethro’s house for 60 years – a house dedicated to spiritual growth and search for the Divine. He is far from the slavery and humiliation of Egypt, and from the injustice of Egyptian culture. Jethro’s house accords him space, freedom and an atmosphere of spiritual development.³²

“Now I know” – I knew it before, and now even more so. “Than all of the gods” – this teaches that he was familiar with all of the idolatry in the world, and there was no idol he had not worshiped. (Rashi on Ex. 18:11)

According to this interpretation, Jethro had gone through a long process of spiritual development – he had tried every form of idolatry – until he arrived at the belief in one God, in the Lord. (This process is reminiscent of Abraham’s search for the Creator of the world.) Even a gentile who has gone through such an intense spiritual process and ultimately arrives at belief in one God is clearly worthy of being considered Moses’ peer.

For further discussion of Jethro’s character and Moses’ devotion to him, see Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, *Tzir VeTzon*, ch. 1. Jethro is described as a spiritual figure searching for philosophical and metaphysical meaning in the events happening around him, but he distances himself from the actions of people, due to the feeling that it is impossible to persuade people to change their ways.

32 This had a similar effect on Moses’ leadership skills: Moses was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, not among his enslaved people. This allowed him to learn the ways of royalty; in addition, he developed leadership skills and the ability to rebel against the government – skills that would be difficult to acquire as a slave. As Ibn Ezra writes:

ומחשבות השם עמקו ומי יוכל לעמוד בסודו ולו לבדו נתכנו עלילות. אולי סבב השם זה שיגדל משה בבית המלכות להיות נפשו על מדרגה העליונה בדרך הלימוד והרגילות ולא תהיה שפלה ורגילה להיות בבית עבדים.

And God’s thoughts are deep, and who can understand His secrets? For He alone foresees outcomes. Perhaps God arranged that Moses would be raised in a royal household

Even later on, when Jethro and Zipporah come to Moses in the desert, the Torah does not describe Moses' reunion with Zipporah. Instead, it focuses on the relationship between Jethro and Moses, and the conversation between them focuses on spiritual matters (see Ex. ch. 18).

These questions – did Moses divorced Zipporah or merely sent her back to her father's house? What was the reason for their separation? What happened when they were reunited in the wilderness? – are not discussed by the Torah at all. Once again, the primary relationship is between Jethro and Moses.

D. Zipporah – Pulling the Strings from Behind the Scenes

“CUSHITE WOMAN”

Miriam's Claim
Against Moses' Separation
from His Wife

In *Parashat Beha'alotcha*, we read of Miriam's claim against Moses regarding his marriage:

<p>And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses, regarding the Cushite wife that he had taken, for he had taken a Cushite wife. And they said, “Has God spoken only to Moses? Has He not</p>	<p>וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח פִּי אִישָׁה כְּשִׁית לָקַח: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֵל בְּמֹשֶׁה דִּבֶּר ה' הֲלֹא</p>
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so that his soul would be on a higher plane in learning and habits, and not on a lower [plane] and accustomed to a life of slavery.

גַּם בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר... (במדבר 12:1-2) (ב,א-ב)

Most commentators understand, in accordance with the Sages interpretation, that Moses separated from his wife due to his high prophetic status³³. Miriam takes offense at this, arguing that prophets need not separate from their wives. God responds that Moses' status is unique among the prophets, and that it does indeed warrant separation (see Num. 12:4-8 and Rambam's comments cited in note 41 below).

This is the accepted interpretation, and it does shed light on Moses' status as a prophet (and its necessary implications for his relationship with Zipporah).³⁴ However, it also raises a question: the Torah quotes Miriam as speaking about Moses' **taking** a Cushite wife, not about his **sending her away** or separating from her.

Miriam's Issue with Moses' Marriage to Zipporah and Bond with Jethro

The simple understanding of Miriam's words is that she perceives a connection between Moses' **marriage to Zipporah** and **his prophetic status**. Why?

As discussed above, Moses seemed to have a unique spiritual bond with Jethro which contributed to his spiritual development. His marriage to Zipporah was an expression of this connection.

³³ See Rashi ad loc. For further discussion, see Rabbi Elchanan Samet's lesson on *Parashat Beha'alotcha* at the Virtual Beit Midrash:

www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/7-parsha/32behaal.rtf

³⁴ As we shall discuss below.

This might clarify Miriam's accusation:³⁵ Miriam does not understand why Moses saw fit to marry a Cushite woman – in her eyes Zipporah is merely a gentile woman, daughter of a Midianite priest. Why would Moses seek to further his spiritual development with a priest of Midian?!³⁶

35 This interpretation is based on the above assumption that the connection between Zipporah and Moses is an expression of the unique spiritual bond between Jethro and Moses. At the end of the lesson we will incorporate the accepted interpretation, in which Miriam disagrees with Moses' need to separate from his wife due to his elevated prophetic status (see note 49).

36 If we accept this interpretation, it is difficult to understand God's response to Miriam. It is possible to read it as a general statement that does not respond to Miriam's claim, but merely states: Moses has reached such levels of greatness – how dare you speak ill of him?

However, since both Miriam's question and God's response relate to Moses' prophetic status, it is difficult to interpret God's words as anything other than a direct response to her claim. We shall suggest two possible explanations below, but there are still a number of issues that require further study: God's answer to Miriam clarifies that Moses' status is indeed unique among the prophets: "Mouth to mouth I speak to him, not in visions nor in riddles, and he looks upon the image of God..." (Num 12:18), meaning Moses interacts with God directly, as described in the encounter at the inn: "And God met him" (see below).

How is Moses' elevated prophetic status related to his relationship with Jethro? There are two possible answers:

Moses' spiritual status was not harmed by his connection to Zipporah and Jethro – in fact, quite the opposite. Moses' relationship with Jethro allowed him to begin his spiritual development in a suitable environment – development which ultimately reached the highest possible levels of connection between man and God, as God Himself attests to here.

Zipporah recognized Moses' unique status – the fact that he was able to interact with God "face-to-face" (see below). Miriam, on the other hand, does not realize that Moses' status

"AND IT WAS ON THE WAY, AT THE INN"

Let us return to *Parashat Shemot*.

**The Ability
to Return to
Egypt and
Restore the
Nation**

After sixty years of spiritual development in Jethro's house, Moses encounters God at the burning bush and is given a divine mission to bring the nation of Israel out of Egypt. Armed with spiritual knowledge, leadership skills and faith in the success of his mission, Moses returns to the spiritual wasteland he left behind in Egypt. Now he no longer needs to distance himself from his people, who were corrupted by the immoral society of Egypt, for he has been promised that "when you take the nation out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (Ex. 3:12) – the very same mountain upon which God revealed Himself to Moses through the burning bush.

is unique, and so God explains this to her.

God's answer to Miriam can be explained by a passage in tractate *Hagiga* (*daf* 15) related to Rabbi Meir's studies with "Acher," Rabbi Elisha ben Avuya, who became a heretic. The Gemara asks: how could a wise man such as Rabbi Meir allow himself to study with *Acher*, when the Torah must clearly be learned from a pure and holy source?

Reish Lakish answers (according to Rashi's comments *ad loc.*) that a great man, who is able to take care [and not learn from] his deeds, may learn Torah from him.

According to the Gemara, a truly great person is able to learn from sources that are not totally pure or holy (see also *Pri Tzedek, Parashat Balak* 2).

In this case, God's response to Miriam is more easily understood. Miriam asks how Moses could possibly form a spiritual connection with Jethro. Her question stems from a lack of understanding of Moses' unique spiritual greatness – it is this greatness, that he is "faithful in all of My house," which allows Moses to form a connection and learn from a gentile priest. See note 49 for further discussion of this point.

How did Zipporah Save Moses? Moses leaves Jethro's house, but takes Zipporah and their children with him. On the way to carry out the divine mission, the strange episode of his son's circumcision occurs:

And it was on the way, at the inn, and God met him and sought to put him to death. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off her son's foreskin, and she touched it to his feet and said, "For you are a husband of blood to me." And He released him, and so she said, "A husband of blood, of circumcision."

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמְלֶוֶן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמֵּיתוֹ: וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרַח וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת עֶרְלַת בְּנֶהָ וַתַּגֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתָן דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי: וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ אַזְ אָמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֵת. (שְׁמוֹת ד', כד-כו)

What does this story mean? Whom does God attempt to kill, and why? Why are we not told the reason? How did Zipporah know what to do³⁷, and why is she the one who manages to save Moses? What do the phrases "you are a husband of blood to me" and "a husband of blood, of circumcision" mean?

Many interpretations have been suggested for this story. Most of the commentators understand that God sought to kill Moses,³⁸ which is the simple

37 See *Shemot Rabba* 5:8.

38 This is the opinion expressed by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi in tractate *Nedarim* 31b; see also Rashi on Ex. 4:24 (s.v. "Vayevakesh"); Ibn Ezra ad loc.; Rabbi Yitzhak Ben Asher Halevi ad loc.; *Hizkuni* ad loc. and many others. However, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel suggests that God wanted to kill Moses' son **Eliezer** (Rav Shmuel ben Hofni Gaon, quoted by Ibn Ezra, agrees). Another interpretation

understanding of the text. Why does God attempt to cause Moses' death just as he is going to fulfill His mission?³⁹

"And God met him"

The story begins with an unusual phrase: "And God met him." This is a unique way of describing man's relationship with God. God is usually described as speaking to man or sending a messenger, but "meeting" with God is unheard of. As discussed above, Moses had achieved a very high level of prophecy, which is illustrated here for the first time – the meeting between Moses and God. Moses "meets" God, as though he were meeting his fellow man!⁴⁰

suggests that God's "target" was Moses' elder son **Gershom**, who had not been circumcised (see Reuven Uziel, "*Shelichuto she Moshe Rabbeinu UMA'alata shel Tzipora*").

39 The commentators suggest a number of explanations for this as well; see Rashi on Ex. 4:24 (s.v. "Vayevakesh lehamito"); *Sifte Chachamim* ad loc.; Seforno ad loc. (s.v. "Vayifgeshehu Hashem")

40 The phrase "and he met him" is used a few verses later, when Moses meets his brother Aaron:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַהֲרֹן לֵךְ לִקְרַאת מֹשֶׁה הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ בְּהַר הָאֱדֻלְיָהִים וַיִּשָׁק לוֹ.

And God said to Aaron, "Go toward Moses, to the wilderness," and he went **and he met him** at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. (Ex. 4:27)

The following *midrash* may also relate to this point:

דבר אחר, "לך לקראת משה המדברה" – זהו שאמר הכתוב: "מי יתנך כאח לי" (שיר השירים ח') – ישראל אומרין לפני הקב"ה מי יתנך כאח לי... ובאיזה אח אמרו ישראל להקב"ה? כמשה ואהרן, שנאמר (תהלים קל"ג, א): "הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד", שהיו אהבין ומחבבין זה את זה.

Another thing: "Go toward Moses, to the wilderness" – about this it is written: "May you be as a brother to me" (Song. 8:1) – the nation of Israel says before God, "May You be as a brother to me"... and of which brother did the nation speak? Of Moses and Aaron, as it says: "Behold, how

God describes Moses' prophetic status in this way in His answer to Miriam:

“Mouth to mouth I speak to him, not in visions nor in riddles, and he looks upon the image of God...”⁴¹ (Num. 12:8)

good and how pleasant it is when brothers sit together” (Ps. 133:1), for they loved and had affection for one another. (*Tanhuma* on Ex. 4:27)

The *midrash* compares the close relationship that the nation yearns for with God to the fraternal bond between Moses and Aaron. The basis for this comparison might be the fact that the phrase “and he met him” appears twice in this *parasha* – once when describing Moses' interaction with God, and again when describing Moses and Aaron's reunion.

41 Rambam describes Moses' unique prophetic abilities as follows:

ומה הפרש יש בין נבואת משה לשאר כל הנביאים? שכל הנביאים בחלום או במראה ומשה רבינו מתנבא והוא ער ועומד ... כל הנביאים על ידי מלאך, לפיכך רואים מה שהם רואים במשל וחידיה, משה רבינו לא על ידי מלאך... שאין שם משל אלא רואה הדבר על בוריו בלא חידה ובלא משל... כל הנביאים יראים ונבהלים ומתמוגגין ומשה רבינו אינו כן... כל הנביאים אין מתנבאים בכל עת שירצו משה רבינו אינו כן אלא כל זמן שיחפוץ רוח הקודש לובשתו ונבואה שורה עליו ואינו צריך לבוין דעתו ולהודמן לה שהרי הוא מכון ומוזמן ועומד כמלאכי השרת, לפיכך מתנבא בכל עת ...

And what difference is there between the prophecy of Moses and that of the rest of the prophets? All of the prophets [received prophecy] in a dream or a vision, while Moses prophesized awake and standing upright... all of the prophets [received prophecy] through a messenger, and so they saw what they saw as metaphors and riddles, while our teacher Moses did not [receive prophecy] through a messenger... for there was no metaphor; rather, he saw things precisely as they were, without riddles or metaphors... All of the prophets were terrified, and our teacher Moses was not... all of the prophets did not prophesize whenever they wished; our teacher Moses was not so, but any time he wished the Divine Spirit would descend upon him and prophecy would (visit) him, and he did not need to

Meeting with God Demands Constant Readiness

Such an elevated level of prophecy demands a high level of commitment from the prophet. When one meets with God, even the smallest blemish is unforgivable and may cause one's death. This is Abarbanel's interpretation:

For prophecy would descend into Moses always, and he had to maintain his solitude and thoughts of his mission. Therefore when he came to the inn and dealt with the matters of their lodgings for the night, and did not occupy himself only with matters pertaining to his mission and prophecy, when the bounty began to descend upon him it found him unprepared for prophecy... And since he was found unprepared to receive this bounty, great danger and misfortune came upon him...

שהנבואה הייתה יורדת אל משה תמיד והיה צריך לעמוד תמיד בהתבודדותו ומחשבתו בשליחותו ולכן כשבא במלון ונתעסק בעסקי הלילה ולא התבודד בענייני שליחותו ונבואתו תחילה הנה כשחל עליו שמה השפע מצאו בלתי מוכן לנבואה... ומפני שנמצא בלתי מוכן לקבול השפע ההוא היה עליו הצער והסכנה ההיא....

According to Abarbanel, the flaw that disrupted Moses' meeting with God was that he became occupied with the inn as opposed to remaining solitary and prepared to receive prophecy.

The Flaw – Lack of Circumcision

Based on the text, it seems that Moses was saved by the circumcision of his son. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this was the flaw which put Moses'

life in danger.⁴²

According to most commentators,⁴³ Eliezer was born before the family set out on their way and Moses could not have circumcised him due to the dangers of the journey. Even though Moses did have “*halachic*” grounds for not circumcising his child, a **higher level of perfection** is demanded of him upon meeting with God. It is unthinkable that Moses would encounter God so closely when his son remained uncircumcised.

Zipporah's Insight

Zipporah realizes what is going on. In her father's house, she had learned to recognize spiritual elevation. She realizes that Moses is experiencing a unique encounter with God, and that God may take

42 Still, the text can be understood differently. The circumcision might have been a kind of sacrifice in merit of which Moses would be saved (as Rashbam and Rav Yitzhak bar Sheshet explain).

Abarbanel's interpretation can be reconciled with our understanding of the text by the following *midrash*:

“זיהי בדרך במלון” – חביבה מילה שלא נתלה למשה עליה אפילו שעה אחת, לפיכך כשהיה בדרך ונתעסק במלון ונתעצל למול לאליעזר בנו מיד ויפגשוהו ה' ויבקש המיתו.

“And it was on the way, at the inn” – [the act of] circumcision is so beloved that Moses was not exempted from it even one hour; therefore, when he was on his way **and was occupied with their lodgings and neglected to circumcise** his son Eliezer, immediately “And God met him and sought to put him to death.” (*Shemot Rabba* 5:8)

According to this *midrash*, Moses' sin was that he was distracted by mundane matters instead of focusing on the circumcision of his son. The act of circumcision itself directly negated this sin.

43 See Rashi and Ibn Ezra.

his life due to the flaw rendering him unfit for this encounter. Searching for the flaw, she realizes that their son has not yet been circumcised; she remedies this, thus saving Moses and enabling him to continue his mission.

Circumcision as the Foundation of the Redemption

Apparently, it is no coincidence that circumcision was the deed required as Moses and his family were on their way to redeem the nation of Israel from Egypt. **Circumcision reflects the unique covenant between God and the nation.** This covenant is the foundation of the bond between God and Israel; in the nation's hour of need, it stands as an assurance that the redemption will come. Moses is on his way to redeem the people of Israel, whom God refers to as “my eldest child, Israel” (Gen. 4:22). It is therefore unthinkable that a member of Moses' family should lack circumcision – the sign of the covenant between God and his children, the nation of Israel.⁴⁴

44 *HaEmek Davar* interprets this in a similar fashion:

...סמך ענין מכת בכורות לזוה הענין, ללמדנו דשני הענינים שוין בסיבתן.
The plague of the firstborn was juxtaposed to this matter **to teach us that both (stemmed) from the same cause.** (*HaEmek Davar* on Ex. 4:24, s.v. “*Vayevakesh*”)

The nation also forms a covenant with God when they leave Egypt, in the form of the Passover sacrifice. The connection between this sacrifice and circumcision is clear: they are the only two positive commandments for which the punishment of violation is *karet*, spiritual excision. Both of these commandments reflect a covenant between God and the people of Israel on a national level; therefore, one who fails to perform them is punished by excision, which results (among other things) in isolation from the nation: “And that soul shall be cut off from **its people**” (regarding circumcision: Gen. 17:14; regarding the Passover sacrifice: Num. 9:13). Another

Zipporah, from her perspective as a former “outsider,” perceives the unique nature of the connection between God and Israel signified by circumcision. She came from a home of constant spiritual development and knows the value of God’s covenant with the nation; by performing the circumcision she affirms the unique connection between God and Israel. (This act also reflects her transition from the status of “daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian” to the wife of Moses and part of the nation of Israel.)

Zipporah is the one who **enables Moses to continue with his mission**, maintaining the high level of righteousness demanded of him. She does so first and foremost by **removing the blemish** which hindered Moses’ ability to receive prophecy at the highest level, and by **demonstrating a deep understanding of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel**.

WHERE WAS ZIPPORAH?

When did Moses and Zipporah Separate, and Why?

The Torah’s narration of this incident ends here; it does not describe the aftermath. We only find out in chapter 18 that Zipporah was no longer Moses. What actually happened? We cannot know for sure. It is possible that they continued together to Egypt, and Zipporah returned to Midian at some point for

aspect of the connection between these commandments is expressed by the fact that an uncircumcised man is specifically prohibited from eating from the Passover sacrifice: “And all uncircumcised males shall not eat from it” (Ex. 12:48). See also *Mechilta, Mesechta DePischa* 5.

reasons unknown.⁴⁵ Perhaps Moses left Zipporah and their sons behind at the inn to allow the baby time to recover, after which the family returned to Midian.⁴⁶

Zipporah’s Departure – to Allow Moses’ Prophecy to Continue

Or perhaps Zipporah understood that Moses’ elevated status did not allow him to maintain a normal marital life, and she decided to leave him in order to allow him to fulfill his divine mission.⁴⁷

45 Rashi comments:

“אחר שלוחיה” – כשאמר לו הקב”ה במדיין (שמות ד’, יט-כו) “לך שוב מצרימה... ויקח משה את אשתו ואת בניו גו’... ויצא אהרן לקראתו... ויפגשוהו בהר הא-להים”. אמר לו מי הם הללו. אמר לו זו היא אשתי שנשאתי במדיין ואלו בני. אמר לו והיכן אתה מוליכן. אמר לו למצרים. אמר לו על הראשונים אנו מצטערים ואתה בא להוסיף עליהם? אמר לה לכי אל בית אביך, נטלה שני בניה והלכה לה.

“After he sent her away” – when the Holy One, Blessed be He, told him in Midian, “Go, return to Egypt, ...and Moses took his wife and his sons, etc... And Aaron came towards him... and he met him at the mountain of God” (Ex. 4:19-27). [Moses] told Aaron who [the people with him] were. He said to him: This is my wife, whom I married in Midian, and these are my sons. [Aaron] said to him: And where are you leading them? [Moses] said to him: Egypt. [Aaron] said to him: We grieve for the first ones [who are already in Egypt], and you come to add to them? He said to her: Go to your father’s house; she took her two sons and left. (Rashi on Ex. 18:2)

46 See Ibn Ezra’s commentary.

47 Abarbanel explains later on:

ולפי שציפורא לא ידעה האם היה הצער אשר בא למשה בעוון מילת הילד או מפני שהיה מוליך אותה למצרים, ולכן רצתה להצילו משניהם: אם הילד – בשכרתה ערלתו, ואם לעצמה – בששבה לבית אביה, כדי שיהיו מחשבותיו של משה פנויים להתבודדות הנבואה...

And as Zipporah did not know whether the misfortune came upon Moses for the sin of [not having] circumcised the child, or because he was leading her to Egypt, therefore she sought to save him from both: If [it was due to] the child – she cut off his foreskin; if [it was due] to her – she returned to her father’s house, so that Moses’ thoughts would be free to focus on the solitude [required for] prophecy...

According to this possibility, Moses and Zipporah did separate following the fateful meeting with God at the inn on the way to Egypt. They did so in order to allow Moses to retain his high prophetic status, which was crucial to fulfilling the mission of liberating the people of Israel from Egypt.⁴⁸

Miriam's words can also be explained in light of this interpretation, as they were understood by most commentators:

Miriam opposes Moses' separation from Zipporah, claiming that prophecy does not require one to separate from his wife. Miriam did not recognize Moses' unique status among the prophets. **It is Zipporah, Jethro's daughter, who understands Moses' exceptional status and is willing to leave him to allow him to continue to grow and meet**

48 A *midrash* on the final chapter of Proverbs, *Eshet Chayil* [Woman of Valor], states:

“גמלתהו טוב ולא רע...” – זו צפורה, ולמה נקרא שמיה צפורה? מלמד שצפתה וראתה והולידה שני בנים למשה: גרשם ואליעזר, אליעזר – מלמד שעזרו הקדוש ברוך הוא מפרעה עד שדבק בצפורה, וגרשם – מלמד שגרשה אותו צפורה ממצרים.

“She does him good and not evil...” – this [refers to] Zipporah; why was she called Zipporah? This teaches us that she had foresight [*tzafta*] and saw and bore Moses two sons: Gershom and Eliezer. Eliezer – this teaches that God [el] helped him [*azar*] from Pharaoh until he cleaved to Zipporah; Gershom – **this teaches that Zipporah drove him out [*girsha*] from Egypt.**

As mentioned above, the *midrash* credits Zipporah with Moses' leaving Egypt and fathering two sons. The *midrash* portrays Zipporah as “pulling the strings” to ensure that Moses would accomplish his mission of bringing the nation of Israel out of Egypt. See also *Yalkut Shimoni* 2, *remez* 168.

with God.⁴⁹

E. Summary

Moses' sixty years in Midian were not spent avoiding responsibility; rather, they constituted a spiritual education which formed the basis of his growth into a leader and a prophet of unique stature.

Not only did Zipporah not hinder the redemption – she was the one who made it possible.

The relationship between Moses and Zipporah reflects the unique **spiritual bond** between Moses and Jethro.

It is Zipporah who saves Moses from death, thus enabling him to fulfill his mission. She is also the

49 The accepted reading of Miriam's speech can also be reconciled with our interpretation as follows: Moses' unique status, which began with his **spiritual bond** with Jethro and Zipporah, is what ultimately leads to the **separation** of Zipporah and Moses. Zipporah, who understood that Moses was on a high prophetic level, realizes that he cannot continue to live with her normally, and she leaves him. Miriam, who was not aware of the depth of the bond between Zipporah and Moses, does not understand the reason for their separation either. She therefore argues **against both their marriage and their separation**. God responds to both points: a. Moses is indeed on a unique level; b. his connection with Jethro and Zipporah was a positive development from the start (despite, or perhaps even because of, Zipporah's status as a gentile woman). In fact, it is through this connection that Moses achieved his unique status in the first place. However, ultimately Moses' condition was such that he could not continue to live with his wife normally, despite the worthiness of Zipporah and her father.

one who identifies the importance of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel as a crucial component of the redemption.

Ultimately, Zipporah is the one willing to pay the price and separate from her husband to enable him to continue to meet with God and fulfill his mission.