



Parashat Be'Ha'alotekha

Miriam: Speaking Truth to Power

by Rachel Biale on Saturday June 02, 2007

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Numbers 8:1–12:16, Shabbat

This week's parasha contains perhaps the most audacious challenge to male authority recorded in the Torah: "And Miriam, and Aaron with her, spoke against Moses concerning the Cushite woman he had taken, for he had taken a Cushite wife. And they said: 'Is it but through Moses alone that the Lord had spoken? Has He not spoken through us as well?'" (Numbers 12:1-2. All Biblical translations from Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*). My "queery" focuses on Miriam's and Aaron's respective roles in challenging Moses' prophetic authority and the disparity in the consequences for each of them. Miriam is struck by leprosy and exiled from the camp for seven days. Aaron is spared any punishment and prays for her healing. "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses concerning the Cushite wife he had taken." Miriam is the one who speaks—with Aaron as a silent partner alongside her—an important point somewhat lost in the English because the feminine singular form of *Vatedaber*—"and **she** spoke"—is not evident in translation. The text does not tell us what she said regarding the Cushite wife.

Who this wife may be and what the complaint is about are issues that have puzzled both traditional commentators and modern scholars and will not be addressed here. Our focus is on verse 2, which apparently deals with a completely different issue: the challenge to Moses' singular prophetic authority. The new theme makes more sense in this context because the preceding section (Numbers 11: 24 – 29) features a related story: the prophesying in the camp of Eldad and Meidad. While Joshua sees them as a great threat to Moses and urges: "My lord, Moses, restrain them!" Moses welcomes the spreading of prophetic voices among the people: "Are you jealous on my part? Would that the entire Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord should place His spirit upon them."

But, in stark contradiction to this, when Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses, God is furious and punitive. Why the disparity? Miriam, after all, had been called "prophetess" (*nevi'ah*) at her supreme moment of religious leadership upon crossing the Red Sea: "And Miriam the



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prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances." (Exodus 15:20-21). Perhaps, it is precisely because it is a woman who challenges Moses' authority. And yet, many commentators have already drawn attention to the vital role of women in propelling the Exodus story from its very inception to the deliverance at the Red Sea. Yocheved, all the Hebrew women and midwives, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter are the links that hold together the chain of the Moses story. It certainly seemed at the Red Sea that the hierarchy of leadership was: Moses – Miriam – Aaron, which demonstrates a preeminence for a woman that the ongoing textual tradition would not sustain. Soon, we get more accustomed to the Moses – Aaron pair and Miriam fades into the background.

Is it at this moment of complaint against the Cushite woman and the challenge to Moses' prophetic authority that Miriam reemerges to reclaim her position? Perhaps the two complaints are connected: Miriam may be upset because the Cushite wife is Moses' new love and demotes Zipporah to the "third wheel." She challenges Moses on this at the same time she is displaced by Aaron from Moses' side. If she draws an analogy between family power relations and communal leadership, she may be stating a much more radical challenge: not only to Moses' prophetic leadership of the nation, but to male dominance in the family.

What would give Miriam such a notion? The Biblical narrative never says that she herself married. There is no "Mr. Miriam" anywhere in the text—no hint of marriage, family or children. Miriam stands aloof of the marital structure. Thus, perhaps, Miriam has less trouble than other women imagining a role for herself as an independent community leader, as a prophet.

If this is Miriam's complaint, then we can better understand why she is singled out for punishment. "And the Lord's wrath flared against them, and He went off. And the cloud moved off from over the tent and, look, Miriam was blanched as snow. . .she was struck with skin blanch." (12:9-10). Only Miriam is targeted, emerging from the cloud of God's presence in a nightmarish rebirth—as suggested in Aaron's plea to Moses: "Let her not be, pray, like one dead who when he comes out of his mother's womb, half his flesh is eaten away." (12:12). Moses is nearly struck dumb, resorting to perhaps the shortest prayer in the Bible: "And Moses cried out to the Lord, saying: 'God, pray, heal her, pray.'" The Hebrew—"El na refa na la" with its preponderance of "ah" ending sounds evokes the babble of a baby. Moses is reduced to the most primitive language level at the sight of his stricken sister. God answers Moses' heartfelt



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cry with a peculiar retort: “Had not her father spat in her face, would she not be shamed seven days, be shut up seven days outside the camp, and afterward she would be gathered back in?” (12:14). Miriam is to be shamed with seven days of exile from the camp—reminiscent of the seven days of the uncleanness of the *niddah* (menstruant – Leviticus 15:19). The analogy that explains the severity of the shaming is the public humiliation she would endure were her father to spit in her face. We have no other Biblical reference to a father spitting in his daughter’s face as an act of public shaming, only a kind of opposite: a woman spitting in the face of her levir (*yabam*) in the ceremony of *halitzah* (a levir is a brother-in-law to whom it falls to marry the widow of his deceased childless brother. Halitzah is the procedure of renouncing this obligation to perform levirate marriage). How does this analogy work in our passage? Is Moses the father who has been challenged by a rebellious daughter and is to respond with publicly humiliating her, or is it God? If the former, perhaps it reflects the narrative’s compulsion to fortify the hierarchical relationship between Moses and Miriam. She had challenged him for equal footing as a true sister, now she is pushed down to the role of a humiliated daughter. If the father stands for God, we have a looser parallel but still a dominating male figure punishes an “uppity woman.”

A rabbinic midrash picks up on this theme and weaves it into a completely unrelated story that offers a very different perspective on the role of women. The story (Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 1:4) is about an unnamed “certain woman” who was in the habit of listening to Rabbi Meir’s “discourses at the synagogue of Hamath every Shabbat evening.” On one occasion he preached for so long that by the time she got home “she found the candle was out” (a simple fact of life in a world without electricity, but clearly here a sexual innuendo). Her husband was so mad when she told him the reason that he swore, “You are not to enter my house again until you spit in the teacher’s face.” Distraught at her plight, the woman talked to her neighbors who advised her to go with them to Rabbi Meir for a solution. Rabbi Meir clairvoyantly understood the situation and feigned a pain in his eye for which the only remedy was the ministering of “a woman skilled in whispering a charm for eye pain.” The neighbors told the woman: “Go, whisper in his ear and spit lightly in his eyes, and you will be able to live with your husband again.” She came forward but at the moment of truth “she confessed: ‘My master, I do not know how to whisper a charm for eye pain.’ He said to her ‘Nevertheless, spit in my face seven times and I will be healed.’ She did, whereupon he said: ‘Go and tell your husband, ‘You bade me do it only once. I spat seven times.’” When Rabbi Meir’s students expressed shock— “Master, is the Torah to be treated with such contempt?” he assured them that any apparent indignity is worthy “in order to bring about peace” in the home. Bringing “Shalom Bayit”



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(domestic harmony) is paradoxically accomplished here by upending the gender hierarchy. Whereas in our parasha Miriam's punishment restores the patriarchal hierarchy, the Talmudic story undercuts it.

"Peace," at home, in the community, and in the nation, can only come about when those in dominant roles are willing to diminish their power to accommodate justice. Today, that means making room for all who have been relegated to second-class and marginalized positions in our past, be they female or queer.



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