Parashat Behaalotekha: He Took a Cushite Woman

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Bemidbar 12:1	
וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל־אֹדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקָח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כֻשִׁית לָקָח:	Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had taken [into his household as his wife]: “He took a Cushite woman!”

1. A Beautiful Woman

Targum Onkelos on Bemidbar 12:1	
וּמַלֶּלֶת מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל עֵסֶק אִתְּתָא **שַׁפִּירְתָּא** דִּי נְסִיב אֲרֵי אִתְּתָא **שַׁפִּרְתָּא** דְּנְסִיב **רָחִיק**:	Miriam and Aharon spoke about Moshe concerning the beautiful woman he married, for he married [**sent away**] a beautiful woman.

Rashi on Bemidbar 12:1	
על אדות האשה. עַל אוֹדוֹת גֵּרוּשֶׁיהָ:	**Because of the Cushite woman**— because of her having been divorced by Moses

Ibn Ezra on Bemidbar 12:1	
וטעם **כי אשה כשית לקח.** זה הדבור שדברה מרים ומה נכבד דברי קדמונינו שאמרו על הזקנים אשריהם ואוי לנשיהם והנה חשדו משה כי לא נמנע לשכב עם צפורה רק בעבור שאיננה יפה:	And the meaning of **because of the Cushite woman he took.** These are the words that Miriam spoke. How precious are the words of the ancients who said with regard to the elders, “Happy are they, but woe to their wives.” They suspected that Moses refrained from sleeping with Zipporah only because she was not beautiful.

2. A Cushite Woman

Bavli Moed Katan 16b	
כַּיּוֹצֵא בַּדָּבָר אַתָּה אוֹמֵר: ״עַל אוֹדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכּוּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקָח״, וְכִי כּוּשִׁית שְׁמָהּ? וַהֲלֹא צִיפּוֹרָה שְׁמָהּ! אֶלָּא: מָה כּוּשִׁית מְשׁוּנָּה בְּעוֹרָהּ — אַף צִיפּוֹרָה מְשׁוּנָּה בְּמַעֲשֶׂיהָ. כַּיּוֹצֵא בַּדָּבָר אַתָּה אוֹמֵר: ״וַיִּשְׁמַע עֶבֶד מֶלֶךְ הַכּוּשִׁי״, וְכִי כּוּשִׁי שְׁמוֹ?	The Gemara notes: **Similarly, you can explain** the verse: “And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses **due to the Cushite woman whom he had taken,** for he had taken a Cushite woman” (12:1). **But is her name Cushite? Zipporah is her name. Rather, just as a Cushite is distinguished by his** dark **skin, so too, Zipporah was distinguished by her actions.** The Gemara continues: **Similarly, you can explain** the verse: **“Now when Ebed-Melech the Cushite heard”**

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

וַהֲלֹא צִדְקִיָּה שְׁמוֹ! אֶלָּא: מָה כּוּשִׁי מְשׁוּנֶּה בְּעוֹרוֹ — אַף צִדְקִיָּה מְשׁוּנֶּה בְּמַעֲשָׂיו.	(Jeremiah 38:7). **Is his name Cushite? Zedekiah is his name. Rather, just as a Cushite is distinguished by his** dark **skin, so too, Zedekiah was distinguished by his** righteous **actions.**

Rashbam on Bemidbar 12:1	
הכשית - שהיא ממשפחת חם.	**The Cushite woman** from one of the tribes going back to Ham[2] [one of Noah's sons.]

Bekhor Shor on Bemidbar 12:1	
על דבר אשה כושית אשר לקח. לפי הפשט שהיו אומ' וכי לא מצא משה אשה מבנות ישראל שיקח לו לאשה שהלך לקחת לו מבנות הכושים שהם ערלים וכי בשביל שהק' מדבר עמו מתגאה שאינו רוצה לישא אשה מבנות ישראל שבקש אשה במרחק הלא גם בנו דבר ונשאנו מישראל ולא נתגאנו בכך:	**Because of the Cushite woman he took:** According to the simple meaning, they were saying, "And did Moses not find a woman from the Children of Israel to take as a wife, that he went to take from the daughters of Cush, who are uncircumcised? And was it because the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke with him, that he became haughty; such that he did not want to marry a woman from the daughters of Israel and sought a woman from far away? 'Did he not also speak with us,' and we married from [within] Israel and did not become haughty about this."

Ha'Emek Davar on Bemidbar 12:1	
כי אשה כושית לקח. לפי הפשט משמעות כושית גויה. אלא שנתגיירה. וכסבורים אהרן ומרים דמש"ה פירש משה ממנה. משום שאינה לפי כבודו של משה. שתהי' אשתו שלא מיחוסי ישראל. ודברו בזה שמכ"מ אינו נכון. אחר שכבר לקח וידע שהיתה גויה ולא הטעתו. וא"כ אינו ראוי לצערה ולפרוש ממנה.	**Because of the Cushite woman he took:** According to the contextual meaning of the text, a gentile black woman. But who had converted. And Aaron and Miriam thought that this was why Moshe separated himself from her. That his wife was not of Israelite lineage. And they were saying that under no circumstances is this proper. After he had taken her and knew she was a non-Israelite and she didn't deceive him. Therefore, it's unfair to make her sad and separate himself from her.

Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 93
Regardless of whether Moses' wife was Ethiopian or Midianite, the objection to her, it is implied, was ethnic. Strikingly, the rabbis raise no objection to her Cushite origin but, to the contrary, defend her, claiming that Moses refused to have sexual intercourse after his descent from Sinai...

3. A Series of Moments

Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, 217-218
We like to think of our character in the same way it is written in our obituaries. We are strong, brave, and loyal. We are funny and creative. We are what we strive to be. While if we sit and reflect, we can provide a more nuanced description of ourselves, in our day-to-day lives, our self-esteem reads in synopsis: "Mary was a kind of loving mother. An avid gardener. "But life is a series of moments. And in reality, we are both the culmination of those countless moments, and each moment individually in time...

[2] From the time of Josephus, the descendents of Ham are generally connected to people who live in Africa, although the Torah makes no reference to this connection.