

Parashat Behaalotekha: Celibacy Matters (Really)

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Bemidbar 12:1-2	
וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁהָ עַל-אִשְׁתּוֹ הַכְּשִׁיית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשְׁתּוֹ כְּשִׁית לָקַח: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֶק אֶה-בְּמִשְׁהָ דִּבֶּר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם-בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה:	Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: "He married a Cushite!" They said, "Has GOD spoken only through Moses—and not through us as well?" GOD heard it.
1. Moshe Was Celibate	
Targum Onkelos on Bemidbar 12:1	
וּמִלֵּיל מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁהָ עַל עֶסֶק אֶתְתָּא שְׁפָרְתָּא דִּי נָסִיב אַרִי אֶתְתָּא שְׁפָרְתָּא דְנָסִיב רַחֲמִי:	Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses because of the beautiful woman he had married, for he had separated from the beautiful woman he had married.
Rashi on Bemidbar 12:1-2	
וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן. הִיא פְתִיחָה בְּדִבּוּר תְּחִלָּה, לְפִיכָּה הַקְדִּימָה הַכְּתוּב, וּמִנֵּי הִיטָה יוֹדֵעַת מִרְיָם שְׁפָרַשׁ מִשָּׁה מִן הָאִשָּׁה? רַבִּי נִתָּן אוֹמֵר מִרְיָם הִיטָה בְּצַד צְפוּרָה בְּשָׂעָה שְׁנֵאֲמַר לְמִשָּׁה אֶלְדָּד וּמִדָּד מִתְנַבְּאִים בְּמַחֲנֶה, כִּינן שְׁשִׁמְעָה צְפוּרָה, אֲמָרָה אוֹי לְנִשְׁוֹתֵיהֶן שֶׁל אֱלֹוֹ אִם הֵם נִזְקָקִים לְנִבְוָאָה, שִׁיְהִיו פּוֹרְשִׁין מִנִּשְׁוֹתֵיהֶן כְּדָרָה שְׁפָרַשׁ בְּעַלִּי מִמֶּנִּי, וּמִשָּׁם יָדְעָה מִרְיָם וְהִגִּידָה לְאַהֲרֹן; וַיֹּמַר מִרְיָם שֶׁלֹּא נִתְכַּנְּנָה לְגִנוּתוֹ כֹּה נַעֲנֶשָּׂה, קֵל וְחֹמֶר לְמַסְפָּר בְּגִנוּתוֹ שֶׁל חֲבֵרוֹ (ספרי):	And Miriam and Aaron spoke: She opened the conversation, therefore Scripture mentions her first. And whence did Miriam know that Moses had separated himself from his wife (for this was the statement she made; cf. Rashi below)? R. Nathan answered: "Miriam was beside Zipporah When it was told to Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp' (Numbers 11:27). When Zipporah heard this, she exclaimed, Woe to the wives of these if they have anything to do with prophecy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband has separated from me!" It was from this that Miriam knew about it, and she told it to Aaron. Now what was the case with Miriam who had no intention to disparage him? She was punished thus severely! How much the more will this be so in the case of one who intentionally speaks in disparagement of this fellow!" (Sifrei Bamidbar 99).
עַל אִדּוֹת הָאִשָּׁה. עַל אִדּוֹת גְּרוּשָׁיָהּ.	Because of the Cushite woman- because of her having been divorced by Moses.
הֲלֹא גַם בָּנוּ. וְלֹא פִרְשָׁנוּ מִדְּרָה אֶרֶץ (ספרי):	Has he not also spoken with us- and we have not separated from our spouses! (Sifrei Bamidbar 100).

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Professor Marty Lockshin, "Did Moses Become Celibate?," *TheTorah.com* (2020)

Because Miriam and Aaron were not prophets at the level of Moses, they did not need to be ready for conversation with God at any moment, and thus were never required to be celibate. Their lack of understanding of the difference between themselves and Moses is what led to God's rebuke.

2. Moshe Was Not Celibate

Ibn Kaspi on Bemidbar 12²

<p>וכל שכן שהמעשה ההוא יותר ראוי לשלמי היצירה ולטוביהם, רצוני אשר החום והלחות גובר בם. ואין ספק כי משרע"ה אדון הנביאים היה מזה המזג, עד שחיה מאה ועשרים ולא כהתה עינו ולא נס לחה,</p>	<p>Such behavior [sexual activity] is especially fitting for the best and most perfect human beings, I mean those whose moist and warm humors are predominant. Doubtless, the humors of Moses, the greatest of the prophets, may he rest in peace, were of this nature. He even lived for 120 years and yet (Deut 34:7), "his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated."</p>
<p>ואם הוא ע"ה יהיה פורש לגמרי מאשה כמו שאמרו הקדמונים ועשו על זה אסמכתות מן הכתוב אין בם ממש, הנה לא היה משה האיש המשובח בזמן מעולם ועד עולם,</p>	<p>If we were to say that Moses, may he rest in peace, completely separated himself from women, as the ancient [rabbis] maintained, basing themselves on groundless "hints" in the text, then he would not have been the greatest man of all generations.</p>
<p>א"כ אין לשפוט עליו ע"ה שפרש מאשה, כי אינו צעיר ודורש או אגוסטי, וכרמלי.</p>	<p>Accordingly, we should not portray him [Moses], may he rest in peace, as being a Franciscan or Dominican, an Augustinian or a Carmelite [monk]!</p>

Professor Marty Lockshin, "Did Moses Become Celibate?," *TheTorah.com* (2020)

Whatever the reason for Moses feeling the need to take a second wife, Aaron and Miriam's sin, according to Ibn Kaspi, was that they did not give Moses the benefit of the doubt; they did not assume that he had good reasons for doing this. In this reading, God's touting Moses' greatness is not an explanation for Moses' behavior at all. Instead, it is meant to explain why God is reacting so harshly.

3. Celibacy Matters (Really)

Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Jonathan Mark, *Heavenly Sex: Sexuality in the Jewish Tradition*

There is a Bible in every hotel and motel in the country...People pick up the Bible for many different reasons but rarely, if ever, as a sex manual. That is their mistake.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible"³

The laws [of the Torah] also reveal a great danger: when a society has such legitimate concerns about an important aspect of life, it needs a way to discuss and channel anxieties productively. This the Bible does not provide. We can see the concerns about sex expressed in the laws, but we cannot see how they were mediated, detoxified, expressed, and understood. The result is a core emptiness in the Bible's discussion of sex.

Big Question: Why would rabbis care whether or not Moshe was celibate?

² This entire text is taken from Professor Marty Lockshin, "Did Moses Become Celibate?," *TheTorah.com* (2020).

³ See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, 250.