

XII

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE V Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro

Tsippy Levin Byron
(Bar-Ilan University)

This article seeks to read the character of Zipporah not as a secondary figure, but as a central axis for understanding the tension between Moses's private home and his national mission. Through the analysis of key scenes, it is claimed that Zipporah represents an ethics of rescue and improvisation, qualities that are very reminiscent of Miriam's uniqueness. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that she is excluded from the public-prophetic sphere in which Miriam operated. Next to her is Aaron's wife, Elisheva, whose voice is also not heard. Both illustrate the boundary between family and nationality.

The first encounter between Moses and Zipporah in Midian echoes in the structure and motifs of the meeting of Yaakov and Rachel in Charan. Both scenes take place near a well, involving shepherds, a strange man and a refugee, and the expulsion of other shepherds.

However, while Yaakov responds with emotion: «And Yaakov kissed Rachel and lifted up his voice and wept», Moses responds with action: «And Moses arose, and was saved, and watered their flock». The verb 'and Yoshan' repeats Moses's pattern of action in Egypt – «And he smote the Egyptian and buried him in the sand». Salvation does not stem from romantic attention, but from spontaneous ethics of standing on the side of the weak versus the strong. The text does not convey the motives for the marriage of Zipporah and Moses. Three rational reasons can be proposed that arise from the context: The circumstances: Retribution and gratitude: Jethro calls on Moses to 'eat bread' following the rescue of his daughters. Priority Code: Zipporah is referred to as 'the senior'.

Like Laban in Haran, in the Midian society it is customary to marry the senior woman first. The need for belonging and protection: Moses is 'a stranger in a foreign land'. Marriage to the house of the priest of Midian provides him with political asylum and tribal status. In the obscure scene in Numbers 4:24-26, «And the Lord met him and sought to put him to death». At this moment, Tzipora acts without hesitation: she does not freeze out of fear. She bravely confronts the death-threatening divinity. «And she took a sharp stone and cut off her son's foreskin».

She doesn't have a knife, and she improvises flint. The act indicates an intuitive understanding that circumcision is a condition for the identity of the 'descendants of Abraham'. Throwing the foreskin 'at his feet' is a symbolic act of guilt and atonement and salvation. This act places her in line with the midwives Yocheved, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter, all of whom took part in Moses's rescue and the miracles of his life. In the wake of this life-threatening trauma, Tzipora disappears from the national narrative. Immediately after the giving of the *Torah*, Jethro arrives: «And Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, took Zippora, Moses's wife, after she was returned to him». The *Torah* does not document when she was sent and why. Jethro's reception is solemn and detailed: «And Aaron and all the elders of Israel took to eat bread with Moses's father-in-law». On the other hand, there is not a single word of emotion, speech or encounter about Zipporah's return.

In Chapter 12 of the book of Numbers, it is recounted: «And Miriam and Aharon spoke to Moses about the "Negro woman" ». It is apparently an ethnic-pejorative term for the Medinite Tsippora. The affair may reveal a hidden power struggle. Miriam, who 'guarded' Moses on the Nile and followed his vision, functions as a 'mother-in-law' who does not relinquish her status. Tzipora, who gave Moses shelter and saved his life, is silent again. Moses also does not respond to Miriam's words. Perhaps out of reverence for her. Perhaps by tacit consent. He does not come to his wife's defence. The silence and insult will not be lost and will seep into the groundwater of future generations.

Through the history of Moses' family, the *Torah* teaches us about the 'Trauma Preservation Law'. A family trauma that reverberates for generations to come.

Perhaps the sons Gershom and Eliezer, who saw their mother humiliated and were called only sons and not Moses's sons – will pass on to their sons the experience of rejection and not acceptance in the family.

At the end of the book of Judges, it is told of 'Yonatan ben Gershom ben Menashe', who established idolatry in Dan in the north. The letter 'N' in the name of 'Menashe' is written as 'N' hanging and hovering. Chazal agreed that this was a late correction of the scribes, intended to obscure the fact that Yonatan is the grandson of Moses. 'Gershom ben Menashe' = 'Gershom ben Moses'. History does not forget and does not forgive. The grandfather brought the people out of Egypt and idolatry, and the grandson returned the people in their land to the bosom of idolatry.

The voice of Elisheva bat Aminadav, Aharon's wife – a woman who also comes from a privileged family from the tribe of Judah –, is not heard at all in the heroic story of the exodus from Egypt.

The *Torah* mentions its lineage only once, when commanding about the priestly garments: «And you shall bring your brother Aaron near to you... and his sons with him». Elisheva is mentioned only as the mother of the priests, not as a working subject. It seems that the 'triumvirate' of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses created a closed leadership front. The two women – Zipporah and Elisheva – were unable to penetrate this circle. Miriam is the voice. Zipporah and Elizabeth are the silence. One is a leader and a protester. The other two are rescuers and guards but are excluded. In this gap between voice and silence lies a complex story about the boundaries between family and nation.

SOMMARIO

La figura di Zipporah appare caratterizzata da una forza morale che la rende in grado di portare aiuto in modo spontaneo e improvvisato, qualità che ne evidenziano il carattere unico e particolare. Forse è proprio per questa ragione che sembra esclusa dall'ambito della pubblica profezia in cui operò Miriam.

ABSTRACT

Zipporah represents an ethics of rescue and improvisation, qualities that are very reminiscent of Miriam's uniqueness. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that she is excluded from the public-prophetic sphere in which Miriam operated.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Zipporah
Mosè
Giacobbe
Rachele
Miriam

KEYWORDS

Zipporah
Moses
Yaakov
Rachel
Miriam

Contributo, come da regolamento, non sottoposto a procedura di referaggio “double blind”.