

Dedicated to my son, Niv Shlomo, on becoming a Bar Mitzvah

### **Parashat Yitro: Say hello to Zipporah**

After hearing about the salvation of the People of Israel, Jethro, Moshe's father in law, came to the desert to him: "And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her away, and her two sons... And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife unto Moses into the wilderness..." (Exodus 18:2-5). These words are hard to understand because we did not hear anything about the departure of Zipporah, when did it happen and why? Did Moshe send Zipporah away or it was a mutual separation? Do we have here the first ever divorce documentation? And if Zipporah was sent away why did she come back with her father to see Moshe in the desert? Since the story of her saving Moshe by cutting with her own hands the foreskin of her son, when God wanted to kill him, we do not hear a thing about her.

I would like to take the opportunity to consider questions regarding alienation and closeness in the relationship of Moshe and Zipporah, a relationship in which much is concealed then known, and I think that they may teach a lesson in understanding the attitude to the "other" as well as to oneself.

Moshe was raised as a prince in Pharaoh's palace but in his essence he remained a stranger, a son of slaves, who absorbed his alienness with his mother's milk. When he flees to the desert he returns to his original status as a foreigner. As a stranger and newcomer he strikes at the local harassing shepherds and helps the seven daughters, the priest of Midian. When the daughters tell their father what happened, they introduce the new young man as "an Egyptian". The oldest daughter, Zipporah, is given as a wife to the rescuer.

Moshe causes Zipporah to leave her home and her status as princess and go as a foreigner to an unknown land. He even does not consult her; he puts her and his sons on a donkey, takes his stick and takes off. Moshe returns to Egypt, but in fact he returns to a place he has never been before – he comes as God's messenger, but is a stranger both to his people (did he have an Egyptian accent?) and as a threatening stranger to him in whose palace he once lived as a son. Moshe the man

was known all his life both as a stranger and as a resident, a respected personality and a nameless wanderer, as the one who merits speaking face to face with God and as the one who eventually remains in the desert and was buried in an unknown place.

Whereas Zipporah, the local princess, who was given to the foreigner who fled from Egypt, went after him to the unknown territory from which he fled, and became a total stranger. She is a stranger not only because of her different origin, religion and ethnicity but also because she is married to a man who was, until recently, a stranger to his own people and a hated representative of the oppressive regime. We do not know anything about Zipporah's life experiences or feelings. Compared with our matriarchs that gave their children names that reflected their lives, Moshe (who was also given his name by a woman) is the one who calls his sons by names that reflect his own journeys (Exodus 2:22, 18:4). Why were Zipporah's strangeness and faith silenced? What do we know about her?

Did Zipporah want to marry a strange man who was a hero and helped her and her sisters (this is, after all how it is depicted in modern films and books) or maybe it was a marriage of convenience that she was forced into by her father? And Moshe, was he enchanted by this Midianite woman he met by the well or did he marry her in order to survive in a strange land? We already asked what were the circumstances of the "sending away" of Zipporah-- did he choose it or did she, the princess who could not face life in the desert with the slaves? And if so, why did her father, Jethro the priest of Midian, choose to come to Moshe with Zipporah and the children? Why did Moshe respect his father-in-law so much? "And Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent." (Exodus 18:7.) But it seems that Moshe ignores his wife, who saved his life and his two sons, his flesh and blood.

The Midrash also does not go into details of the relationship between the two and about Zipporah's personality. Let's examine two very different midrashim that do deal with her: On the verse "for he had married a Cushite woman." (Numbers 12:1), our Sages ask: "Is Cushite her name, was it not Zipporah? But just as a Cushite has strange (i.e., different) skin, so Zipporah's actions are strange" (Bavli Moed Katan 16b). The Midrash does not explain what was "strange" in Zipporah's

actions-- is this said in order to designate that she was a daughter of an idolater or it was a compliment that, by her resourcefulness, she saved Moshe? We can't be sure what they meant, but according to a later midrash, Moshe was kept for ten years as a prisoner in Midian and it says that during all these years, Zipporah took care of him and fed him and later she even persuaded her father to free him (Yalkut Shimoni Exodus 168). Here we get a very different portrait of a resourceful and courageous woman saving her beloved.

Zipporah and her relationship with Moshe get a minimal, but a very interesting interpretation, in Yehezkel "the tragedy writer's" work. Yehezkel lived in Alexandria, and like many Hellenistic Jews wrote in Greek. He was immersed in the Hellenistic well-composed literature in its well-known genre – the tragedy. We do not know any thing about his life, but we can learn from a reference made by Eusebius, the Church Father, who calls him "the Jewish tragedy writer." Perhaps Yehezkel used the tragedy literature genre in order to provide his Jewish readers with Jewish material in updated Greek attire and in order to engage them in Biblical stories. Perhaps he also wanted to bring closer the non Jewish readers – we will probably never know, as what was left for us is simply testimony on an interesting cultural meeting between Jewish contents and Hellenistic form.

In Yehezkel's play, Moshe asks Zipporah, when he meets her and her sisters near the well, who they are, and she replies in detail, explaining to him the nature of the land:

This land, O stranger, all bears Libia's name, but tribes of sundry races dwell throughout; the dark skinned Aethiops, yet there is one who ruler, prince, and sole commander, he rules all this state and judges moral men; a priest, the father of myself and these.<sup>1</sup>

The reference of Zipporah to Moshe as "the stranger" may show her as the oldest daughter of the "ruler and the sole commander" who "judges moral men; a priest" who feels superior over the stranger. Later in the play an unknown man named Chum (Hebrew for "brown"-- maybe this was the color of his skin) requests that Zipporah tell him everything about her relationship with Moshe. Zipporah answers: "My father gave me for this alien's wife". Calling him "alien", Zipporah grasps the

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<sup>1</sup> James Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, New York 1985, pp. 810-811.

essence of all Moshe's life. We can also read between the lines and see that she was not happy with her father's decision, and to her he remained the "alien" all his life.

Only this tragedy, "the Exit" (היציאה), remains from Yehezkel's work. The tragedy is about the Exodus from Egypt and it is only partially preserved. We hear of it, as mentioned, from Eusebius, the Father of the Church who quotes a Greek author Alexander Poluhistor, who apparently lived in the first century BCE and wrote a book on the Jews. We see that also here, as in the story of Moshe and Zipporah, this tradition comes to us through a Church Father who quotes a Greek author who quoted a play of a Jewish writer, who wrote on Jewish contents, according to Greek literature conventions.

As Moshe and Zipporah who operate in a complex cultural, gender-oriented, religious and ethnic world, Yehezkel's tragedy's journey, until reaching us, was also complex - so are we acting in a complicated world in which we are strangers in our homes while there are distant places in which we feel at home.

Let us never forget our initial and essential strangeness in the world, and at the same time, may we always act to help all to feel at home in it.

### **Ursula's response to Dalia**

I never thought about the relationship between Zipporah and Moses until you Dalia, raised the question and explored it. Why? Zipporah is a marginal woman in a tradition that has marginalized women for very long time. Looking at the history of the churches, it is only very recently that women received the right of ordination and not all the Christian churches grant it to women, not even all the Lutheran churches at this moment.

Despite the fact that over the past decades a number of volumes have been published on the theme of Biblical women, little attention has been given to Zipporah. I doubt that many members of my congregation know her name and not even the ones who are interested in the women of the Bible.

Yet, there is another reason why I have not yet thought about the relationship between Zipporah and Moses. Trained as a Protestant theologian at a German

university, I was taught the method of historical-critical exegesis. This method attempts to find out “the reality behind the text”. At the center of this exegesis are questions concerning the genesis of the text(s) and the historical reality which it/they reflect. Questions of literary content beyond these categories are rarely thought about. Yet, as a practicing Christian I do find it helpful as well as necessary to look at the biblical personages as one “gestalt”.