

Parshat B'ha'alotcha
All in the Family: Moshe's Wife and Father in Law
Melton at Shearith Israel, June 4, 2012
JSI at Akiba Academy, June 5, 2012

A) Overview of the Parsha

- 1) Covers chapters 8 to 12 of the Book of Numbers
- 2) Deals with the preparation for the beginning of the journey from Mount Sinai to the Land of Israel, and the beginning of that journey.
 - a See Bmidbar chapter 10, verses 11 – 13

B) Summary of Historical Context of this Parsha

- 1) The Israelites left Egypt on the 15th of the First Month after experiencing the Ten Plagues and participating in the first Passover. They went through the Reed Sea on dry land, and took about 50 days to march to Mount Sinai. This was all retold to us in the first half of the Book of Exodus. They remained at Mount Sinai until the events described in this week's parsha.
 - a At Mount Sinai, Moshe ascends the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. While Moses was up on the mountain with God, the Israelites rebelled and constructed the Golden Calf. Moses came down from the mountain and upon discovering the great sin that had been committed, smashed the Tablets of the Law that God had given him, and proceeded to punish and admonish the people.
 - b He went up to God another time, again for 40 days, and here, while the Biblical record is unclear, Jewish tradition says that he went up this time for two periods of 40 days, meaning that all together he spent 120 days with God. He beseeches God to forgive the people, and in this he is successful.
 - c When he comes down, he brings with him divine forgiveness. According to Jewish tradition, the date was the 10th of the 7th month, the day that became the holiday of Yom Kipur, the Day of Atonement. Moses brings to the people the second Tablets that God had given him on high, and also transmits to the people the other commandments that God had given him. The major commandment highlighted by the text is the construction of the Tabernacle.
 - d The labors of the Tabernacle go on for about 6 months, reaching completion in the spring, at the beginning of the first month. That means that 11 and a half months have passed since the Exodus from Egypt.
 - e With this background, we now come to this week's Torah portion. We are now in the first and second months of the second year since the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites are still encamped at Mount Sinai, but are now ready to march off into the desert on the way to the Promised Land.
- 2) The Book of Shmot covers the period until the Tabernacle was erected at the beginning of the second year after the Exodus.
- 3) The Book of Vayikra is a-historical, with the exception of the description of the consecration ceremony for the Tabernacle, at the very beginning of the second year after the Exodus.
- 4) The Book of Bmidbar begins with the second year after the exodus, and covers the whole 39 years before the entrance into the Land of Israel. The first ten chapters deal with the preparation for beginning the journey from Mt. Sinai to the Land of Israel. In the ensuing chapters the journey begins.

B) Chapter 10, verses 29 – 36

- 1) Moshe's father in law was early in the Torah called Reuel and also Yitro. Here is called Hovav.
- 2) Apparently he has been staying with Moshe and the Israelites up until now. We will later see when he arrived and under what circumstances, and how long he has sojourned with the Israelites.
- 3) The verses do not say what he decided to do in the end. There is no mention of him later in the Torah or in the Book of Joshua.
- 4) A parenthetical devar torah from Rav Dov Begon.

C) Chapter 12, verses 1 – 13

1) The Kushite Woman

- a Some say this is a woman who has not previously been mentioned in the Torah, a second wife who he now married.
- b Others say that the reference is to Moshe's wife of many years, Tzipora. See Sefer Habakuk chapter 3, verse 7. We will work with this approach.

ו עמד וימדד ארץ, ראה ויתר גוים, ויתפצצו הררי-עד, שחו גבעות עולם; הליכות עולם, לו. 6 He standeth, and shaketh the earth, He beholdeth, and maketh the nations to tremble; and the everlasting mountains are dashed in pieces, the ancient hills do bow; His goings are as of old.

ז פחת און, ראיתי אהלי כושן; רגזו, ריעות ארץ מדן. 7 I see the tents of Kushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian do tremble.

ח הבנהרים, חרה יהוה--אם בנהרים אפד, אם-בים עברתך: פי תרפב על-סוסיד, מרפבתיד ישועה. 8 Is it, O LORD, that against the rivers, is it that Thine anger is kindled against the rivers, or Thy wrath against the sea? that Thou dost ride upon Thy horses, upon Thy chariots of victory?

- c If so, why does the matter come up only now?
 - i Most midrashim explain that the complaint was that Moshe presently divorced her. This approach is problematic because this verse says nothing about Moshe divorcing his wife, nor does any other verse in the Torah. Clearly the midrashim went in this direction because they could make no sense of the peshat.
 - ii We will try to explain the straightforward approach that only now did Moshe's sixty-year-old marriage become an issue.

2) The complaint: We will try to ascertain its true nature.

D) Sefer Shmot, chapter 2, verses 15 – 22

- 1) Moshe was a young man at the time described by these verses.

E) Sefer Shmot, chapter 4, verses 18 - 20

- 1) This is the aftermath of the Burning Bush.
- 2) It is only two chapters later, but at least 60 years have passed, because we are later told that Moshe was 80 years old when God called upon him to redeem the Israelites from slavery.
- 3) This means that Moshe was married to Tzipora for over half a century and it did not seem to bother anyone.
- 4) Note that when Moshe finally went back to Egypt to take upon himself the mantle of leadership, he went together with his wife and children.

F) Sefer Shmot, chapter 4, verses 24 – 26

- 1) Enigmatic verses indeed
- 2) Tzipora not only begin the journey to Egypt with her husband Moshe, but she also continued on the journey.

- 3) At this point she was extremely knowledgeable of and dedicated to the covenant with God. There was no formal conversion ceremony at that time, but as circumcision is a central sign of the covenant and later becomes a central part of conversion, we can metaphorically say that both Tzipora and her son were converted to Judaism.
- G) Sefer Shmot, chapter 18, verses 1 – 10, 12 – 14, 27
- 1) This is after the Exodus and the splitting of the sea.
 - 2) The Israelites arrival at Mt. Sinai is only described later on in chapter 19, verses 1 – 3. So our verses, that already assume that the Israelites are there, are out of place.
 - a These verses might be placed here in order not to disturb the continuity of the narrative that begins in chapter 19.
 - 3) There is much dispute among the commentators when Yitro and Tzipora and the family actually arrived. A strong case is made that they arrived before the Giving of the Ten Commandments (described in chapters 19 - 20), because had that already occurred, it would have been mentioned in verses 1, 8 - 10.
 - 4) The big question: How is it that Yitro brings his daughter and sons to Moshe; did we not just read that Moshe took them with him when he journeyed from Midyan to Egypt? For this we must see the midrash:
 - a Mechilta dRebbi Yishmael, Mesecheta dAmalek, Parshat Yitro aleph, paraphrased by Rashi on Shmot chapter 18, verse 2. See separate sheet.
 - 5) The impression is that Yitro stayed on for a short amount of time, departing quickly and leaving behind him Tzipora and the children.
- H) Back to our parsha, Sefer Bmidbar, chapter 10, verses 29 – 32. Yitro is here with Moshe: Is he still here, or is he here again? Our commentators disagree concerning the relationship between the two passages about Yitro.
- 1) Either he came and left, and then came again – and the second coming is not described - in which case we are not told if the second time he remained or left again.
 - 2) Or the two passages must be read as one, meaning that the statement at the end of the first passage that he returned to his land, does not mean that he immediately did so. Rather he eventually did so, and that return was precipitated by the events described in our Torah portion. This latter approach is much more likely, at least so it appears to me.
- I) Back to the other relevant passage in our parsha, chapter 12.
- 1) We can now finally understand according to the pesaht why the complaint came up only now!
 - a This is the first point in time in which Tzipora is actually present in the fullest sense as the wife of Moshe!
 - i No Israelites were present or aware of their marriage when it occurred, nor were any aware of it for its first 60 years.
 - ii When Moshe returned to Egypt at the age of 80, he returned alone.
 - iii When Tzipora came back to Moshe at Mt. Sinai, she did so together with her father in law. Her father in law remained for about ten months with the Israelites and spent good quality time with Moshe; the two men were good friends. She may have been seen by the Israelites simply as part of the family of Yitro.
 - iv Only when Yitro leaves as they are about to embark for the Land of Israel does it become clear that Tzipora is staying with Moshe as his permanent wife!!
 - 2) The nature of the complaint.
 - a Tzipora is a foreigner! And the wife of the supreme leader!
 - i Only a year and a few months ago, the Israelites were called upon to extricate themselves from Egypt culture. They may have included separation from non Jewish wives.

- ii A mixed multitude went out of Egypt with them. This group may have been behind many of the rebellions against God in the desert.
 - (One) See Sefer Shmot chapter 12, verses 37 – 38.
 - (Two) See our parsha chapter 11, verse 1 according to Rashi and verse 4 with Rashi. This immediately precedes the complaint of Moshe and Aaron. The matter of Moshe's wife may have become urgent because of this recent incident.
 - iii See Sefer Bmidbar chapter 25, verses 1 – 9, 14. It appears that Moshe was unable to react; why was he paralyzed?
 - See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin page 82a
 - iv Back to Rashi on Sefer Shmot, chapter 18, verse 2, this time with the commentary of Tiferet Yonatan on the Mechilta.
- 3) So perhaps Miriam and Aaron have a very legitimate point. They are concerned over the negative religious and national implications of Moshe's choice of wife. But God upholds his righteousness...

Tiferet Yonatan

“We have cause to grieve over the former ones etc”: This is difficult, for the Tribe of Levi was not enslaved, and furthermore, in any case the time of redemption had arrived! Rather, the claim of Zimri is well known – ‘the daughter of Yitro, who permitted her to you’, and he did not accept that she was a convert for the sake of heaven. Now in Egypt the Israelites transgressed the covenant of circumcision, but they did not intermarriage with the women of the land, and Aaron was afraid that if Tzipora would enter the Land of Egypt and the Israelites would see that Moshe took a Midyanite woman, they would themselves marry Egyptian women, for they would not be able to make a distinction and divine wrath would come upon them God forbid. And that is what the midrash means when it says “We have cause to grieve over the former ones” – that they transgressed the covenant of circumcision and now in addition we will have to worry that they will want to marry the women of the land God forbid. And therefore he sent her back to Midyan.

Bring the matter of the blasphemer

For further thought:

This could be a class on the subject of the private lives of leaders and how they enter into the public domain, and modern examples may be offered. Or the them could be how we relate to foreigners and converts among us, and modern examples may also be given.