

Parshat Beha'alotekha: Siblings: A Love Story, Finally

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*Dedicated in honor of my longtime "beha'alotcha chevruta" educator
Rabbi Miriam Weidberg, who exemplifies humility, collaboration, and sisterhood.*

The Torah isn't exactly known for great sibling relationships. Kayin murders Hevel. Yaakov steals the firstborn blessing from Esav. Yosef's brothers plot to kill him. In each of these instances, there is competition, and a perception that only one child can lead. Yet in this week's parsha, we get a glimpse of what it looks like to have a functional sibling relationship, even though there might be hiccups along the way.

Miriam speaks to Aaron about their younger brother Moses. It's not clear from the text what the content of her gossip is except that it has something to do with Moshe marrying a Cushite woman. We also are told that Miriam and Aaron are upset that their prophecy is not recognized in some way, asking rhetorically, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" (Exodus 12:2)

God intervenes, defends Moshe's honor, and strikes Miriam with leprosy. Aaron then pleads with Moshe to pray on Miriam's behalf. Moshe prays, yet God insists that Miriam be quarantined for her wrongdoing for seven days.

While this story is often regarded as a derogatory account of Miriam, there is a lot that can be said about the interactions among the siblings. Aaron shows compassion towards his leprous sister. Perhaps bearing some guilt, as he was complicit in her gossip about Moshe, yet was left untouched. He begs Moshe to pray for Miriam to be healed from her leprosy, which he describes as deathly. Moshe, in turn, bears no grudge against his sister for speaking critically of him and immediately prays on her behalf. Even Miriam's utter silence in the second half of the story is somewhat remarkable, in that she does not attempt to explain or whitewash her behavior.

The three siblings have a longstanding history of supporting one another. Miriam stands guard while her baby brother (soon-to-be-named Moshe) floats in the Nile, bringing him to a "Hebrew wet nurse" (AKA her mother) when the daughter of Pharaoh wishes to adopt him. When Moshe is chosen by God to be Israel's savior, and begs God to choose someone else instead, it is Aaron who comes to greet him, "happy in his heart" (Exodus 4:14), seemingly comfortable playing as Moshe's spokesperson, not showing a smidgen of jealousy towards his younger brother's prestige.

Their leadership roles continue in the story of the Exodus and beyond, with Miriam leading the women's dancing at the splitting of the Red Sea, and Aaron's role as High Priest throughout their years in the desert.

According to the Talmud, the three also have important roles to play in sustaining the Jewish people in the wilderness. There was a well of water in the merit of Miriam, the clouds of glory in the merit of Aaron, and the manna in the merit of Moshe (Ta'anit 9a). It is as if the siblings' love for one another not only bolstered each other, but nourished the greater community as well.

One might say that sibling relationships are a direct outcome of poor parenting choices, and it is not entirely up to the children to direct their sibling relationships. Think Isaac's favoritism of Esau, or Jacob's playing favorites with Joseph. Those certainly didn't play out very favorably. We don't know much from the text about the details of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses' upbringing. One could say that in this account, however, God plays the role of the bad parent. God plays favorites, pitting Miriam and Aaron against Moses, whom God describes as being the only one with whom God speaks

directly (12:8). God exclusively punishes Miriam even though the text says that Aaron also spoke against Moshe (12:2). This makes the love among the three siblings that much more exemplary.

It is no easy feat to attain this kind of love among brothers and sisters. What's key for things to go so smoothly are the words God uses to describe Moshe:

Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנִיּוֹ מְאֹד מְכַלֵּה אֶת־פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה:

It's humility that makes it possible for Moshe to pray for his sister, even though she had just criticized him. It's humility that allows Aaron to rejoice for Moshe's promotion to leader of Klal Yisrael. And it's humility that Miriam needs in order to repair her wrongdoing:

But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted."

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַבְיֵה יָדְךָ בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא תִכְלֹם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּסָּגֵר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחֵר תֵּאָסֹף:

It's humility that needs to be re-entered into Miriam's psyche, in order for her to recover.

The Hebrew word for sibling is אח/ach. This happens to be the same word for hearth, or fireplace. Fire can be destructive, like the hate one can feel towards peers and siblings. It's no coincidence that the Torah chooses this word - rather than the word "fellow" or "neighbor" - when instructing us בלבבך לא תשנא את אחיך - "Do not hate your brother in your heart" (Leviticus 19:17).

But fire can also be life-giving. When siblinghood works, it can be as nurturing as a warm fireplace, illuminating and enlightening life, and allowing for multiple leadership roles in a single family. This happens when all parties involved are humble, lowly like the hearth. The hearth, where the ashes are collected, reminiscent of Avraham's expression ואני עפר ואפר - "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27).

May we be like Miriam, a proud advocate. May we be like Aaron, generous of spirit. May we be like Moses, forgiving and prayerful. And may we merit the sweet light of brotherhood, to sustain us and the communities of which we are a part.



Born in Haifa and raised in Allentown, Pennsylvania in a Hebrew speaking home, Yael Smootha grew up enchanted by the stories of the Torah. Yael studied at Breuers and then at Teachers College, Columbia University, ultimately teaching public school and then at Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan and of Westchester. She cares deeply about the integration of arts and education. Yael currently heads the Jspace Hebrew School at Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - the Bayit. Yael currently lives with her family in Teaneck, NJ.