

Fill Your Own Cup 5786
Winter Series – Session Five – Tzipporah

1) Wife of Moses by Shirley Kaufman (referenced in The Torah: A Women's Commentary)

*Something went wrong
when he told her to pack
and went on listening
to voices she couldn't hear.
It wasn't her job
the blood on her fingers,
this cut flesh, red love-bites
in the sand.*

*The desert widens between them
like and endless argument.
His mouth is too soft
for God's omnivorous rage,
fish will die, the river
stink and lice and flies
and boils and the rest.
Slice of the covenant: blood
on the doors.*

*He's off to his mountain.
She'll lose
what she saves,
fall out of the future
thankless, nothing to lean on
but her own arms,
holding the small face
unfathered anyway, crying
between her hands.*

2) Exodus 2:15-22

(15) When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. (16) Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; (17) but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. (18) When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" (19) They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." (20) He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread." (21) Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife. (22) She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

שמות ב':ט"ו-כ"ב

(טו) וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לַהַרְגֹת אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מִשָּׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיָּשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־מִדְיָן וַיָּשָׁב עַל־הַבְּאֵר: (טז) וּלְכַהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֲנֶה וַתִּדְלְנָה וַתִּמְלֹאנָה אֶת־הַקְּרֹהֲטִים לַהֲשִׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן: (יז) וַיִּבְאוּ הַרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׂוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיִּזְשַׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־צֹאנָם: (יח) וַתִּבְאֲנָה אֶל־רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמְרוּ מַדּוּעַ מֵהֲרַתְּנוּ בָּא הַיּוֹם: (יט) וַתֹּאמְרוּן אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילֵנוּ מִיַּד הַרְעִים וְגַם־דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־הַצֹּאן: (כ) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנֹתָיו וַאֲנִי לָמָּה זֶה עֲזַבְתֶּן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קְרָאָן לוֹ וַיֹּאכַל לֶחֶם: (כא) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְשִׁבְתָּ אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּלָמֹה: (כב) וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ גֶרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נְכַרְיָה:

3) Exodus 4:18-26

(18) Moses went back to his father-in-law Yeter and said to him, "Let me go back to my kinsfolk in Egypt and see how they are faring." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." (19) יהוה said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all those who sought to kill you are dead." (20) So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God with him. (21) And יהוה said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go. (22) Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says יהוה: Israel is My first-born son. (23) I have said to you, "Let My son go, that he may worship Me," yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.'" (24) At a night encampment on the way, יהוה encountered him and sought to kill him. (25) So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" (26) And when [God] let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."

שמות ד':י"ח-כ"ו

(יח) וַיָּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב אֶל-יֵתֵר חַתָּנוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֲלֹכָהּ הֲאֵלֶּיךָ וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֶל-אֶחָיו אֲשֶׁר-בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶרְאֶה הַעֲוֹדָם חַיִּים וַיֹּאמֶר יֵתֵר לְמֹשֶׁה לָּךְ לְשָׁלוֹם: (יט) וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן לֵאמֹר שָׁב מִצְרַיִם כִּי-מֵתוּ כָל-הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים אֶת-נַפְשְׁךָ: (כ) וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-אֲשֵׁתוֹ וְאֶת-בָּנָיו וַיִּרְכַּבְבּוּ עַל-הַחֲמֹר וַיָּשָׁב אֶרְצָה מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מַטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים בְּיָדוֹ: (כא) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּלִקְתָּךְ לָשׁוּב מִצְרַיִם רָאֵה כָל-הַמְּפַתִּיִם אֲשֶׁר-שָׂמִיתִי בְיָדְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְאֲנִי אַחֲזֶק אֶת-לְבָבוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת-הָעָם: (כב) וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל-פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנִי בְכָרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כג) וְאָמַר אֵלָיו שְׁלַח אֶת-בְּנִי וַיַּעֲבֹדְנִי וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַנֶּה אֲנֹכִי הֲרֹג אֶת-בְּנִי בְכָרִי: (כד) וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמְּלֹךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֻׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ: (כה) וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צַר וַתִּכְרַת אֶת-עֶרְלַת בְּנֶהּ וַתַּגֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתַן-דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי: (כו) וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ אַז אָמְרָה חֲתַן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת:

4) Exodus Rabbah 5:8

“It was on the way at the lodging, the Lord met him, and sought to kill him” (Exodus 4:24).

“It was on the way at the lodging” – circumcision is dear, as Moses’s punishment for [not performing] it was not delayed for even one moment. Therefore, when he was on the way and was preparing the lodging and was indolent in circumcising his son Elazar, immediately, “the Lord met him, and sought to kill him.” You find that it was an angel of mercy, and, nevertheless, “He sought to kill him.”

Tzipora took flint, cut her son’s foreskin, and cast it at his feet; she said: You are to me a bridegroom of blood” (Exodus 4:25).

“Tzipora took flint” – how did Tzipora know that it was over matters of circumcision that Moses was endangered? Rather, the angel came and swallowed Moses from his head to the [place of] circumcision. When Tzipora saw that he swallowed him only until the circumcision, she understood that he was being harmed due to matters of circumcision. She realized just how great the power of circumcision is, as he was unable to swallow him beyond there. Immediately, “she cut her son’s foreskin, and cast it at his feet.” “She said: You are to me a bridegroom of blood” – she said: ‘My bridegroom, may you be given to me thanks to this blood of circumcision, as I fulfilled the mitzva.’ Immediately, “he let him alone” (4:26).

“Then she said: A bridegroom of blood regarding the circumcision” – she said: How great the power of circumcision is, as my bridegroom was liable to be executed because he was indolent in performance of the mitzva of circumcision, and were it not for it, he would not have been saved.

שמות רבה ה':ח

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמְּלֹךְ, חֲבִיבָה מִלֵּה שְׁלֹא נִתְּלָה מִשָּׁה עָלֶיהָ אִפְלוּ שְׁעָה אַחַת, לְפִיכָה כְּשֶׁהִיָּה בַדֶּרֶךְ וְנִתְעַסַּק בַּמְּלֹךְ וְנִתְעַצֵּל לְמוֹל לְאֵלֵי עֶזְרָר בְּנוֹ, מִיַּד וַיִּפְגְּשֻׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ. אֵת מוֹצֵא מִלֶּאֶךָ שֶׁל רַחֲמִים הִנֵּה וְאֶף עַל פִּי כֵן וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ. וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צַר, וְכִי מִנִּין יִדְעָה צִפּוֹרָה שְׁעַל עֶסְקֵי מִלֵּה נִסְתַּכַּן מִשָּׁה, אֲלֵא בֵּא הַמְּלֶאֶךָ וְבִלְע לְמֹשֶׁה מִרְאֵשׁוֹ וְעַד הַמִּלָּה. כִּיֹּן שָׂרְאֵתָה צִפּוֹרָה שְׁלֹא בִלְע אוֹתוֹ אֲלֵא עַד הַמִּלָּה הַפִּירָה שְׁעַל עֶסְקֵי הַמִּלָּה הוּא נִיזְקָ, וַיִּדְעָה כִּמְהָ גְדוֹל כַּח הַמִּלָּה שְׁלֹא הִנֵּה יְכוֹל לְבִלְעוֹ יוֹתֵר מִכָּאן, מִיַּד וַתִּכְרַת אֶת עֶרְלַת בְּנֶהּ וַתַּגֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו, וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתַן דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי, אָמְרָה חֲתַנִּי תִהְיֶה אַתָּה נִתָּן לִי בְּזָכוֹת דָּמִים הִלְלוּ שֶׁל מִלָּה, שְׁהָרִי קִיַּמְתִּי הַמְצִיָּה, מִיַּד וַיִּרְף הַמְּלֶאֶךָ מִמֶּנּוּ. אַז אָמְרָה חֲתַן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת, אָמְרָה כִּמְהָ גְדוֹל כַּח הַמִּלָּה שְׁחֲתַנִּי הִנֵּה חֲבִיב מִיַּתָּה שְׁנִתְעַצֵּל בְּמִצְוֹת הַמִּלָּה לְעִשׂוֹתָהּ, וְלוֹלִי הִיא לֹא נִצְלָ.

5) Exodus 18:1-7

(1) Jethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, God's people, how יהוה had brought Israel out from Egypt. (2) So Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after she had been sent home, (3) and her two sons—of whom one was named Gershom, that is to say, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land"; (4) and the other was named Eliezer, meaning, "The God of my father's [house] was my help, delivering me from the sword of Pharaoh." (5) Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. (6) He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." (7) Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.

שמות י"ח:א-ז

(א) וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי-הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: (ב) וַיִּקְחָה יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת-צִפּוֹרָה אֵשֶׁת מֹשֶׁה אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ: (ג) וְאֵת שְׁנֵי בָנָיהָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֱחָד גֶּרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נְכַרִּיהָ: (ד) וְשֵׁם הָאֲחָד אֱלִיעֶזֶר כִּי-אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי וַיִּצְלַנִּי מִחֶרֶב פָּרְעֹה: (ה) וַיָּבֵא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר-הוּא חֹנֵה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹהִים: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אָנֹכִי חֹתֵןְךָ יִתְרוֹ: יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלָיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיָהּ עִמָּהּ: (ז) וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה לִקְרַאת חֹתֵנוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשְׁקְלוּ וַיִּשְׁאַלוּ אִישׁ-לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֵהָלָה:

6) Numbers 12:1-2

(1) Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had taken [as his wife]: "He took a Cushite woman!" (2) They said, "Has יהוה spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not spoken through us as well?" יהוה heard it.

במדבר י"ב:א-ב

(א) וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל-אֲדֹתָהּ הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי-אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח: (ב) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרִק אֶת-בְּמֹשֶׁה דְבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם-בָּנוּ דִבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה:

7) Avivah Zornberg from *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 96-97

Why does God "attack" Moses in this uncanny way? The Talmud speaks of his "negligence" (nitrashel) in circumcising his infant son; for this, he is swallowed by a serpent from the head down, and from the feet up, to the site of circumcision on his own body. Zipporah reads this macabre event as a diagnostic drama and immediately circumcises the baby. I suggest that the repressed meaning of this narrative lies in a play on the word milah-"circumcision"—which, in Rabbinic Hebrew, also means "the word," "language." It is Moses' crisis of language that provokes God's attacking significantly, in a malon (hotel)—another pun on milah. The real issue is Moses' continuing resistance to language, to entering the world of others. ***The uncircumcised baby, foreskin uncut, is a figure for Moses himself, "of uncircumcised lips," resisting the embarrassments of language.***

8) Ilana Pardes. *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible*, pp. 96-98

The story of the "Bridegroom of Blood" offers a perplexing counterpart to the episode of the burning bush. Here too, as in the nation's biography, initiation is a process that requires more than one rite and more than one representation. Moses' initial refusal to assume the position of deliverer in Exodus 3 turns into an eerie combat in Exodus 4, for here God's anger is conveyed by means of concrete violence and His insistence on having total possession of the one He had chosen comes close to murder. Zipporah's intervention, however, is the most radical supplement. It seems to suggest that a feminine touch must be added before Moses' initiation can be regarded as complete. Zipporah designates Moses ceremoniously as her "bridegroom of blood" and takes him, as it were, under her wings. Women (and mothers in particular) -- despite, or rather because of, their powerlessness -- often have an important role in teaching the weak and threatened young heroes how to handle hostile paternal figures. Rebekah offers such help to young Jacob in his struggle to assume the position of the chosen firstborn against Isaac's will.

That Zipporah's opponent is the Father Himself makes her move all the more startling. She placates [YHVH] by complying partially and cunningly with His whims. Her strategy is synecdochic: pars pro toto (a part for the whole – y.e.) , a foreskin and a touch of blood for the victim's life. If she can ward off divine violence she seems to assert, so can Moses. The mission will take its bloody toll....She marks Moses (or her son) with blood, foreshadowing the two scenes in which the nation is marked by blood: on the night of the Exodus and then again on accepting the book of the covenant at Sinai. The history of the people is already inscribed on his body and the body of their son. He must go on.

Zipporah is sent off by Moses after this nocturnal episode, and we do not hear of her until she returns to the camp in Exodus. The rabbis, in any event, sensed the quest for maternal wings -- on this mountain and beyond it -- and fashioned a female symbol of Divine Presence, called Shekhina....

9) Parshat Shemot, Rabbanit Sharon Rimon

<https://www.hatanakh.com/sites/default/files/Shemot%20-%20Sharon%20Rimon.pdf>

Zipporah realizes what is going on. In her father's house, she had learned to recognize spiritual elevation. She realizes that Moses is experiencing a unique encounter with God, and that God may take his life due to the flaw rendering him unfit for this encounter. Searching for the flaw, she realizes that their son has not yet been circumcised; she remedies this, thus saving Moses and enabling him to continue his mission. Apparently, it is no coincidence that circumcision was the deed required as Moses and his family were on their way to redeem the nation of Israel from Egypt. Circumcision reflects the unique covenant between God and the nation. This covenant is the foundation of the bond between God and Israel; in the nation's hour of need, it stands as an assurance that the redemption will come. Moses is on his way to redeem the people of Israel, whom God refers to as "my eldest child, Israel" (Gen. 4:22). It is therefore unthinkable that a member of Moses' family should lack circumcision – the sign of the covenant between God and his children, the nation of Israel. Zipporah, from her perspective as a former "outsider," perceives the unique nature of the connection between God and Israel signified by circumcision. She came from a home of constant spiritual development and knows the value of God's covenant with the nation; by performing the circumcision she affirms the unique connection between God and Israel. (This act also reflects her transition from the status of "daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian" to the wife of Moses and part of the nation of Israel.) Zipporah is the one who enables Moses to continue with his mission, maintaining the high level of righteousness demanded of him. She does so first and foremost by removing the blemish which hindered Moses' ability to receive prophecy at the highest level, and by demonstrating a deep understanding of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel...

The Torah's narration of this incident ends here; it does not describe the aftermath. We only find out in chapter 18 that Zipporah was no longer Moses. What actually happened? We cannot know for sure. It is possible that they continued together to Egypt, and Zipporah returned to Midian at some point for reasons unknown. Perhaps Moses left Zipporah and their sons behind at the inn to allow the baby time to recover, after which the family returned to Midian. ***Or perhaps Zipporah understood that Moses' elevated status did not allow him to maintain a normal marital life, and she decided to leave him in order to allow him to fulfill his divine mission.***