

RABBI REBECCA T. ALPERT

שמות

Shmot

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## Rediscovering Tziporah

The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. Shepherds came to drive them off, but Moses rose to defend them, and he watered their flock. They returned to their father Reuel, and he said, "Why have you come back so soon today?" They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds and he even drew water for us and watered the flock." He said to his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to eat." Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Tziporah as wife. She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, "I have been a stranger in a strange land." (EXODUS 2:16-22)

NO FEMINIST TALE THIS, the story of the meeting and betrothal of Moses and Tziporah, at least not in the biblical text itself. We can name the elements that reduce women to property and render them invisible: Reuel (who is identified both by traditional commentators and later biblical scholars as one and the same with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law in later episodes of the story) owns the flock. He crit-

icizes his daughters for their lack of hospitality. He rewards Moses for his deed by "giving" his daughter to him in marriage. Moses is the hero, saving the helpless daughters from the shepherds. The son that Tziporah bears belongs to Moses, and he names this son in remembrance of his experience in Midian. Moses and Reuel act; Tziporah and her nameless sisters are acted upon. Tziporah's mother isn't mentioned in the Torah's story. It is left for later commentators to imagine her into existence.

Later midrashim, both ancient and contemporary, rework elements of this story, giving life to its female protagonist, Tziporah. Through these retellings the story comes alive from a feminist perspective and enables us to see Tziporah as a much more complicated character in the story, one who acts rather than one to whom things happen.

The story of Tziporah begins with her name, which translates into English as "bird." *Midrash Tambuna* suggests that Tziporah's mother gave her that name because she had the insight that, like the purification offering of two clean, living birds, Tziporah would be responsible for purifying her house.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient texts make Tziporah's nameless mother the one who names her. I wonder what made her think of this name. Perhaps she knew that Tziporah would take flight with this strange man, Moses. Or perhaps she named her for the goddess who came to her in a vision at the moment of Tziporah's birth.

Although no goddess worship is known to have existed in Midian, many of the ancient traditions worshipped goddesses in the forms of animals, particularly birds.<sup>2</sup>

I'd like to imagine that Tziporah learned from her mother, and harbored her own unorthodox religious beliefs. Perhaps she and her sisters were troubled at the well by the shepherds because Tzipo-

rah was known to be a believer in the bird goddess, the one for whom her mother named her. As an outcast because of her beliefs, she would share much in common with Moses, who struggled with his belief in the invisible God who spoke to him from a bush.

Midrash tells the story of the well where Tziporah and her sisters watered the flock. According to later accounts, it came into being at the creation of the world. It was the same well where Rebekah and Rachel met their husbands.<sup>3</sup>

Ancient sources identify Tziporah as a descendant of Abraham through the line of Keturah because of this connection,<sup>4</sup> and we will discover that Tziporah was indeed like Abraham in more than one respect. Linking women to water is a powerful perspective that we cannot overlook in telling this story, for it connects Tziporah not only to her ancestors, but to her sister-in-law, Miriam the prophet, and to Moses, the one who was drawn out of the water. So Tziporah has a proud lineage and a powerful connection to symbolic elements in our history—to birds and to water.

While the biblical story suggests that Jethro/Reuel knew immediately that he liked Moses and wanted him as part of his family, in the midrash, Jethro/Reuel was actually frightened of Moses at first because he did not like Egyptians. Rather than inviting him to eat with them and to marry his daughter, he threw Moses into a pit to die. According to this account, it was Tziporah who felt an attraction to Moses, and kept him alive in the pit, secretly feeding him every day.<sup>5</sup>

But perhaps Tziporah sustained Moses with more than food. Perhaps they also shared their lives—he telling of his identity as a Hebrew and his reasons for fleeing to Midian, as well as his concern about justice for his people that led him to kill a man; and she sharing with him the secrets of her profession as a shepherd, how to

care for a flock, guiding and leading it while caring for each individual animal and learning its secrets. Perhaps it was then that she also shared her vision of the bird goddess with him, as he explored his feelings for the God of Israel—both knowing the commanding voice, though they called their gods by different names.

According to *Sefer VaYosha*, Tziporah took her fate into her hands, keeping Moses alive secretly and then only some time later telling her father that he still lived. In this version, Reuel/Jethro was impressed with Moses' ability to stay alive. Convinced of Moses' worthiness, he gave permission for the marriage. So it was Tziporah's cleverness that defined her fate, not her father's wisdom.<sup>6</sup>

In this midrash, Reuel consented to the marriage on one condition: one half of the children were to be raised as Midianites, and the other half as Hebrews.<sup>7</sup>

According to this midrash, Moses agreed to the marriage that Tziporah had masterminded and to raise half of his children as Midianites. As the story is told in the midrash *Lekah*, Tziporah was pregnant immediately, but she remained small, so that no one knew that she was carrying a child. The concern for this detail in the ancient midrash brings out the traditional commentators' awareness of Tziporah's humanity and shows how much ancient sources saw her as a person in her own right, not merely a shadow of her father and husband. This first child was hers as much as it was Moses'—more so, because he was to be raised as a Midianite according to plan.<sup>8</sup>

When the child was born, Moses did name him Gershom (meaning "I was a stranger there"), not only because Moses was a stranger in Midian, but also because, as modern midrashist Hanna Siegel suggests, Gershom, who was to be raised as a Midianite, would be a stranger to Moses himself.<sup>9</sup>

Gershom was raised in the ways of Midian and, as I imagine it, initiated into the rites of his mother's goddess. He was not circumcised, nor was he taught about his heritage as a Hebrew.

As the biblical story goes, it was sometime later that the king of Egypt died and Moses was called back to save his people. In the meantime, Moses and Tziporah lived together, tending the flocks in Midian. What would their life have been like? I can imagine that Tziporah continued to function as a shepherd while she raised her first child, teaching him her religious beliefs, living peacefully in Midian.

Of course, the main focus of *Shmot* is Moses' call to save his people, and Tziporah recedes into the background upon his return to Egypt. But she does return to the text in this *parashah* one more time, in a very bizarre encounter:

At a night encampment on the way, Adonai encountered him and sought to kill him. So Tziporah 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!" And when he let up, she added, "A bridegroom of blood on account of the circumcision."  
(Exod. 4:24–26)

The midrash, and what we already know about Tziporah as a powerful actor, helps us interpret this very strange passage. The text never names the son who becomes circumcised. It might have been another son, since the text tells us that Moses returns to Egypt with "his wife and his sons" (Exod. 4:20). But perhaps this strange encounter was Tziporah's effort to leave her Midianite roots behind by circumcising Gershom so that he would not be a stranger to the Hebrew people among whom they were going to live. According to Rashi, Tziporah had a vision that Moses was being swallowed up

by a serpent, a messenger of God. The serpent had swallowed him whole, all but his penis. Perhaps she construed this as a message from Moses' God that to save her husband's life she must show her acceptance of this God by making her son a Hebrew through the covenant cut upon the penis. Thus, she took matters into her own hands, and taking up the flint, circumcised her son, cutting the flesh of her own firstborn. In breaking her commitment to her father, she made Moses her bridegroom of blood, made Gershom an Israelite through the sacrificial act,<sup>10</sup> and also sacrificed her chance to pass on her goddess traditions to her firstborn. It was then Tziporah who, leaving behind her connections to her past, became the stranger in a strange land.

In this *parashah*, as it is interpreted through ancient and contemporary midrash, Tziporah comes alive as a courageous, energetic, clever, and visionary woman. She is a model from whom we learn about exploring visions and acting on your own behalf to attain your dreams. Like our ancestor Abraham, she teaches us about surrendering old beliefs for new ones, and about what it feels like to be compelled to take a knife to a child in pursuit of those beliefs. And she reminds us about the ancient world of the goddesses that were left behind and are now being rediscovered and reclaimed by Jewish feminists in our generation as a part of our heritage.