

## *Moses' Wife and Father-in-law*

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Having escaped with his people from Egypt, across the Red Sea and into the wilderness of Sinai, Moses is joined by his wife and sons and visited by his father-in-law, Jethro.

*Yethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God" (Exodus 18:1,5).*

Read Exodus 18:1-27. The Jewish sages teach us to be attentive to the use of repetition in the text. Do you notice it? Like a drumbeat, reference to Jethro as Moses' 'father-in-law' is repeated 13 times in just 27 verses. What sparks of enquiry might the sacred text be igniting in us? Ponder this, with a friend, before reading on.

The text could have highlighted Jethro's identity as a foreigner, a pagan priest, a leader among the people of Midian. Instead it highlights his identity as 'father-in-law.' Thus it implicitly reminds us that Moses—ex-prince of Egypt, Hebrew fugitive, reluctant leader, saviour to his people—is a *married* man. Nothing surprising about that, you say. After all, the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—were all married. Yet, whilst the Torah is relatively vocal on the topic of the Patriarchs' wives, it is strangely silent about Moses' wife. For instance, the Torah announces her arrival with Jethro (18:6), but quickly falls silent again. We are told that Moses goes out to greet his father-in-law, they embrace, they ask after each other's welfare, they go into the tent and converse (18:7)... Not a word about Moses' wife, Zipporah.

On the rare occasions that Moses' wife appears in the Torah there is nearly always a jarring note. Earlier in Exodus (4:24-26), she is involved in a circumcision scene that has troubled commentators down the ages. Later she is the

focus of a conflict between Aaron, Miriam and Moses (12:1). The long period of separation between Moses and his wife has given rise to midrashic (storytelling) suggestions that her presence would have interfered with Moses' mission.

Compare all this to the wives of the Patriarchs. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah are active participants; they evoke a response from their husbands who love them, listen to them, grieve their deaths. So then, a curious contradiction emerges as our Torah text reminds us, 13 times, that Moses has a father-in-law (read: Moses has a wife) and at the same time includes uncomfortable silences and question marks surrounding his wife. The Torah celebrates Moses as a great leader to his people; yet, in contrast to the Patriarchs, his wife and children are in the shadows. Why? Might we find here the emergence of a new kind of vocation to spiritual leadership that precludes normal family relations? How do you interpret the repetition and absence in the text regarding Moses, Jethro and Zipporah?

### **Reflection:**

Moses' wife is from a pagan, Midianite family. Reflect on the gifts and challenges that spouses bring from their family-of-origin. In what ways do spouses and families bless one another?

Jethro teaches his son-in-law how to reorganize his judicial practices. Have you had a 'Jethro' influence in your life; a family member or close friend who helped you to rethink familiar practices? •

Sources: Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (New York, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture: NJPS.

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