

"OLD RELIABLE"

The end of today's Sidra describes an incident which is as intriguing as it is disturbing, as fascinating as it is saddening. Apparently a domestic crisis caused a rupture of relationships in the leading family of the Israelites in the generation of the desert -- the family composed of the two brothers, Moses and Aaron, and their sister Miriam. The domestic situation was soon transformed into a kind of spiritual contest, which required the intervention of God on behalf of Moses, and the subsequent punishment of Miriam.

All we are told in this passage, in which it is obvious that the Torah deliberately disguises and conceals what happened, is that Moses was criticized by Aaron and Miriam because of his Kushite (Ethiopian) wife. What the criticism is -- that we are not told, but we can assume that it has nothing to do with modern forms of racial bigotry. Any attempt to read such bigotry back into the Bible, as the motive for the criticism of Moses marrying Zipporah, is an anachronism of the most unintelligent sort. Whatever it may be, the criticism of Moses's wife was quickly elevated into invidious comparisons of spiritual competence: Aaron and Miriam felt that they were as close to God, prophetically, as was Moses. Moses remained silent, and God took up the cudgels on behalf of Moses. Miriam was stricken with leprosy, and Moses was vindicated. The closing words of that vindication remain an eternal testament to the stature of Moses: **בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא**, "in all My household, he is most trustworthy."

What did God intend by this honorific reference to Moses as **נֶאֱמָן**, as what might be translated as "an old, reliable friend?"

This divine accolade was interpreted by Rabbi Isaac, one of the **בעלי התוספות**, in a volume of Bible commentary published from manuscripts not many years ago (the **"גילגל זקנים"**). According to this interpretation:

אָמְרוּ לְמֹשֶׁה וְשִׁיקָה אִשָּׁה אֲחֵרָה לֹא מִדִּינָהּ וּמִשָּׁה לֹא
רָצָה מֵאַחֵר וְשִׁלְחָהּ כְּשֶׁהִיא עֲבִי וְעֵתָה הִיא מֵלֶךְ, לֹא רָצָה
לְגִרְשָׁהּ, לְפִיכָן **נֶאֱמָן בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא**.

Miriam insisted that Moses divorce Zipporah, his Midianite wife, and marry someone else. Moses,

however, refused. Since he had married her when he was poor, and she stayed with him, therefore now that he was a king he would not divorce her. Therefore it is said of him, "in all My household he is most trustworthy."

We must not at all assume that the intrusion into Moses' domestic life by Aaron and Miriam was merely petty family gossip. Aaron was, after all, the High Priest of Israel, and Miriam was a prophetess. Their concerns were much larger than the trivialities that often afflict unintelligent people and cause so many family rivalries. Indeed, I think a good argument can be made to support the contention of Aaron and Miriam. After all, Zipporah was nothing more than a peasant girl, a shepherdess from some remote oasis in the great Midianite desert. She was a daughter of a man who had moved from one idolatry to another, never finding himself. She may have been adequate for Moses when he was a private person, a young unknown. But now he was a king, he was the head of state. How would it look for Moses, representing all of Israel, to entertain other heads of state, to undertake all of the difficult tasks of statecraft, when beside him was a woman who was moulded in the desert, far and isolated and remote? Moses could not afford to look upon his life and his wife sentimentally. He was the head of a people, he represented them in public, and he must make his personal life fit his new status.

And yet, no matter how valid the argument for divorcing Zipporah, Moses would not abandon her. He remembered that she had stayed with him during the time that he was a lonely, penniless, hungry refugee in the great desert. When no one would take him in, Zipporah came close to him. She was with him during his poverty, so he would not abandon her now that he had become prosperous. She was loyal to him when he was alone, so he would remain loyal to her now that he was a great success. He was truly an "old reliable."

בכל ביתי נאמן הוא

This teaching is not quite as much a truism in our days as one might be led to believe. It is not only that we live in an era of corruption and immorality. Political corruption always existed, although of a different nature, and immorality is a permanent feature of any society which pretends to moral standards. It is, rather, that in this era of counterculture and new philosophies, liberation and self-fulfillment are the great virtues in the lexicon of our modern ethics, whereas the qualities of duty and loyalty have been downgraded. They are often dismissed as inhibiting and ego-curtailing, as forcing man into duplicity

and dishonesty, as frustrating his self-realization. An act such as that of Moses, remaining loyal to Zipporah, might well be criticized by some counter-culture philosophers as overly sentimental, negativistic, and ascetic.

Yet, Judaism proclaims aloud: **בכל בית נאמן הוא**. Reliability and responsibility, loyalty and fidelity, remain God-like qualities. It is true that these are qualities which curb man's freedom, because they force him into one specific pattern of action. But they are the results of a decision made in freedom. If freedom is to mean that I am always able to change my mind, then mine is not the gift of freedom, but the curse of chaos; it is not **הפְּקִידוּת** but **חֵרוֹת**.

I do not mean to say that loyalty must prevail over all other considerations, that it is an absolute. Certainly, the Torah permits and sometimes encourages divorce. There are times when a couple ought to break up and not remain bound to an empty experience, or even a harmful one, because of such sentiments. Yet, our society has gone too far in the other direction. We have made divorce so irrelevant to shame, so easy to obtain, so untainted by social censure, that marriage and divorce have become a game, a kind of sequential polygamy. Indeed, that phenomenon has now been surpassed and transcended, so that instead of marriage and divorce, there is simply living together with different people at different times, without the benefit of either marriage or divorce. Under such circumstances, the lesson of Moses, that of trustworthiness and responsibility and reliability, remains as needed today as never before.

Perhaps, in addition, this might inspire young people to much greater care in choosing their marriage partners. When people come to realize that loyalty may force them to remain with a marriage partner under extremely difficult and unhappy circumstances, they will take much more care and precaution in marriage. Far too often, in my experience of years of counseling, I have found that people who "fall in love" fall out of love just as quickly. I am always distressed when people tell me they have "fallen in love." Love is not a thing one ought "fall" into. You fall into a ditch or into a trap; love is not fallen into, but grown into. Love requires time, development, maturity, understanding, and the engaging of two personalities who draw closer with time. The "chemistry" of "falling in love" must either take the road of psychology -- of a mutually developing maturity and reciprocal growing together -- or of biology, of mere erotic infatuation, and then it must disintegrate.

But I feel that our interpretation of the divine compliment to Moses is more than a teaching of marital loyalty. I believe it

it says volumes about Jewish loyalty to God and to Torah.

Moses himself realized this later on when, in a great discourse to his people before his death, he proclaimed: **יִשְׁרָאֵל יִשְׁוֹרֵן וְיִבֹּעַ**, that Jeshurun (Israel) grew fat and kicked. Too often, Moses observed in a comment that remains as pertinent today as it did thirty five hundred years ago, Jews are like poor upstarts who suddenly grow rich and are unable to contain their affluence; they discover that they have fallen out of love with their wives and lives -- or vice versa -- and that they have achieved the kind of status that encourages them to change mates -- and fates.

Eight centuries ago, Maimonides thought that he was describing a phenomenon peculiar to his times when he commented that Jews who achieve success in business or government usually tend to lose their piety, they forfeit their **יִרְאַת ה'שם**. Actually, he was describing a perennial problem of Jews throughout the ages. We have experienced the same thing in our days. All too often, Jews for whom the Torah was good enough during their time of poverty, find it wanting in their time of prosperity. What Moses teaches us is that

מֵאַחֲרֵי שֶׁלָּקַחְתָּ כֶּשֶׁתִּי וְעֵתָהּ הָיָה מֶלֶךְ לֹא רָצָה לְגִרְשָׁא.

The Torah which gave us courage and confidence and optimism, which provided us with a context of value and meaningfulness, when we were poor and lonely and persecuted, when we emerged from the ghettos and shtetls of East Europe and the small towns of central Europe and came to the lower East Side and to the poorer sections of Brooklyn -- that same Torah is meaningful for us today too. People who change values and religion merely because of growing material possessions, are frauds; they are not authentic human beings. Such people have exploited Judaism for their own psychological needs. They are spiritual manipulators and not genuine people. Of course, as a Hasidic teacher taught, it is difficult for a rich man to believe in God. When he comes home, all his fine possessions cry out to him, "believe in us" and he hardly hears the voice of God,

אֲנִי ה' אֵלֶיךָ, "I am the Lord, thy God," or "believe in Me." The test of prosperity is always greater than the test of poverty. But Moses overcame it, he remained loyal, he would not abandon his wife -- not only because of some kind of impersonal test of loyalty, but because he genuinely related to her. Such must be the attitude of Israel to God and to Torah, following the classical metaphor of our relationship as that of husband and wife.

Or better yet, let us learn from God Himself. In the great

prophetic parable of Jeremiah, God is a loving husband who always remembers Israel's loyalty to Him, during the days of, as it were, our mutual need and affliction; and thus He may yet forgive us for our treachery to Him in the days of our greater affluence.

כה אמר ה' זכרתי לך חסד נעורין אהבת כלולותיך
לכתך אחרי במדבר בארץ מאד זרועה

God says: "I remember the affection of your youthfulness, the love during our early marriage, when you followed Me in the desert, in a land that was unsown and uncultivated and uncivilized. At the time that God, as it were, was alone and unrecognized; Israel was willing to remain with Him. And therefore now that God is proclaimed and known, He will not forget the love and the affection of Israel's early days.

May all of us achieve our life's goals. May we succeed in matters material and spiritual, but above all, may we always remain worthy of the compliment paid by God to Moses:

הוא -- בכל ביתי כאמן הוא
"reliables" of God himself.