

Parshat Yitro
Drawing Near in Godly and Marital Relationships
Naima Hirsch - Class of 2024

When feminist lovers of Torah read Moshe's instructions to Israel before the Sinai Revelation - "be ready for the third day, do not go near a woman" - we recoil. We begin to anger over the misogynist implications; why are women not preparing as well to hear God's voice?? We try to reconcile the excitement of almost-receiving with the pain of being left outside the doors to the mikvah. We try to follow in the footsteps of the rabbis who read us into the story; *beit yaakov*¹. We read Judith Plaskow and think about how all Jewish souls heard the lightning at Har Sinai. We make hesitant peace.

But there's another element at play here, and it's how this pasuk teaches us about the connection between sex and encountering the Divine. The men are instructed about three days because that's the minimum time frame required for women to become *tahor* (ritually pure) after interacting with semen, and therefore this instruction actually allows the women to be present for Matan Torah². The Israelites couldn't receive the Torah while in a ritually impure state. Similarly, one needs to be *tahor* to offer *korbanot* (sacrifices), or even to enter the Beit haMikdash. Sexual activity precludes the ritually pure state necessary to interact with God.

And this is logical in the world of *tumah* (ritual impurity) when we remember that a person becomes ritually impure after encountering death. To this day, many Kohanim don't enter graveyards, attend funerals, or even visit rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art with actual sarcophagi; they are required to stay *tahor* from this strongest *tumah*. While we may not want to saddle our expectations of sex with the spectre of death, we cannot ignore that sex acts can carry the weight of potential life. Women trying to conceive can testify that their periods are moments to mourn; their bodies did not create life this month.

While this pasuk reminds me of the ebb and flow of *hilchot niddah* (laws of marital purity), I cannot help but think about the further implications of Moshe's instructions differing from God's. God tells Moshe that the Israelites should stay holy for three days as they wait for the Torah (Shemot 19:10-11) and Moshe specifies what that means. That's what Moshe's job is as leader; he is both *meturgeman* (interpreter) and megaphone. So what's the significance of Moshe's instruction here? Why does this merit discussion?

The Gemara on Yevamot 62a teaches us that there is an explicit connection between the three-day time period for the nation and how Moshe separated from Tziporah after Matan Torah.

As it is taught in a *baraita*, Moses did three things based on his own perception, and his perception agreed with the perception of the Omnipresent: He

¹ Rashi on Shemot 19:3

² Men are considered *tamei* for one day after seminal emission

separated from his wife, he broke the tablets, and he added one day to the days of separation before the revelation at Sinai.

I am struck by the implications that Matan Torah had on Moshe's marriage. It is only at the beginning of Parshat Yitro that Tziporah and Moshe are reunited after Yetziat Mitzrayim. The *pesukim* (Shemot 18:1-8) that describe this reunion do not suggest an intimate one. The person that Moshe embraces in 18:7 is his father-in-law, not his wife, and only a few *pesukim* later, Moshe will put a permanent pause on his sexual relationship with Tziporah as the nations' husbands will take a temporary pause from their wives.

This is a sacrifice that Moshe needs to make in order to stay *tahor* for his constant, intimate, conversations with God. If the almost-Jewish "civilians" Moshe leads cannot be *tamei* (ritually impure) during their face-to-face interaction with the Divine, then all the more so Moshe must never be *tamei*. His personal life is eclipsed by his professional life, so to speak. God has replaced Tziporah as Moshe's intimate partner.

The necessary dissipation of Moshe and Tziporah's marriage pains me as a future rabbi, and as a future spouse. Even though Tziporah is my middle name, I do not mean to imply that my fiancé and I are Moshe and Tziporah. What I do mean is that boundaries between work and family are crucial and sometimes impossible. I personally do not want either of my roles - partner or pastor - to be eclipsed by the other. I hope to find balance, but I know that will not always be possible, especially as a woman.

Malbim teaches us that the pre-Matan Torah separation was not a balanced one. He reads the verb in 19:15 - אַל-תִּגְּשׁוּ - do not approach - as a one-sided effort where husbands distanced from wives, and compares this instance to the words used to describe *niddah*, where the verse says, אַל תִּקְרְבוּ, do not come close (Vayikra 18:19). Malbim argues that אַל תִּקְרְבוּ differs from אַל-תִּגְּשׁוּ because in *niddah*, both partners are collaborating on the process of becoming *tahor*. Both partners are equal participants in refraining from sex as well as observing other strictures of the laws of *niddah*. But here, it seems like Moshe is instructing the men to echo his behavior of a one-sided decision.

What I want to take away from all of these interacting ideas - the pain of exclusionary language, the impact prophecy had on Moshe's life, the reasons behind the command in the first place - is to acknowledge the impact that religion and professional lives have on the intimate and personal. We know that separating because of *tumah* is part of life, and for some people that is harder to live with than others. But we also know that relationships should be partnerships; ideally couples approach their *niddah* practices, sex life, parenting styles, and values as a team.

What we can learn from Moshe is the peril of imbalance. Yes, we learn delegation from Yitro's lesson to Moshe regarding setting up a court system at the opening of the *parsha*, but we also learn the tragedy of prioritizing religion and/or occupation over personhood and intimacy. While we can - and should - still hold Moshe as a paradigm of Jewish leadership, we must also acknowledge that he is the exception that proves the rule. Moshe's choices



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were sacrifices that we do not need to make now. Instead, I hope that by understanding the reasons for Biblical spouses separating, we can change how we understand - and practice - Jewish leadership.



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