



WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Women's League Shabbat 2015/5775

D'VAR TORAH II

Lessons from Our Sisters Timeless and Timely

Most of us believe that our *mishpachah*, our family, is an important factor in our lives. Whether the relations are good, or complicated, or mixed, personalities and events are deeply etched in our psyches.

Beginning with our days in Hebrew school, we have looked to the Bible for examples of family relations. The stories, whether portraying positive or negative behaviors, became and remain object lessons for how families should, or should not, function. We want to emulate Abraham and Sarah for their courage – setting out from their familiar homes to a land far away. We are confounded by Jacob's duplicity in stealing his brother's blessing; of Joseph's arrogance and the lethal envy of his brothers. When we began to understand the full import of the drama, we read with almost prurient fascination about Rachel and Leah's rivalry over their shared love for Jacob.

These complicated sibling relationships are perplexing. What do we make of these stories? How do we cite them as examples for *mishpachah*?

The Rabbis, understanding this conundrum, provided counsel: We are to behave like Abraham and Sarah when they did this..... or not behave like Jacob or Joseph, or Rachel when they did that....

Some commentators like to point out that the sibling relations in Exodus are markedly different from those portrayed in Genesis. While the many sets of siblings in Genesis – from Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers – are envious and conniving, the principal set of siblings in Exodus, Moses, Miriam and Aaron seem to portray a very different image – one of harmony, support and protectiveness. Rabbi David Greenstein writes in his essay on sibling relations in the recent RA publication *The Observant Life* – that the story of Moses, Miriam and Aaron -- is a “counter narrative.” The newfound cooperation among siblings is key to Israel's redemption.

This is an interesting idea. But then what are we to make of the narrative in Numbers 12? In this story Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses' Cushite wife. They then question why **only** Moses is granted prophetic abilities. Moses does not respond to them, but God appears and censures them both, and affirms Moses' primacy in the sibling hierarchy. When God departs, Miriam has been struck with leprosy. Aaron appeals to Moses “Let her not be as a stillbirth which emerges from its mother's womb with half its flesh eaten away” and only then Moses responds, beseeching God: “*El na, rafa na lab*” (Please God, heal her.) Miriam is shut out of the camp – as

was done to lepers or anyone with any disease – and the people did not march on until she was readmitted.

This story also confounds. It provides some interesting questions for discussion – questions that reflect nicely on the programmatic agenda of Women’s League for Conservative Judaism this year. I am speaking of two new initiatives:

- the anti-bullying campaign that was introduced at the 2014 convention
- our **Mishpachah II: Lessons from Our Sisters** that provides diverse kinds of material that focus on complex family dynamics

Reading this distressing story about Moses, Miriam and Aaron – within the framework of bullying and complicated family dynamics – I want to pose a number of conversation questions for you to take away and ponder at your Shabbat table, or when you sit on a board, or at a sisterhood meeting.

- Why do Miriam and Aaron speak against their Cushite sister-in-law? Is it personal? Do they dislike her because of her race or ethnicity?
- Why does Moses stand silently by while instead God intercedes?
- Why is Miriam punished but not Aaron?
- After Miriam is struck with leprosy, first Aaron appeals to Moses and then Moses appeals to God. Again, would Moses have acted if not petitioned by Aaron?
- How do we read this story in conjunction with Rabbi Greenstein’s assertion of a counter narrative of a redemptive sibling relationship?

I suggest that these stories highlight challenges – ancient and contemporary – to living harmoniously. The biblical authors reflect an intimate and insightful understanding of the human condition – our ability to do that which is good, and also our capacity to do great harm.

Ben Bag-Bag teaches in *Pirkei Avot* about the study of Torah: “*Turn it. Turn it. You will find everything in it.*” The Bible provides a roadmap for our behavior

As we reflect on values that we derive from these biblical personalities, we constantly are reminded: how do, or *should*, we speak to each other? How do, or *should*, we support and protect each other within our family units.

They provide ancient models, recast in a modern idiom. The lessons from our forebears are timeless, and timely.

Shabbat shalom.