

Moses, Mars, and Miriam

- Basil Herring.

"Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus". The book argues, the Martians and Venusians lived together in peace because they were able to respect their differences, their respective ways of dealings with life's challenges, problems, and stresses. And the same is true of men and women: peace comes, relationships are strengthened

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For starters, and to cover myself on both sides of a delicate divide, there are two stories I'd like to share with you: the first is about a fellow who was asked by one of his fellow workers at the office "did your wife have anything to say when you got home late last night?" He answered "no, but it didn't stop her talking for hours!" In the second story a woman was overheard to say to a casual acquaintance "you can talk to my husband about any subject. He doesn't understand, but you can talk to him!"

Which is by way of introduction to a book which has been on the NY Times best seller list for a staggering 158 weeks. Many of you have probably read it. This morning it will help us understand, or at least review, a particularly fascinating passage in our parshah dealing with the relationships of men and women. The book is titled Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, by Dr. John Gray. A few brief passages will serve to illustrate its relevance to the subject:

Imagine that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. One day, long ago, the Martians, looking through their telescopes, discovered the Venusians. Just glimpsing the Venusians awakened feelings they had never known. They fell in love and quickly invented space travel and flew to Venus. The Venusians welcomed the Martians with open arms. They had intuitively known that this day would come. Their hearts opened wide to a love they had never felt before. The love between the Venusians and Martians was magical. They delighted in being together, doing things together, and sharing together. Though from different worlds, they reveled in their differences. They spent months learning about each, exploring and appreciating their different needs, preferences and behavior patterns. For years they lived together in love and harmony. Then they decided to fly to Earth. In the beginning everything was wonderful and beautiful. But the effects of the Earth's atmosphere took hold, and one morning everyone woke up with a peculiar kind of selective amnesia. Both the Martians and Venusians forgot that they were from different planets and were supposed to be different... And since that day men and women have been in conflict...expecting the opposite sex to be more like themselves.

(For instance) Martians, or men, value power, competency, efficiency, and achievement. They are always doing things to prove themselves and develop their power and skills... They are more interested in objects and things than in people and feelings... Martians pride themselves on doing things all by themselves. Autonomy is a symbol of efficiency, power, and competence. And therefore when a Martian, or man, is stressed, he will withdraw into the cave of his mind and focus on solving a problem, in which he becomes so focused that he temporarily loses awareness of everything else. Other problems and responsibilities fade into the background.

Venusians, or women, however, have different values. They value love, communication, beauty and relationships. They spend a lot of time supporting, helping and nurturing one another. Their sense of self is defined through their feelings and the quality of their relationships. They experience fulfillment through sharing and relating... Personal expression, especially of their feelings, is very important. To share their feelings is much more important than achieving goals and success. Talking and relating to one another is a source of tremendous fulfillment. Thus Venusian (women) do not understand how Martian (men) cope with stress. They expect men to open up and talk about their problems the way Venusians do. When a Martian is stuck in his cave a Venusian resents his not being more open. She feels hurt when he turns on the news, or goes outside to play some basketball and ignores her.

In other words, the book argues, the Martians and Venusians lived together in peace because they were able to respect their differences, their respective ways of dealing with life's challenges, problems, and stresses. And the same is true of men and women: peace comes, relationships are strengthened, when a woman learns that men sometimes need to withdraw to better cope with stress. And it comes when a man finally understands just how much women need to talk about their problems, and feel that they are being heard.

With this as background, we can now turn to our parshah, and the episode involving Moses, Tziphora and Miriam, and as it has been interpreted through the prism of our rabbinic tradition. Va'tedaber Miriam ve'Aroneh be'Moshe al odot ha-ishah ha-kushit asher lakah

And Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses, regarding the Cushite woman that he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said "Did God speak only with Moses? Did He not also speak with us?" Nu. 12:1-2

This is the conventional translation of these verses. But the rabbinic translation of the Torah known as Onkelos, translates the verse as follows:

Miriam and Aaron spoke of Moses, regarding the beautiful woman he had married, insofar as he had separated himself from this beautiful woman.

And the rabbinic midrash known as the Sifri states:

The word "spoke" here appears in the feminine form, for it was Miriam who spoke about Moses, while Aaron listened to her. Thus Miriam's name comes first in the verse. What did she say? R. Natan says that Miriam overheard Tziphora, Moses' wife, when she heard the news (referred to in the preceding chapter) that Eldad and Meidad had become prophets in the camp. Tziphora expressed her sympathies for their wives, saying "I feel badly for these women, for their husbands will now live separately from them, just as my husband has done to me." And Miriam repeated Tziphora's words to Aaron.

Rashi quotes this Sifri at length, and then adds: how do we know that the word Cushite really means "beautiful?" Because the gematriya of Kushit is the same as yefat mareh, meaning "beautiful." Seforno quotes another passage in the Sifri, which asks, "how did Miriam know that Moses was living apart from his wife?" It answers "Miriam saw that Tziphora was no longer putting on her makeup and jewelry. She asked her why, and was answered, "because your brother Moses no longer notices these things, he is too preoccupied." Miriam then turns to Aaron and says, "we too are prophets, God spoke to us too in Egypt, yet we too have maintained the conjugal nature of our marriages, why shouldn't Moses?"

Moses had married the strikingly beautiful and attractive Tzipora as a refugee in Midian. When he was called by God to return to Egypt, he took his family along. But he was met by his brother Aaron at Sinai, who told him that it made no sense to bring his wife and children into the Egyptian “inferno.” And so Moses sent Tzipora and the children back to her parents’ home. The Netziv to Exodus 17:2 explains that in those days prior to the Torah’s revelation, that was the equivalent of divorce, and Tzipora was effectively entitled to marry another man. Yet the Torah there pointedly tells us that she remained “eshet Mosheh,” faithful to Moses in his absence. Now it is a year or two later. Moses and the newly liberated people are at Sinai, and she has rejoined her husband, ready to resume her marital relationship. At first all goes well. But then problems arise. Moses becomes increasingly stressed and preoccupied with his public responsibilities and his daily prophetic visions. As is made clear in Deuteronomy, after the revelation of Sinai Moses tells the men to go “back to their tents,” to resume their normal marital lives, whereas he himself is instructed to “stay with God.” And indeed, one might say, Moses gladly accepts this extraordinary demand, out of love for his people. But Tzipora is not so fortunate. For the second time in her life, ironically in the very same place at Sinai, Tzipora begins to feel that Moses is withdrawing into what we might call his mental and spiritual cave, increasingly unavailable to her as a husband and family man.

At the same time Moses’ stress “at the office” really starts to build. The people complain to Moses, make ever growing demands on him and his time, ultimately complaining at one point (11:10) about “family matters,” which is understood by the Sifri as complaining about all of the family sexual laws and relationships which are now forbidden to them by the Torah. Given Moses’ personal and family situation, this demand in particular is completely beyond his ability to comprehend. And so he explodes in frustration, saying to God, “what have You done to me? Did I bring this people into the world, that you insist that I bare them on my bosom like a nursing mother who nurtures her baby? If this is what you want, better you kill me, than that I have to experience such evil.” The people want sexual gratification; they need extraordinary physical and spiritual nurturing. Moses feels that God wants him to play the feminine, maternal, nurturing role. But he feels completely unqualified for the task at hand, and so he withdraws into his mental cave.

Under these circumstances, Tzipora doesn’t stand a chance. In this cauldron of Martian, or Sinaitic, stress and crisis, Tzipora naturally expects attention and love from her husband, the father of her children. She is an outsider in the camp; she feels lonely and alone. But try as she might, she cannot talk to Moses, or if she does, she feels that he is not listening to her problem. How can he, when his entire being is in turmoil to the point of suicidal self-doubt. And the truth is that, conjugally speaking, they are apart, and their marriage is in serious trouble. She recognizes that it is nothing personal, but rather a result of her husband’s prophetic experience which demands all of his attentions. Thus she assumes that the same will be true of Eldad and Meidad, whose marriage, she thinks, will likewise suffer if not dissolve. So what does she do? Like a true Venusian, she seeks company and solace by talking about her problem with others, sharing with them the grief and misery that is in her heart.

Miriam, her sister-in-law, overhears her talk. Miriam is precisely the nurturing, enabling, and supportive older sister, the very one who convinced her parents to have Moses in the first place, who stood guard over his cradle in the Nile River, and who brought their mother to protect and

nurture the baby Moses. Again she thinks she can help him, based on her own experience, this time saving his marriage, by changing his behavior. So what does she do? She makes two big mistakes: (a) she assumes that Moses' prophecy, and the demands made upon him by God, are in some way comparable to others; and (b) she decides to discuss the whole matter with Aaron, the brother whose whole life was devoted to bringing alienated people and factions together. But from a Venusian point of view we can understand what is behind her behavior. She, like her sister-in-law Tzipora, is a classic instance of a nurturing, sharing, talking, communicating, relationship-cultivating, sister, wife, and mother. They did not appreciate the very real needs of Moses, not sufficiently sensitive to his uniqueness, and special predicament.

Was the marriage saved in the end? Did he learn to listen, and she grant him his space? To put it differently, did these Martians and Venusians in the shadow of Mount Sinai get to live happily ever after? The Torah is silent on that score. But a few weeks from now we will have an opportunity to examine the long term impact of these and related events, on their children and grandchildren. Stay tuned.

As for us, however, both male and female of the species, there is surely much to ponder in this brief interlude at Sinai, much to learn, and much to appreciate, in strengthening our own marriages and relationships, as we examine the Torah's timeless truth and beauty that await our discovery, with the literary and others tools of our time. In so doing will we all, husbands and wives, men and women of all ages, learn to live together in abiding love and mutual enrichment.