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Closing D'var Torah at SRE Network's Executive Symposium

By Rabbi Avi Killip

When I finished college and started my first job, I was navigating a challenge at work. I had a mentor tell me, "Avi, every woman has another woman at work who she hates." This was given to me as fact. Women do not get along.

The Torah doesn't offer us a tremendous number of examples of women working together, but I to uplift one: Miriam and Tziporah. Miriam is Moses's sister, and Tziporah is Moses's wife. I was raised on the story that these two women hated each other. Their relationship was so bad in fact, that Miriam was given leprosy, a terrible skin disease, as a punishment for gossiping about Tziporah.

I accepted this narrative so deeply that when, as an adult and a rabbi, I encountered a modern feminist midrash that depicted these women as friends I rejected it as revisionist history. This just isn't what happened; we can't just make things up!

But then I started learning, and I found not one, but two classical Midrashim, ancient texts, that present Miriam and Tziporah as friends. In these narratives, Miriam is punished not for bad mouthing Tziporah, but for standing up for her.

In one midrash Miriam notices something about Tziporah. She notices that Tziporah has stopped wearing her jewelry, her *takhshitei nashim*. And she asks her: "Why have you stopped wearing your jewelry?" Maybe she is saying "Tziporah, you are really letting yourself go!" or maybe she is saying "I noticed you took off your wedding ring." In either case, she doesn't just judge or wonder, she asks. And Tziporah answers her. Essentially she says "well, it doesn't really matter; Moses doesn't care. We aren't really together anymore." Miriam then stands up for Tziporah, speaking against Moses's behavior.

I want us to learn three things from this midrash: First, Miriam notices. She stops to take note of the experience of the woman standing next to her. Second, she asks her to share more about her experience. She does not assume that what she sees is the full picture or that she knows the full story. Finally, I want to lift up that this story is very, very ancient. We are not the first women to be doing this work, to be asking how we can support each up.

Today was an opportunity to notice. Tomorrow we will return to our workplaces and start asking-- find out what the experience of our organization and community really is. And my blessing for us is that when the work feels lonely, we can hear the voices of Miriam and Tziporah cheering us on. Behatzlacha!

Midrash in Hebrew and English

ספרי במדבר צ"ט

ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה. מנין היתה מרים יודעת שפירש משה מפריה ורביה? אלא שראתה צפורה שאינה מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים. אחרת לה: מה לך שאין את מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים? אמרה לה: אין אחיך מקפיד בדבר. לכך ידעה מרים, ואמרה לאחיה, ושניהם דברו בו. והרי דברים ק"ו: ומה מרים, שלא נתכוונה לדבר באחיה לגנאי אלא לשבח, ולא למעט מפריה ורביה אלא לרבות, בינה לבין עצמה—כך נענשה; המתכוון לדבר בחבירו לגנאי ולא לשבח, ולמעט מפריה ורביה ולא לרבות, בינו לבין אחרים ולא בינו לבין עצמו—על אחת כמה וכמה.

Sifrei BeMidbar 99

"and Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses": How did Miriam know that Moses had ceased from marital relations (with his wife Tzipporah)? Seeing that Tzipporah did not adorn herself as other (married) women did, she asked her for the cause and was told: "Your brother is not 'particular' about this thing" (intercourse, [being constantly "on call" for the word of G-d]). Thus Miriam learned of the matter. She apprised Aaron of it and they both spoke of it (as being a troublesome precedent for others.) Now does this not follow a fortiori, viz.: If Miriam, whose intent was not to berate her brother, but to praise him, and not to diminish propagation (in Israel), but to increase it, and who spoke thus privately — If she was thus punished, then one who intends to speak against his brother, in defamation and not in praise, and to diminish propagation and not to increase it, and in public — how much more so (is he to be punished!)