

CHIZUK AND IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael -
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

Who is the Cushite woman whom Moshe married?

We know full well that Moshe was married to a Midianite woman - Tzipora, the daughter of Yitro. Yet, in this week's Parsha (Bamidbar 12:1) we read of a Cushite wife: "And Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe because of the Cushite (Ethiopian?) woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman".

Many commentators are perplexed by the sudden introduction of this new figure. Rashi insists that Moshe had only one single wife - Tzipora. Why did Aharon and Miriam refer to her as a Cushite? Rashi quotes the Sifri's explanation stating that just as a dark skinned person stands out in a crowd by virtue of their skin color, so too, Tzipora stood out by dint of her remarkable external beauty coupled with her virtuous soul.

The Rashbam, however, follows the P'shat, the simple meaning, of the Torah's words. Accepting the Torah's description of this possible second wife at face value, Rashbam adopts the mysterious narrative found in various Midrashim, suggesting that the Cushite was a woman from Moshe's past. As a young man fleeing Mitzrayim, Moshe had made his way to Cush, eventually marrying a local woman and living there for forty years. Although many might find it hard to swallow this claim, the main virtue of the Rashbam's

suggestion is that it follows the simple meaning of the Torah's words.

Just as the Torah's sudden introduction of a Cushite woman perplexed the Biblical commentators, so too the historic appearance of a large multitude of Ethiopian men, women and children, airlifted to Israel in the 1980s as part of Mivtza Moshe, surprised and perplexed the Jewish People the world over.

Questions were posed regarding the Ethiopian Olim's origin as well as their Halachic status. Here was a People who had, by their own admission, been cut off for hundreds of years from any contact with the rest of their Jewish brethren. Despite persecution by Christians and missionaries, they clung to their Jewish traditions. They kept Shabbat and observed the laws of Tum'a and Tahara, adhering to the P'shat of the Torah's words. They would not light, or use, a fire on Shabbat. They did not perform Britot on Shabbat. During their monthly period, or after having given birth, the women would leave the home for the duration of the Torah proscribed days of impurity and temporarily live in a "Tukul"- (Beit Nida).

Upon their arrival in Israel they naturally wished to adhere to their ancient traditions, but things were not always simple. The Jewish Agency representative in the Absorption Center refused to fund their request to provide them with a communal "Tukul". It is easy to imagine how this added to the extreme difficulty they had accepting the modern Israeli life and its 20th century Halachic development. As the Rabbi of the Absorption Center, my

interaction with these new and unusual Olim often led to interesting questions. For example, they had always offered a Korban Pesach on Erev Pesach. Could I honor their request to provide a Shochet for the lamb that they had purchased and tied up next to their homes in the Absorption Center? I have already retold how I approached the then Chief Rabbi, Rav Avraham Shapira zt"l, who said that I was not to abide by their request. Having arrived in Israel, he believed that they must adapt to Halacha as it is practiced here. When the directives of the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi were passed on to officials, someone pointed out that since the Ethiopians are not Ashkenazi, I could present the same questions to the Sefardi Chief Rabbi (Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu zt"l). I was told that Rav Eliyahu could be found burning his chametz in the Buchara Quarter. I "chased him down" and presented the burning question of the permissibility of a Korban Pesach today when there is no Beit HaMikdash. Rav Eliyahu zt"l actually ruled that it was permissible for the Shochet, explaining that this was not to be considered a violation of the prohibition of "Sh'chutei Chutz". Similarly, the two Rabbis differed regarding the correct approach towards the Ethiopian tradition of not violating the Shabbat with a Brit Mila. Here too Rav Shapira zt"l was adamant that they join the rest of Am Yisrael, while Rav Eliyahu zt"l insisted that we have to give them time to learn to accommodate themselves with our traditions - even if it means delaying the Brit by a day.

It is important to realize where they had

come from - both emotionally and spiritually. The Ethiopian Jews had always dreamed of returning to Zion and Yerushalayim. In fact, a child who misbehaved would always be warned that if he were to continue with his poor behavior he would never get to Yerushalayim. When one of their leading Kessim, spiritual leaders, (Kes Adana) arrived at the Mercaz Klita, I quickly befriended him and explained to him how we had both a Sefardi and Ashkenazi minyanim. When I explained to him that we were ready to provide him with a room to establish his own minyan, his answer was priceless: "We have been separated from the rest of the Jewish People for thousands of years. Now that we are finally together, we will pray together." For the rest of his stay at the Absorption Center, he and the other Ethiopian residents, continued to daven with me in the Ashkenazi minyan.

It took thousands of years for Ethiopian Jewry to fulfill the dream of "Shivat Zion". Once having arrived they have been tasked with the impossible: Making the transition from an agrarian, 18th century society, attempting to bridge two centuries of cultural development in a few years.

Today we have a small but growing number of lawyers, politicians, doctors and even Rabbis from the Ethiopian community. It has not been an easy process, and we still have a far way to go, but slowly and surely they are becoming more and more integrated into Israeli society. They are rising on the socio-economic ladder, and the broader community is slowly overcoming its prejudices. In keeping with

what Rav Ovadia zt"l proclaimed in the past we must steadfastly repeat the motto: "They are blood of our blood, essence of our essence." Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Bazeh!

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