

The Cushite and Us Sermon

June 24, 2016

In 2007, I sat in a day of lectures in Southampton, England, learning about the effects of climate change on the political world. I picked up a book and inside was a chapter called “*Preparing for Mass Refugee Flows: The Corporate Military Sector*” Until then, I had always considered climate change as a localized phenomenon, only affecting people of certain regions. I had not connected climate change with refugees with the political spectrum. The author of the chapter, Steve Wright, talks of “*Europe and the US becoming virtual fortresses against this people-tide.*”¹ The rest of the chapter painted a terrifying picture of governments becoming more militaristic in their treatment of refugees. When I read it, I imagined that, should such a thing come to be, it would take a generation at least. I was wrong. Both here in the US and now very clearly in the UK, how to deal with refugees and with economic migrants is becoming a central political discussion. Many British people woke up this morning surprised that the openly xenophobic anti-immigrant, nationalist campaign of Brexit won in the referendum.

But fear of the Other is not new. Near the end of this week’s Torah portion, in chapter 12 of the book of Numbers, we have an extraordinary narrative. Miriam and Aaron were speaking badly about Moses’ Cushite wife and Torah repeats, “for he had married a Cushite woman.” They then start questioning Moses’ leadership ability, in particular whether God only speaks through him. God hears and is angry and Miriam is stricken with *tzara’at*, the whitening skin condition that is often mistranslated as leprosy.

¹ Steve Wright, in *Surviving Climate Change – The Struggle to Avert Global Catastrophe*, ed. David Cromwell and Mark Levene, Pluto Press, 2007, p.84

What's going on here? Moses has a Midianite wife, so why is there an issue with a Cushite wife? Cush is Ethiopia so do they – in particular Miriam – have a problem with the colour of Moses' Cushite wife's skin? The Rabbis actually identify the Cushite wife with Tzipporah, his Midianite wife. They say the two are the same, despite the fact that Midian and Cush were clearly different places. They equate the two by saying that just as a Cushite has different skin (in terms of colour), so Tzipporah had different skin (in terms of beauty). Midrash Tanchuma says that just as everyone speaks of the blackness of the Cushite, so all proclaim the beauty of Tzipporah (Tanchuma, Tzav 13). Let us just stop and look at this claim. The idea here is that Tzipporah, a Midianite, is referred to by Torah as a Cushite, because of her skin being so different in beauty, as different as an Ethiopian is in colour from everyone else. This is not an okay claim, certainly not by contemporary standards. What's so difficult about it is that it uses Cushite as a term of distinction, and we all know similar contemporary terms to refer to people of colour. But the Rabbis didn't have a problem with this explanation because they had to make sense of the text. How could Miriam have been saying bad things about Moses' black wife? Even they realise that's problematic. So they reinterpret the text to suggest that Miriam was talking about the beauty of the wife we already know about, using a slang term. And then, here's the act of Rabbinic exegetical genius. They suggest that Miriam was not attacking Moses' wife's beauty, but defending it. They connect verses 1 and 2 – the verse where Miriam criticizes Moses' Cushite wife and the verse where they ask about Moses' Divine communication – and conflate the two. Moses, according to this reading, was being criticized for focusing on communicating with God and not paying attention to his beautiful wife. Miriam was speaking badly *against* Moses wife, but speaking badly about Moses because of his neglect of his wife!

And that's a very cute bit of exegesis, but it doesn't avoid the fact that in order to achieve it, two things had to happen. The first is that the Rabbis had to ignore the second part of verse 1, which clearly states "because he had married a Cushite wife," which clearly implies another wife in addition to his Midianite wife. But the second problem, which is far more significant, is the use of the word Cushite in the Rabbinic mind to denote difference.

We all know of racism and xenophobia but it's particularly unsettling to read it in our tradition, in our sacred tradition. Yes, the message that one should not neglect family duties in the face of religious duties is definitely a message that has merit. Yes, the Rabbinic reading that Miriam was complaining because, as a woman, she had heard from her fellow woman that Moses was neglecting his family duties actually makes sense when read back into the text. But that does not take away the fact that to explain the text, the Rabbis had to explain that Cushite means black which means different.

And it's that kind of mindset which I have a serious problem with because – while I originally wrote down that that leads to racism – in fact, that *is* racism. But it's subtle, it's pernicious. In order to explain away a racist text, the Rabbis ended up by demonstrating their own racism. Back in their day, though, Rabbinic Judaism didn't affect elections or governmental policy, whereas now in a globalized economy with mass movement of people unseen before in human history, there are serious political consequences. But more than political consequences, I want to focus on the personal ones. The Rabbis at least partially redeem themselves when they address the skin disease of tzara'at that strikes Miriam. In fact, they very clearly spell out that it is punishment for Miriam's *lashon hara*, which is evil speech. To me, this Torah portion points out the inherent danger of racism in that it literally eats away at you. I don't believe that it's coincidental that the punishment

for Miriam complaining about Moses' wife's skin colour is that her own skin colour is immediately transformed into something disgusting. It's almost *midda k'neged midda* – measure for measure, an important Jewish concept that I referred to recently. We don't like to think of *middah k'neged middah* in a greater sense – we don't like to think that our deeds will actually be rewarded and punished from on high. And yet there is something very powerful about the idea that our negativity will be reflected back to us. Our negativity about other people's race or skin colour, or perhaps even their differing religious beliefs and customs, reflects back on us. It literally negatively affects us, too.

Years ago, people used to see the world in a very mechanistic way, suggesting that all elements of creation were separate and individualised. Quantum mechanics has changed that view and more people are starting to see interconnectivity between all beings. We are not so discrete. We are not so different. We all want the same things – security, dignity and lives of meaning and consequence. While I appreciate that a number of people today have expressed that we can achieve such things apart, I believe that we can only achieve them together. At the very minimum, I can say that I believe that racism, xenophobia, fear of the Other isn't a new phenomenon and it's something that profoundly affects not just those being spoken about, but also ourselves. That is why this week we can use our Torah portion as a catalyst for personal introspection, a reminder of the need to eradicate racism from our hearts so that no *tzara'at* may fall upon us. May such be God's will, and let us say, Amen.