

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XIV: Va'era (Ex. 6:2–9:35)

Essay 6. Amram's marriage to his aunt

פְּסוּק "וַיִּקַּח עִמָּרָם אֶת־יְוֹכָבֵד דְּתוֹ". פִּירֵשׁ רַשִׁ"י אָחוֹת אָבוּהִי, בֵּת לִי אָחוֹת קָהָת עַכ"ל. וְנִתְחַבְּטוּ הַמְּפָרְשִׁים בְּבִיאֹר דְּבָרָיו.

There is a verse: “**Amram took his aunt Jochebed** as his wife, and she bore him Aaron and Moses . . .” (Ex. 6:20). **Rashi explains** that Jochebed was, “**the sister of [Amram’s] father; she was daughter of Levi and sister of Kohath.**” **The commentators have struggled with the interpretation of his words.** That is, an aunt is a sister of one’s parents, and Targum Onkelos tells us **יְוֹכָבֵד אָחַת אָבוּהִי**, that Jochebed was the sister of [Amram’s] father, i.e., a sister of Kohath. Since we know the lineage Levi→Kohath→Amram, wouldn’t it have been enough for Rashi to have said that Jochebed was the sister of Amram’s father? We know Amram’s father was Kohath, so why did Rashi have to add that Jochebed was the sister of Kohath? We also know that Kohath’s father was Levi, so why did Rashi have to add that Jochebed was a daughter of Levi? (We also know explicitly from Num. 26:59 that Jochebed was the daughter of Levi.)

וְלַעֲנִיּוֹת דְּעַתִּי נִרְאָה פְּשׁוּט דְּכַוֵּנְתוֹ הִיא לֹמַר שֶׁהִיְתָה אָחוֹת אָבִיו—מִצַּד הָאָב, לֹא מִצַּד הָאֵם—לְפִי שֶׁכֵּנִי נָח שָׂאָר הָאֵם יֵשׁ לָהֶם וְלֹא שָׂאָר הָאָב, וְעַיִן בְּסִנְהֶדְרִין פָּרַק ז' (דָּף נ"ה ע"ב) מֵה שֶׁפִּירֵשׁ רַשִׁ"י שֶׁם וְתִרְאָה הָאֵמֶת.

In my humble opinion, it seems obvious that his intention is to say that [Jochebed] was [Amram’s] father’s sister, i.e., Kohath’s sister—on the paternal side, not the maternal side. That is, Jochebed and Kohath were both children of Levi, but they had different mothers, so Jochebed was only a half-sister of Kohath. That this was Rashi’s intention is obvious, **because the Noachides have maternal relatives** and therefore would forbid marriage to a half-sister on the mother’s side, **but they did not have paternal relatives**, and they would allow marriage to a half-sister on the father’s side. **Refer to the 7th chapter of Sanhedrin, page 58b and what Rashi wrote there, and you will see the truth.**

When someone converts to Judaism, his previous family relationships are disregarded by Torah law. Thus, according to Torah law, a convert would no longer be considered related to a sister, and could be married to her. However, the rabbis were stricter than the Torah and wouldn’t

* English translation: Copyright © 2020 by Charles S. Stein.

allow a convert to continue in marriage to some blood relatives, out of concern the convert might think that Jews from birth are allowed such a marriage. A man can't marry his full sister, or a half-sister on his mother's side. With regard to an aunt, Sanhedrin 58a includes a Baraita in which Rabbi Eliezer says that a man can't marry the sister of his father. Rashi's interpretation, given on Sanhedrin 58b, is that a man can't marry an aunt who is his father's full sister, or who is his father's maternal half-sister, but that he can marry an aunt who is his father's paternal half-sister.¹

That is why Rashi identifies Jochebed as "the sister of [Amram's] father" and adds "she was daughter of Levi and sister of Kohath." Identifying Jochebed as the daughter of Levi was not a redundancy, but an explanation that she and Kohath shared a father, but had different mothers. With that understanding, Amram's marriage to his aunt would be understood as conforming to the Noachide laws.

* * *

¹ He would also have to divorce an aunt who was his mother's maternal half-sister. With regard to a marriage to an aunt who was his mother's paternal half-sister, the majority view was that he could keep her as a wife.