



**B'haalotecha**

**Rabbi Jonathan Aaron - June 13, 2020**

א וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל־אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח:  
ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֲדֹם־בְּמֹשֶׁה דְּבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דְּבַר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה: ג וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנוּ  
מָאֵד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married, for he married a Cushite woman. They said, “Has Adonai spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not spoken with us as well?” Adonai heard it. Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.

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**Miriam and Aaron spoke** — She opened the conversation, therefore Scripture mentions her first. And whence did Miriam know that Moses had separated himself from his wife (for this was the statement she made; cf. Rashi below)? R. Nathan answered: “Miriam was beside Zipporah When it was told to Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp’ (Numbers 11:27). When Zipporah heard this, she exclaimed, Woe to the wives of these if they have anything to do with prophecy, for they will separate from their wives just has my husband has separated from me!” It was from this that Miriam knew about it, and she told it to Aaron. Now what was the case with Miriam who had no intention to disparage him? She was punished thus severely! How much the more will this be so in the case of one who intentionally speaks in disparagement of this fellow”! (Sifrei Bamidbar 99).

**Should we Point out Miriam’s Slander?**

Until Miriam erred by slandering Moshe, she was a rock-star: As a young child, she was ready to sacrifice her own life so that Moshe should live<sup>[4]</sup>. Eighty years later, on the shores of the Red Sea, Miriam grabs a tambourine and leads the women in prayer, extolling Hashem for His beneficence. The Torah calls her a prophetess – the only woman in the entire Torah to warrant this title. To set aside one Shabbat each year in order to remind ourselves how this great woman stumbled would be counterproductive. The Talmud in Tractate Avoda Zara [4b] teaches that “Whoever says that [King] David sinned [with Batsheva] is mistaken”. Rav Eliyahu Zinni reminds us that the Talmud does not say “David did not sin.”. Rather, the Talmud is teaching us that to publicly state that David or Miriam or anyone of their immense stature sinned is a mistake. It is simply not educational to do so.

Publicizing another person’s sins, even for a worthy goal, is guaranteed to start a hail of *lashon hara*. Establishing a Shabbat that revolved around the sins of Miriam would be paradoxical: we would be trying to fight *lashon hara* by creating even more of it. Establishing a Shabbat that revolved around the sins of *Am Yisrael* in the desert would just be plain wrong. It would make too many people feel too good about their own religious status by commanding them to remember others who are at this moment still burning in hell. When *Am Yisrael* join together as a nation, it is to move forward. It is not to stare as others fall behind.

Miriam was a prophetess, a far-sighted and courageous leader. Whilst still a child, she had stood watch over her brother Moses and when he was found she had bravely spoken to Pharaoh's daughter, asking that the boy's mother be invited to the Palace to be his nursemaid. Thus, she helped assure the future of her people. She led the women in rejoicing after the crossing of the Red Sea and was clearly much loved by the people. Yet, this week we read that she spoke to Moses 'because of the Cushite woman he had married' and was punished for doing so. We do not know what she said. Some commentaries suggest that she was trying to help Moses' wife. He was neglecting her in his pursuit of holiness and she reprimanded him for this. But others suggest that Miriam was, in today's terms, racist, criticising Moses for taking not only a foreign but also a dark-skinned wife. Her punishment for this was ironic – her skin was turned white as snow by the mysterious ailment called metzora. Whatever she said, Miriam seems to have caused harm by her words. For all her wisdom, goodness and courage, Miriam could also do wrong. She was not perfect but, like her brother Aaron, who spoke with her but somehow went unpunished, she was flawed – as all of us are.

It is easy to see people as good or bad. Yet, as the Talmud reminds us, although there are some people whose good deeds far outweigh their bad, and some people whose bad deeds far outweigh their good, for most of us the scales are finely balanced. One good deed can tip the balance in favour of a good judgement. As we observe the behaviour of others, we are not in a position to judge them. We do not know what hidden good people do or what they are capable of.

Rabbi Dr Margaret Jacobi

Miriam was not punished for her criticism, and she was certainly not punished for her determined will to guard the future of the nation. She was not scolded for her earlier complaint when the leaders of the nation left their wives and for her insistence that the people return to proper family living. Rather, her sin was that she did not take into account the unique and special circumstances surrounding Moshe. She had predicted his birth by prophecy, saying, "My mother will give birth to a son who will save Yisrael" [Sotta 13a]. But she did not understand her brother's unique status, different from any other human being, even among the most exalted chosen people.

Rabbi Amnon Bazak

He should do good to others, speak well of them, judge them favorably, not speak of their faults, forgive them when they speak badly of him, even if they do not deserve this, as written "Even in your thoughts, do not curse a king" (Koheles 10:20), and "You let loose your mouth for evil, and you accustomed your tongue to deceit, you slandered your own mother's son"(Tehilim 50:19). Regarding forgiving others who speak ill of him, the verse says: "and Miriam and Aharon spoke of Moshe", and then "the man Moshe was exceedingly humble", i.e. he had forgiven them. Likewise, the wise man said: "Also take no heed on all words that are spoken" (Koheles 7:21), and adds "For your heart knows that many times you too cursed others"(Koheles 7:22).

Duties of the Heart, 6:6