

Parashat Beha'alotecha

DC Beit Midrash, 5/31/04

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Numbers 12:1) Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. 2) They said, "Was it only to Moses that Hashem spoke? Did He not speak to us, as well?" And Hashem heard. 3) Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth!

4) Hashem said suddenly to Moses, to Aaron, and to Miriam, "You three, go out to the Tent of Meeting." And the three of them went out. 5) Hashem descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance to the Tent, and He summoned Aaron and Miriam; the two of them went out. 6) He said, "Hear now My words. If there shall be prophets among you, in a vision shall I, Hashem, make Myself known to him; in a dream shall I speak with him. 7) Not so is My servant Moses; in My entire house he is the trusted one. 8) Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles, at the image of Hashem does he gaze. Why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moses?

9) The wrath of Hashem flared up against them, and He left.

10) The cloud had departed from atop the Tent, and behold! Miriam was afflicted with tzaraas, like snow! Aaron turned to Miriam and behold! She was afflicted with tzaraas.

11) Aaron said to Moses, "I beg you, my lord, do not cast a sin upon us, for we have been foolish and we have sinned.

12) Let her not be like a corpse, like one who leaves his mother's womb with half his flesh having been consumed!"

13) Moses cried out to Hashem, saying, "Please, God, Heal her now."

14) Hashem said to Moses, "Were her father to spit in her face, would she not be humiliated for seven days? Let her be quarantined outside the camp for seven days, and then she may be brought in. 15) So Miriam was quarantined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not journey until Miriam was brought in. Then the people journeyed from Hazeroth, and they encamped in the Wilderness of Paran.

Numbers 11:11) Moses said to Hashem, "Why have You done evil to Your servant; why have I not found favor in your eyes, that You place the burden of this entire people upon me? 12) Did I conceive this entire people or did I give birth to it, that You say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling,...'

11:26) Two men remained in the camp, the name of one was Eldad and the name of the second was Medad, and the spirit rested upon them; they had been among the recorded ones, but they had not gone out to the Tent, and they prophesied in the camp. 27) The youth ran and told Moses, and he said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28) Joshua son of Nun, the servant of Moses since his youth, spoke up and said, "My lord Moses, incarcerate them!"

29) Moses said to him, "Are you being zealous for my sake? Would that the entire people of Hashem could be prophets, if Hashem would but place His spirit upon them!"

How are Moses' other challenges related to the incident with his sister and brother?

Numbers 20

The Children of Israel, the whole assembly, arrived at the Wilderness of Zin in the first month and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and she was buried there. 2) There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moses and Aaron.

Miriam's death takes place 38 years after the incident in Numbers 12. How many other times is

Miriam mentioned in the text in the intervening years/chapters? Does she speak?

After an incident of prophecy in the camp [Eldad and Medad, Num 11:26], Tzipporah, Moshe's wife, said, "the poor wives of those men who prophesied. They will be separated from their husbands as I was separated from mine" (See Rashi). Miriam overheard, and feeling sympathetic with Tzipporah, mentioned it to Aharon. [I think he is citing a

midrash found in *Sifrei Bamidbar* -- there's no reference here] This was considered lashon hara, and Miriam was punished for it with tzara'as.

From this section we learn many things:

First, the Torah mentions that Moshe was very humble (v3). (Probably he would not have minded that Miriam said something negative about him...) Thus we see that gossip is forbidden even if the subject of the gossip does not mind.

Second, it is forbidden to speak about someone even if one has previously done him many good turns, even saving his life...

--Chofetz Chaim. *Let Us Go Up: The Chofetz Chaim on Bemidbar and the Five Megillos*. Raphael Blumberg, trans. Feldheim, 1999.

Another midrash provides us with the details of the conversation that took place between Miriam and Aaron [each says: 'The Word was upon me but I did not keep away from my spouse' and questions why Moses' role as prophet exempts him from his duties as a husband -- from *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* A9] Miriam should have known better, the midrashim seem to be saying. She should have acted as Tziporah's' advocate by taking the matter directly to Moses.

These midrashim artfully link the challenges raised in Numbers 12:1 and 12:2 about the Cushite woman and Moses' role as prophet compared to Miriam and Aaron's, which on first reading seem disjointed and unrelated. They also raise several issues of interest to women and feminists. First, these midrashim suggest that Miriam may have occasionally or regularly acted as an advocated for other women. It is not hard to imagine that Miriam's particular leadership role was as a leader of the Israelite women. Exodus 15, where Miriam leads the women in song and dance, suggests the same. As a leader of women, Miriam would have played a major role during the desert wanderings.

Second, with the suggestion that Moses, in fulfilling his responsibilities as a prophet neglected his wife Tziporah, these midrashim raise the question of how an intense spiritual life can coexist with an intimate relationship with another human being. Do these two relationships enhance one another or are they in tension?...

--Ruth Sohn. *Parashat Beha'alotecha: The Silencing of Miriam*. IN Schwartz, Rebecca, ed. *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & The Women of Exodus*. Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001.

The text calls Miriam leprous, using the Hebrew words *tzara'at*. The same term, the same form of leprosy, is used during Moses' conversation with God at the burning bush (Ex 4:7)...The physical change proves to his disbelieving eyes (and is intended to be a sign proving Moses' worthiness to the Israelites) that divine forces are at work in him. Why should it be impossible to believe that Miriam's *tzara'at* serves a similar purpose?...The book of Leviticus summarizes the laws concerning *tzara'at* and impurity: "If the *tzara'at* covers the entire skin...(the Kohen) shall declare the affliction to be pure; having turned completely white, it is pure (Lev 12:12-17). Miriam's skin is white as snow. If she is therefore purified and not impure, why her seclusion from the camp" We know she is a prophet and receives divine inspiration. the incident described in Numbers 12 initiates and validates that status. Seven days of separation for purification also remind us of the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests, when they are instructed to remain secluded for seven days before their inauguration as *kohanim* (Lev 8). Was this then Miriam's consecration as a *kohenet*, a priest?

--Rebecca Schwartz. "If There Be a Prophet..." IN Schwartz, Rebecca, ed. *All the Women Followed Her*.

"Women's marginalization: The Case of Miriam"

Miriam is an active and important figure, a biblical hero to whom many have pointed as an example of women's leadership and empowerment. In Numbers 12, she and Aaron appear to engage in a rebellion against their brother, Moses. They question Moses' singular prophetic ability, asking "Has not God spoken through me also?" (Num 12:2). It is significant that only Miriam, and not Aaron, is punished with a skin disease. Aaron and his male descendants retain their priestly status. Miriam and subsequent generations of women are marginalized, however. After Miriam, women seem to be excluded from officiating in public religious life. Women's leadership is thus deligitimated.

Miriam's unique status as prophet and leader underscores the absence of women in general. In Exodus, she appears to have a constituency of women (Ex 15:20-21). In Numbers, she is a woman alone and suffers punishment alone. This is often the fate of the token woman who achieves unusual leadership or authority. Her experience is always other and odd, and when inevitable problems arise, her difference is frequently held to blame. In recent years, as Jewish women have taken on public leadership roles in politics and religion, the stigma of Miriam as lone woman in happily losing its grip.

...What we know is that when God departed, Miriam was left with scales, and here the heart of the passage unfolds. For what happened next represents a profound and dramatic moment between Miriam, her brothers, and the entire Israelite community.

Everything stopped. The silence was deadening. People stopped kvetching and priorities of the moment, day, and week shifted. Miriam was ill. Even the thinking stopped. Suddenly what was important shone like a moonbeam in the clear desert sky. And all that remained were the heartfelt inner voices of brothers, family and friends. Aaron pleaded with Moses to save Miriam. This was an unusual reversal of communication between these brothers. Moses listened to Aaron, and with heartfelt simplicity, spoke to God. "*El na, refa na la.*" Please God, pray heal her. It was a moment of faith and submission.

Miriam was sent out to the wilderness for seven days and the people waited. Miriam was sent to the wilderness--a wilderness not unlike the nothingness described in Kabbalah upon which all existence would be based. Not unlike the nothingness of Genesis into which God spoke existence: "Let there be light."

...Now as I grapple with illness, and plant myself firmly on my own healing journey, Miriam has been my guide, like the cloud and the fire in the wilderness....

...what a trying time this is for me just as it must have been for Miriam...I stopped wondering what Miriam was thinking alone in the wilderness, the nothingness. Seeing the grains of sand, the earth and sea in front of me, I felt the rhythm of the waves. I heard their song. I saluted the sun and felt the sand, the grains of sand, beneath my feet. And at that moment, I knew what Miriam did in the wilderness. She danced.

And so did I.

--Marion Weinberg. "Miriam: *Parashat Beha'alotecha.*"

IN Schwartz, Rebecca, ed. *All the Women Followed Her*

The description of Tziporah as Cushite was a euphemistic reference to her great beauty, to avoid the evil eye. The numerical value of *cushit* is equal to that of *yafat mareh*, beautiful in appearance. The term is repeated later in the verse to suggest that her physical beauty was matched by her character (Rashi paraphrased.)

"The Bible, unless used with great caution, is not so much a source of values as it is a decoration to give apparent substance to values we already have." -- R. Richard Israel z'l