

Remembering and Taking to Heart Miriam's Tzora'at

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Parshat Ki Tetze contains a one-line reminder of the events recorded in BaMidbar 12. (Devarim 24:9) “REMEMBER that which the Lord, your God did to Miriam, on the way when you were leaving Egypt.” Although 24:7 itself is not specific with regard to the particular event that we are being commanded to remember, an incident that apparently occurred during the course of the forty years of wandering that followed the Exodus from Egypt, (1) the previous verse in Devarim provides a readily identifiable context: (Devarim 24:8) “Be careful regarding the plague of ‘TZORA’AT’ to very much observe and do in accordance with all that the Kohanim will instruct you; in accordance with what they command you, so you will be careful to do.” Since Miriam’s punishment for speaking negatively concerning Moshe in BaMidbar 12:10 was that she was smitten with ‘TZORA’AT’ (see 12:15), (2) and Jewish tradition maintains that “Tzora’at” comes about as a result of an assortment of spiritual shortcomings, primarily when one speaks badly about another, i.e., “Lashon HaRa” (gossip that inevitably contains slander and criticism of others), we can readily conclude that this is the event to which 24:9 is alluding.

But one wonders what is it that precipitates the Tora going out of its way to particularly command us to remember this relatively minor event in the evolution of the Jewish people, as recorded in the Bible? Aren’t there so many other things to remember of seeming greater significance and magnitude?

At the end of the weekday Shacharit service, most Siddurim list what is known as “Shesh Zechirot” (six remembrances), i.e., topics and events that the Tora in one way or another has called upon Jews to zealously keep in mind down through the ages:

- a. The Exodus—(Shemot 16:3) “In order that you will REMEMBER the day on which you went out from Egypt all the days of your life.”
- b. The Revelation on Sinai—(Devarim 4:9-10) “Just observe for yourself and guard your soul exceedingly LEST YOU FORGET the things that your eyes saw and lest you remove from your hearts all the days of your life and you will make them know to your children and your grandchildren. The day on which you stood before the Lord, your God, in Chorev, when HaShem Said to me, ‘Gather together for Me the people that I may Cause them to hear My Words, that will teach

them to fear Me all of the days that they are living on the earth, and that they will teach their children.

- c. The deed of Amalek and the need to destroy this people—(Devarim 25:17-19) “REMEMBER what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt. That they happened upon you on the way and they waylaid among you all of those who were weak on the way and you were tired and weak and did not fear God. And it will come to pass when the Lord, your God Gives you rest from all of your enemies surrounding you in the land that the Lord is Giving to you as an inheritance to inherit it, WIPE OUT the MEMORY of Amalek from beneath the heavens, DO NOT FORGET.”
- d. The deeds of our fathers in the desert—(Devarim 9:7) “REMEMBER, DO NOT FORGET the manner in which you antagonized God in the desert.”
- e. The deed of Miriam—see above.
- f. Shabbat—(Shemot 20:8) “REMEMBER the day of Shabbat to sanctify it.”

While we can agree that what Miriam did in BaMidbar 12 was certainly reprehensible and regrettable, was it on the level of the other five themes in the Tora where explicit instructions are given regarding the need to remember? Furthermore, the citations that comprise the “Shesh Zechirot” for the most part derive from Devarim, where Moshe’s valedictory address to the Jewish people constitute an attempt to prepare them to continue their devotion and service to God, even when Moshe would no longer be alive to lead and guide them. If faced with a similar task, i.e., to convey to our co-religionists what was most important in order to remain truly Jewish, we too would probably have included The Exodus, the Revelation, the need to eliminate the detractors of God’s Kingship as epitomized in Amalek, the marked ingratitude and low level of belief evidenced by the generation of the Exodus as a goad to increased gratitude and faith on the part of the listeners, as well as the importance of Shabbat. But would we have thought to also mention the incident involving Miriam in our shortlist of crucial things that everyone must keep in mind?

Commentators further appear to compound the problem of discerning the severity of Miriam’s indiscretion when they point out many considerations that would lead us to conclude that Miriam really did not do any harm when she made her comments concerning Moshe. Rabbeinu Bachya points to the following mitigating factors: a] Miriam was a righteous prophetess, (3) b] she spoke out only against her brother and only this single time, demonstrating that

criticizing others was not a constant aspect of her personality, (4) c] she was older than Moshe, (5) d] she had raised him, (6) e] she had risked her life on his behalf at the Nile (7) and f] she did not speak directly in front of him, to avoid him undue embarrassment. (8) NeTzIV adds that g] her act was inadvertent (9) and h] mistaken. (10)

But then again, mightn't this be the very point of why Miriam's transgression is deemed so serious, i.e., despite the innumerable factors that should have resulted in nothing more than a mild rebuke, God meted out a punishment of "TZORA'AT", even to someone like Miriam, indicating that an extremely grave transgression had taken place. RaMBaN argues that if a highly distinguished individual like Miriam, for whom there were so many reasons not to be punished, was given Tzora'at nevertheless, how can someone who has so much less going for him/her reasonably expect to be forgiven without any punitive consequence for the transgression of "Lashon HaRa"? Taking a different tack, both RaShBaM and Tosefet Beracha emphasize that we see from the example of Miriam, as well as that of King Uziyahu (see Melachim II 26:20) that once someone is afflicted with this skin disease, it must be allowed to take its course, and no matter how important and influential the individual suffering from the malady may be, s/he will have to be segregated from society for however long the condition remains. (11)

There are at least three lenses through which to look at this action and consider its gravity. On the one hand, if Miriam is so exceptional, then in accordance with the principle that God judges "Tzadikim" (righteous individuals) "KeChut HaSa'ara" (allowing for a margin of error no wider than a hair's breadth) (e.g., Bava Kama 50a), she is held to a higher standard than ordinary individuals might be, and the average Jew has nothing so confounding to fear even if s/he were to engage in "Lashon HaRa". Another perspective would place the focus on Moshe. Since he is so unique and holy, criticisms levied against him are dealt with far more harshly than were they directed against someone of lesser stature. Finally, it could be argued that "Lashon HaRa" is such an inherently socially destructive act, it will be treated severely regardless of who pronounces it and about whom it is said. According to the first two approaches, there appears to be little to be learned of practical consequence relevant to the Jew of today. Unless you are a "Miriam-type" or a "Moshe-type", which for the majority of us is highly unlikely, the incident does not apply, and is of no more than passing historical interest. Adopting the third approach, however, does send a powerful message to each of us and our contemporaries. "Lashon HaRa" will never be overlooked. Those who participate in disseminating it cannot hide behind any special status, or claim

indispensability to the community as a whole, in order to deflect blame and accountability for having engaged in malicious gossip.

One ostensible Aramaic translation, “Targum Yonatan”, supposedly designed to afford non-Hebrew speakers the opportunity to understand what is being read from the Tora, is actually much more of a commentary than a translation per se. (12) This commentator’s interpretation of the intent of the Tora when it brings up in Devarim the incident of BaMidbar 12, is to emphasize a transgression other than “Lashon HaRa.” With regard to Devarim 24:9, he writes, “Be careful not to falsely suspect another person in order that you not be smitten. Remember what the Lord your God Did to Miriam who falsely suspected Moshe of something that wasn’t true, and she was smitten by ‘Tzora’at’.” The “Targum”’s comment appears to extend an interpretation in Masechet Shabbat of events taking place at the outset of Shemot, from Moshe to now include his sister Miriam.

(Shabbat 97a) Said Reish Lakish: (13) A person who suspects innocent individuals will be bodily afflicted, as it says, (Shemot 4:1) “But behold, they (the Jewish people) will not believe me (Moshe, that I have come to redeem them).” But it was Known to the Holy One, Blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He Said to him: “They are believers and the children of believers. It is you who in the end will not believe.” They are believers, as it is written, (Shemot 4:31) “And the people believed”, and they are the children of believers, as it is written, (Beraishit 15:6) “And he (Avraham) believer in the Lord.” You will ultimately not believe, as it is said, (BaMidbar 20:12) “And the Lord said unto Moshe and Aharon, ‘Because you didn’t believe in Me’.” From where do we learn that Moshe was afflicted with Tzora’at? Because it is written, (Shemot 4:6) “And the Lord Said furthermore to him, ‘Put now your hand under your shirt upon your chest... (and when he extracted it, it had turned leprous; yet it remained so for an extremely short period of time, i.e., until HaShem Told Moshe in a matter of minutes to replace his hand and thereby restore the flesh to its normal appearance).

Rather than assume the most standard of interpretations, i.e., that Miriam was guilty of “Lashon HaRa”, “Targum Yonatan” understands what happens to Moshe as a precedent for what ultimately happens to his sister, as well as to Aharon. (14) Whereas the relationship between “Tzora’at” and “Lashon HaRa” is fairly clear—if a person does not use his power of communication with others for good, but rather for destructive purposes vis-à-vis what s/he chooses to say to whom, then s/he will be forced to take up residence outside the encampment, away from other people, at least temporarily, when the only human beings with whom the individual will be able to speak are those experiencing the same malady—connecting “Tzora’at” to “Choshed B’Kesheirim” seems at first glance less obvious.

R. Kook, in his commentary on the Aggadic portion of the Talmud, entitled “Ein Ayah”, (15) suggests that when one individual makes a negative evaluation of another, particularly when that other does not deserve to be viewed in such a light, s/he is being influenced by physical, rather than spiritual or intellectual considerations. Jewish tradition emphasizes how human beings are less-than-perfect amalgams of the spiritual—the soul—and the physical—the body. Both aspects seek to dominate the individual, and at different times, one dimension or the other gains the upper hand. When one prays, s/he opens up a window to the soul, which is actually praying unceasingly. When one satisfies his/her physical desires, the body is holding sway. True personal piety is an indication that the soul is regularly and consistently influencing our more physical components. By means of Tora and Mitzvot, we continually strive to sanctify the profane, not only in the world around us, but also vis-à-vis our very selves. And when we are unsuccessful, such failure manifests itself in sin. Consequently, R. Kook cannot conceptualize how we attribute to another negative traits and behaviors, unless we are relating to him/her in a purely physical, crass manner, and consequently, it is appropriate that we should suffer a physical consequence as a result of having acted and thought badly. The time spent being restricted to a solitary existence as a result of “Tzora’at” will hopefully give the individual pause to reconsider, not how and when to communicate with others, but more fundamentally, how to attempt to make him/herself more spiritual in every dimension, how to recalibrate the balance between body and soul, particularly in terms of evaluating one’s fellow. Consequently, if “Lashon HaRa” is perceived as essentially a “Bein Adam LeChaveiro” (between man and man), “Choshed B’Kesheirim” (suspecting innocents of wrongdoing) becomes a reflection of one’s “Bein Adam LeAtzmo” (between man and him/herself) quotient concerning the synergy between the physical and spiritual.

Clearly, if “Tzora’at” were still a phenomenon that would occur in the world that we inhabit, it would constitute a major inconvenience and would serve to disrupt many lives. Yet, as part of God’s general Withdrawal from our visible everyday surroundings, categorized as “Hester Panim” (the hiding of the Face), we have lost the ability to receive feedback as to our spiritual state of affairs, in a most immediate and profound fashion. It is that much more difficult to know with any certainty “how we are doing”. We are left to rely on our own self-evaluations and the input of trusted and sensitive friends.

Shabbat Shalom, and let us keep in mind Miriam’s actions and the consequences that they initiated, in our quest to ever improve how we strive to improve the way we relate to God, our fellows and ourselves.

(1) It should be noted that Miriam is not mentioned as actively doing or being involved in anything following the Song at the Sea of Reeds (Shemot 15:20-21)—Miriam’s name appears only in the following verses: BaMidbar 12:1, 4, 10, 15; 20:1—aside from the incident in BaMidbar 12, which is being referenced in Devarim 24:9.

(2) Tzora’at is clearly not a physical malady if it comes about as the result of spiritual sin, as opposed to some type of virus or bacteria. See the essay on Parshiot Tazria-Metzora at <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Tazria.html>

(3) Micha 6:4 implies that Miriam played as crucial a role in the Exodus as did her two brothers. Shemot 15:20-21 demonstrates Miriam’s prophecy by means of her leading the women in song at the Sea of Reeds. Midrashim maintain that the manner by which she convinced Amram to remarry Yocheved was by telling him that the child that would be born as a result of their resuming their married life would be the savior of the Jews from their Egyptian enslavement. See Sota 11b, 12a.

(4) Sota 12a depicts Miriam as speaking harshly to her father, commenting that his example which resulted in all Jewish men divorcing their wives was more severe than Pharaoh’s decree. Whereas Pharaoh had ordered that only male children be murdered, Amram was assuring that there would be no daughters born either. The Midrash which interprets the names of the two midwives, Shifra and Puah, to be descriptive names for Miriam and Yocheved, imagines Miriam harshly criticizing Pharaoh to his face, and had Yocheved not come to the defense of her young daughter, her life would have been forfeit. Consequently, there was a clear sense that Miriam, similar to her younger sibling Moshe, did not suffer fools lightly and possessed a sharp tongue. That being said, the only explicit case that the Bible records of her expressing a critical evaluation of anyone else, whatever her capacity to be able to do so, is in BaMidbar 12. Of course, the reason why ChaZaL imagined Miriam’s behavior in the earlier incidents was the manner in which she spoke about Moshe in BaMidbar. In that case, there wouldn’t necessarily be prior evidence in terms of her deportment.

(5) This is obvious from the story in Shemot 2. Miriam would not have been in a position to try to protect her newborn brother if she were not older. Furthermore, older siblings often presume that it is within their rights to criticize the younger members of their family.

(6) Miriam's involvement in protecting Moshe and obtaining for him a nursemaid, as it turned out, their mother Yocheved—Shemot 2:8-9—could constitute a claim of having raised him.

(7) An individual “spying” on the daughter of Pharaoh while she bathed would easily have been worthy of execution, but Miriam nevertheless took the risk in Shemot 2:4.

(8) In BaMidbar 12:1, the use of the preposition “BeMoshe” (concerning Moshe) is understood to emphasize that this did not happen in his presence.

(9) Miriam could have meant well in two different ways, depending upon the interpretation of the phrase in BaMidbar 12:1 “Al Odot HaIsha HaKushit” (concerning the Ethiopian woman). The standard interpretation is that Moshe no longer lived with Tziporra once he received the Tora on Sinai. In that case, Miriam felt that Moshe was wronging his wife and setting a poor example for other Jewish men, much as she had disagreed with Amram's separating from Yocheved. If, on the other hand, the interpretation that in addition to Tziporra, Moshe had married another woman, and Miriam was upset over Tziporra's lowered status in light of her “Tzora” (competitor), perhaps Miriam meant well in so far as she was consulting with Aharon regarding Moshe's domestic situation.

(10) There is a debate among commentators regarding whether the separation from Tziporra was Moshe's idea, or Commanded by God. Certainly, if the latter was the case, then Moshe bore no responsibility, and Miriam should not have been criticizing him for something that had been imposed upon him from without. If Moshe decided to do this on his own, then while Miriam may have thought that he had used bad judgment, nevertheless the fact that Moshe is never criticized for having done so, and according to one view—Shabbat 87a—is even praised for taking this course of action, once again Miriam is left unsupported. As far as the interpretation that Moshe married another woman is concerned, since we never hear about this woman, her name, her activities, etc., it is more difficult to imagine what the pros and cons of such a scenario might be.

(11) See the essay on the High Priest and the Inadvertent Murderer at:

<http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Matot-Masei.html> for additional speculations regarding punishments that can be varied by the length of time that either an individual lives, or the span of a physical condition.

(12) As opposed to the more rigorous and consistent “Targum Onkelos”, Targum Yonatan is replete with interpretations and allusions to Midrashic and Aggadic themes. If one understands the commandment to review the weekly Tora reading “Shnayim Mikra VeEchad Targum” (twice the literal text and once with a “translation”) that Targum Yonatan would satisfy the latter criteria, it would appear then that other commentaries not necessarily in Aramaic, would also satisfy the requirement. On the other hand, if the interest is that those who are about to listen to the Tora reading should understand the words, then Targum Onkelos, assuming that one was conversant in Aramaic, is a much better choice. Whether a translation into another language, such as English, would suffice is unclear since at least Targum Onkelos is in accordance with traditional Jewish thought, which may not be the case with other translations, however literal they may appear. In fact, every translation is an interpretation, not only when it comes to an allegory like Shir HaShirim, but even in the most basic, and ostensibly straight-forward sections of the Bible. Onkelos himself was wary of anthropomorphisms and consistently changed the literal meaning of verses in order to avoid this theological problem.

(13) It is notable that Reish Lakish should take such a position, since in one significant interaction with R. Yochanan, he reflects considerable sensitivity to the fact that his past as a highwayman was still being brought up, after so many years of devotion to Jewish tradition and learning. See Bava Metzia 84a.

(14) See Shabbat 97a.

(15) Vol. 4, Machon al shem HaRav Zvi Yehuda Kook, Yerushalayim, 5760, p. 241. The name of the commentary, “Ein Ayah” (the Eye of Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen) derives from “Ein Yaakov” (the Eye of Yaakov), the collection of Aggadic sources first gathered by R. Yaakov Abuav in the late 15th century.