

BEHAALOSCHA (NUMBERS 8:1-12:16)

Who's Your Brother?

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Miriam was in trouble. She had sinned, and G-d was angry.

As we have discussed in the past, the Torah expects us to live a normal lifestyle. G-d expects us to marry and raise children. In fact, one requirement of a High Priest is that he be married. (See "When In Rome...?")

The one, single exception to this rule was Moses. Because he, unlike other prophets, could, and often did, receive communication from G-d at literally any moment, he was required to separate from his wife. It was not considered appropriate for him to engage in marital intimacy when he was "on call" from G-d every second of the day.

Miriam happened to find out about this fact, and she wasn't happy about it. She and her other brother Aaron were also prophets! They too received communication from G-d. Yet, they continued to live regular lives. We are always in the presence of G-d, even at the most private of moments, and everything we do must be for a holy purpose. Aaron remained married to his wife, and Miriam remained married to her husband. Why was their brother ignoring his wife?!

Miriam and Aaron, loving sister and brother of Moses, discussed the matter in Moses' presence. This was done totally without malice. It was an act of constructive criticism.

It was also a monumental mistake. G-d was furious:

"Hear My words! If there are prophets among you, when I make myself known to him in a vision I will speak to him in a dream. This is not true of My servant Moses, who is like a trusted servant throughout My house. I speak to him mouth to mouth, in a clear vision without allegory so that he sees a clear picture of G-d. Why did you not fear speaking against My servant Moses?" The wrath of G-d flared against them and He left. (Numbers, 11:6-8)

Miriam was afflicted with "Tzora'as," a spiritual disease with physical properties vaguely similar to leprosy. As such, she was considered spiritually defiled, and forced to live outside the Camp of Israel until the condition would clear up. This disease is typically considered a form of Divine punishment for gossip. (See "A Taste of his own Medicine.")

Miriam remained outside the camp for seven days. This led to a one-week delay in the travels of the Camp of Israel. Normally, those who were required to stay outside the camp due to ritual impurity followed along on the outskirts as the Nation traveled. Miriam could have followed the Israelites through the desert at a safe distance. However, as Rashi explains, G-d accorded her the honor of having the people wait for her.

This was a reward for something she had done many years before, as a young girl. When her baby brother Moses was set afloat in the Nile, Miriam stood at a distance to watch out for him. As a reward, G-d now had the entire Nation of Israel, millions of individuals, waiting patiently for her recovery.

There is much we can learn from all this:

- * The unfathomable greatness of Torah personalities.

To tell the truth, I was a bit reluctant to write about Moses becoming celibate. I was afraid that people won't understand. But if G-d can write it in His Torah, I guess I can quote it on my website! You and I have no idea whatsoever who and what Moses was. We can't begin to understand the spiritual giant he was. You know how I know that? Because his own sister and brother had know idea who he was!

- * The terrible sin of gossip.

Miriam and Aaron loved and admired their brother immensely. They spoke, not to criticize, but to clarify. They wanted to rectify the situation. They were trying to help Moses and his wife. Yet, G-d was incensed. If G-d reacts so harshly to well-intended constructive criticism, how do you think He responds to careless and malicious prattle?!

Another point to consider. Aaron and Miriam spoke against Moses because they didn't fully understand his motives. Had they fully understood Moses' spiritual level, and that he was acting upon G-d's instructions, they certainly would not have been critical.

We are often frustrated when other people misunderstand our actions, and we certainly don't want them to talk badly about us based upon those misconceptions. The next time we see someone doing something that we deem inappropriate, perhaps we should stop, think, and give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe what they are doing is correct, and we are the ones making a mistake in our interpretation of their actions.

- * The fairness of Divine Judgment.

Miriam was being punished for sinning against Moses (and G-d!) Yet, at the same time, she was being honored for her earlier devotion to her then-baby brother Moses. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein points out that G-d specifically chose this time to honor Miriam. He wanted to demonstrate how dear she was to Him due to her good deeds. She deserved honor. The fact that she now deserved punishment didn't mitigate that honor.

Miriam deserved to be punished. She received that punishment. Miriam deserved to be honored. She received that honor. Every person receives exactly what he is supposed to receive. The Torah is telling us that while we may not understand the "math", we can rest assured that G-d makes sure that everything adds up correctly.

We don't understand why G-d does what He does. It sometimes confounds us. It sometimes upsets us. It sometimes angers us.

It is important for us to try to understand that we don't, and won't, understand G-d and His ways. Miriam didn't understand Moses, and we don't understand Miriam.

G-d, fortunately for us, understands everything!

Have a great Shabbos.

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