

Miriam's Rebellion and the Uniqueness of Moses

By: Gretchen A. Shapiro
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Teacher: Rabbi Moshe Berger
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Chapter 12 of Bamidbar is about the rebellion of Miriam and Aaron against the leadership of Moses. That being said, the chapter is much more complex than that one sentence would imply. This paper will make use of quotes in both Hebrew and English to discuss the complex chapter of Bamidbar.

The very first sentence of Bamidbar would lead one to believe that the entire issue is Moses' wife. As this paper will show, there is more to it than that. Bamidbar 12:1, says "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Kushite woman." In Hebrew, this is

א וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם אֶחָרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל־אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכִּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כִּשִּׁית לָקַח:

The first thing to notice about the Hebrew, is that the word וַתְּדַבֵּר (va-tedaber) is in the feminine singular. It is Miriam alone who is talking. Aaron is there to back her up, but he is silent. This helps to explain why Miriam is the one who gets punished by HASHEM with "snow-white scales", while Aaron only suffered second hand (maybe, the paper will discuss this issue in depth when it gets to that verse).

The next issue raised in the first verse is Moses and his "Kushite" wife. It was learned in Shemot (Exodus), that Moses' wife was Zipporah, a Midianite. The term Kushite can mean more than one thing, that Zipporah was dark-skinned compared to Miriam herself, that Moses took a second wife from Kush, that Kush is nearby Midain, or that Zipporah was exceptionally beautiful (Targum Onkelos). Since the name of no other wife is mentioned, it is likely that Miriam is referring to Zipporah herself. The Midainites, according to Abraham Ibn Ezra, were tent-dwellers who were dark-skinned and were also known as Kushites. That being the case, why did Miriam confront Moses after all this time about his wife? To answer to this question the book of Shemot

(Exodus) must be consulted. In Shemot 18:5-6, Jethro comes to the encampment of the Israelites with Moses' wife and children. Zipporah was not with Moses in Egypt, so Miriam did not know her until later. It is likely, that Miriam was upset because Moses had married a foreigner, not because she was Midianite, dark-skinned, beautiful, or Kushite. None of the commentaries by the rabbis object to her Kushite origin. They even go so far as to propose that Miriam is angry because Moses, being called by HASHEM at any moment, had to stay in a state of ritual purity and thus did not have marital relations with his wife, Zipporah. This idea is in keeping with the other statements Miriam makes. It seems that she is not so much concerned about Zipporah and her marriage to Moses, but Moses' relationship with HASHEM.

Verse 2 of Bamidbar gives the real reason for the complaint against Moses. Bamidbar 12: 2." And they said, 'Has the L-rd indeed spoken only by Moses? has he not spoken also by us?' And the L-rd heard it." Here, Miriam and Aaron (who is backing her up, while remaining silent) make the point that they too are prophets. Shemot (Exodus) 15:20 says "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister...". Two things are clear from this passage, Miriam was a prophetess and she was closer to Aaron than Moses. This makes sense, because Moses was not raised with his siblings. HASHEM also spoke through Aaron, that is clear from Shemot 4:27 "The L-rd said to Aaron...". Perhaps their complaint is related to the fact that Moses is now sharing some of his power with the 70 elders. Miriam and Aaron have not been given the position of leadership in this way even though they are prophets. Ibn Ezra says that the whole matter relates to the fact that Miriam and Aaron were still having relations with their spouses, while Moses was not. This points out a difference between the type of prophets Miriam and Aaron were, and the type of prophet Moses was. This will be discussed at greater length in reference to verse 6 of Bamidbar. HASHEM, of course, hears the complaint Miriam voices about

Moses. From the first verse, it seems that Miriam is not talking directly to Moses, but about Moses ("He married a Kushite woman", not "You married a Kushite woman"). Since Miriam and Aaron are not talking to Moses, they are engaging in Lashon Hara, as well as rebellion. Whom they are talking to is not clear, perhaps Miriam is talking to Aaron only, and Aaron is agreeing with her, or at least not voicing any disagreement. HASHEM hears this and comes to Moses' defense.

Moses is said, in verse 3, to be "very humble, more than any other men which were upon the face of the earth.". At first glance, this seems to be a break in the flow of the story. It is here, however, to show that Moses would not speak up for himself. Moses had not wanted to speak for HASHEM, had not felt himself to be worthy of such an honor (Shemot 3:11 "But Moses said to G-d, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt" and other verses). Bamidbar is saying that Moses is still humble about himself. This is one reason why HASHEM comes to Moses' defense. Moses would not defend himself in this matter.

Next, Bamidbar 12:4 says " And the L-rd spoke suddenly to Moses, and to Aaron, and to Miriam, 'Come out you three to the Tent of Meeting.' And the three came out." HASHEM's response is immediate. He does not wait for this situation to get out of hand, nor does He wait until Moses asks for His help. Moses, being humble, would probably not have asked for help from HASHEM, at any rate. All three of the siblings go to the Tent of Meeting to hear what HASHEM has to say.

"And the L-rd came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forth." (Bamidbar 12:5). Though the next verse says that the Holy One, Blessed be He, speaks directly to only Moses, He makes an exception in this case. He also calls Aaron and Miriam aside, to talk to them alone, possibly to spare Moses' feelings because of what Miriam had said, or

because of the fact that He is about to praise Moses. It would be hard for a man as humble about himself as Moses is to hear such praise from HASHEM.

HASHEM says to Miriam and Aaron in verse 6-8 "And He said, 'Hear now my words; If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known to him in a vision, and will speak to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses, for he is the trusted one in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the L-rd. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' " The other prophets get their message in a dream or vision, Moses is different. He hears HASHEM's message directly from HASHEM.

Additionally, Moses can call on HASHEM to answer his question, and have Him reply immediately. This is illustrated by Bamidbar 9:8 "Moses said to them, 'Stand by, let me hear what instructions the L-rd gives about you'." Moses then proceeds to ask HASHEM how to answer the people who have brought him a question. Miriam and Aaron cannot speak to HASHEM in the same way Moses does. They do not speak to Him "mouth to mouth" or face to face. Moses is also trusted by HASHEM, meaning that he can talk to Him at any time (like a trusted member of a king's court who has the king's ear and can talk to him at any time). Moses had also "seen" HASHEM through His deeds. This occurred in Shemot (Exodus 33:18-20 "He [Moses] said, 'Oh, let me behold Your Presence!' And He answered, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name L-rd, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But', He said, 'You cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live.' "

HASHEM then proceeds to show Moses His deeds. This is what is meant by Moses seeing the form of the L-rd. HASHEM then asks why they were not afraid to speak against His servant Moses. The term servant is a term of endearment which HASHEM uses. He has referred to David, the Patriarchs, and latter all of Israel as His servant. This

is a rebuke to Miriam and Aaron for the Lashon Hara they spoke against Moses.

HASHEM acts quickly to this affront against His servant Moses.

"And the anger of the L-rd was kindled against them; and He departed.. And the cloud departed from off the Tent; and, behold, Miriam had become leprous, white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous." (verses 9-10).

HASHEM acts as if angry, so as to make His point to Miriam and Aaron. His voice is silent and the cloud disappears. He has removed his presence from the offending siblings. When He leaves, Miriam is punished with leprosy (Hebrew מִצְרַעַת).

The leprosy is snow-white and is all over her body. This is important, since this is a kind of leprosy that Vayikrah (Leviticus) says is clean. Aaron, as priest, is a witness and declare her to be leprous (Vayikrah 13:2-3). Perhaps she is turned white to contrast with her opening statement against Moses' wife Zipporah. It seems a fitting visual reminder to her and the people to not speak Lashon Hara. Aaron, having remained silent while listening to Miriam's complaints against Moses, was not punished in the same way Miriam was. His punishment is to see his sister thus afflicted. It is hard to say which one had the worse punishment.

Additionally, Aaron is forced to ask Moses for help, instead of praying to HASHEM himself. "And Aaron said to Moses, 'Oh, my lord, I beg you, lay not the sin upon us, because we have done foolishly, and because we have sinned' " (verse 11). Aaron, though he remained silent, sinned by listening to Miriam and not speaking up in Moses' defense. Aaron appears to be asking for Moses to forgive them and interceded on Miriam and his behalf. Aaron continues (verse 12) " 'Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb'." Aaron is asking for Moses to ask HASHEM to remove the leprosy from Miriam. The image he uses is that of a stillborn child, very graphic of the flaking skin Miriam has (perhaps

psoriasis?).

Moses is not immune to his sister's suffering (verse 13):" And Moses cried (וַיִּאָמֶר) to the Lord, saying, 'Heal her now, O G-d, I beseech you'." His prayer, unlike the 40 day prayer on behalf of the Israelites after the golden calf incident, is brief and to the point. HASHEM responds immediately to His servant Moses (verse 14) "And the L-rd said to Moses, 'If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? Let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again'." Miriam will not be punished all her life, but only for seven days. Some commentators, based on the fact that a leper is isolated for a minimum of 14 days in Vayikra 13:13,17, say that HASHEM cured Miriam's leprosy immediately, but isolated her for seven days. At any rate, Moses' prayer is answered, while Miriam is still punished for her actions. The camp does not move again until Miriam is brought back into the camp. Bamidbar 12:15 "And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days; and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again.16. And afterward the people removed from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran."

Chapter 12 of Bamidbar is a complex story about sibling rivalry and love, desire for power, prophesy, and Lashon Hara. HASHEM clearly states Moses' special position as His servant. Even though he is now sharing some of his power as leader with the seventy elders, Moses still has a unique position. As Divarim (Deuteronomy) states (34:10) "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses--whom the L-rd singled out, face to face..."

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