

A BED OF POTENTIAL ROSES

by Rabbi Label Lam

A troubling episode is reported in the Torah at the end of this week's Torah portion. Miriam, the sister of Moshe, is stricken with tzoraas (a skin disease) for having spoken improperly about Moshe. That, itself, is not so troubling. We live in a world of consequences. There is no executive privilege protecting relatives of great people. Just the opposite is true. Miriam is held to an extremely high standard. In spite of all the mitigating circumstances, that she loved Moshe, intended him no harm, misunderstood the true nature of his situation, Moshe was not offended, she only spoke to Aaron the other sibling in private, still Miriam was smacked with a rugged fine. For seven days the entire camp stood still till she recovered from her grave illness.

That's not the disturbing point though. Finally we are left with a special Mitzvah for all time to remember what G-d did to Miriam in the desert. She makes one misstep and becomes the poster child for slander for all time. Isn't the mentioning of her error also a violation of the laws of slander? We are bidden not to talk badly about the living or the dead.

Someone came to a great Rebbe for some advice. When the Rebbe looked at the fellow he could tell that he had drifted far from observance of Mitzvos (Torah commandments). The Rebbe questioned him about his lifestyle and personal activities and his worst suspicions were confirmed. With a look of deep abounding love the Rebbe told him, "I am jealous of you. If a person repents and changes his ways out of love for G-d, then his sins, his worst violations and affronts can be translated into Mitzvos. You have a huge potential of converting your mistakes into merits."

The fellow looked mockingly at the Rebbe and answered, "If that's the case, Rebbe, when I come back next year you'll be even more jealous of me." The Rebbe with a stern look now rebuked him, "If that's what you think, that the gift of teshuvah-returning will give you a license for your erring ways, it won't work. The Talmud teaches that if one says he will sin and then repent he isn't given sufficient resources to make it. It just won't happen."

How does it work that spiritual debt can be translated into credit? It's really miraculous but let's understand what we can with the following brief story. A fabulously wealthy King fumbled his prize diamond while showing it off to some guests and was inconsolably saddened that a long deep scratch was etched into one of the diamond's once beautiful and pristine facets.

He offered a handsome reward for any person who could repair the damaged stone. Jeweler after jeweler gave him more reason to regret his foolish handling of the stone. One day a certain clever

craftsman agreed to try, and the King was finally overjoyed with the result. The scratch was cavernous and permanent so he etched the fine appearance of petals and a beautiful rose atop the line making it a wonderfully unique and a masterful piece of work.

Miriam for sure was given a great gem by having her name associated with this mishap forever. Merits, our sages have taught, are brought about through the meritorious. Miriam was one of the most meritorious people in our history. She was the one who placed and followed baby Moshe's basket in the reeds to be rescued ensuring his safety and our future as well. That's plenty but there's much more too.

Miriam now benefits from every person for all time that might pause before speaking in memory of what occurred to her in the desert. The bouquets of roses that flower atop that single slip of the tongue and for having repented accordingly are amongst the most beautiful she ever could have acquired in this world. We should be forever envious of this accomplishment of hers while we sleep comfortably in our own bed of potential roses.

Good Shabbos!

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