

MUST NOT BUST THE TRUST

by Rabbi Label Lam

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, "Has HASHEM spoken only to Moshe?! Hasn't He spoken to us too?!" And HASHEM heard. Now this man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth. *HASHEM suddenly said to Moshe, Aaron and Miriam, "Go out, all three of you, to the Tent of Meeting!"* And all three went out. *HASHEM descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tent. He called to Aaron and Miriam, and they both went out. He said, "Please listen to My words. If there be prophets among you, I'll HASHEM will make Myself known to him in a vision; I will speak to him in a dream. Not so is My servant Moshe; he is faithful throughout My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of HASHEM. So why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moshe? The anger of HASHEM flared against them and He left. The cloud departed from above the Tent, and behold, Miriam was afflicted with Tzaraas, as snow. Then Aaron turned to Miriam and behold, she was afflicted with Tzaraas.* (Bamidbar 12:1-10)

Like forensic scientists we are invited to this subtle crime scene to figure out, after the fact, what had occurred. With help from Rashi and the Sages we begin to unravel the facts of the case. Miriam and Aaron assumed Moshe was on their level of prophecy. They expressed sincere concern about his extra measure of piety that he had separated from his wife Tzipora. What they failed to realize is that he was on call and needed to be ready to receive a prophetic message 24/7.

Only after the matter is spelled out to Aaron and Miriam is the punishment meted out. We have an open window into and a model of "the ways of HASHEM". Rashi tells us, "After He had informed them of their transgression, He issued a decree of excommunication against them. All the more so, should a mortal not become angry with his friend before he informs him of his offense." — Rashi

Why should a person explain the nature of the violation before expressing anger and carrying out a punishment? Maybe the answer is too obvious already. 1) Firstly, it slows down the action reaction of response. 2) A punishment is not an act of vengeance for the past, but rather it is an educational tool for the future. If someone does not have clarity on what they did wrong, correcting behavior becomes a mission impossible. 3) If the recipient of the penalty does not understand the nature of his crime not only will he not learn a lesson but he will feel resentment, assuming the chastisement was arbitrary or an abuse of power. They will begin to doubt the judgment of the authority or worse their own perception of reality. 4) Wrongly assuming one understands the reason for your upset can lead to a total breakdown in the relationship. This happens happens all the time!

Norman Raymond Frederick Maier was an American experimental psychologist who was famous for inducing neurosis in rats by switching the reward and punishment trigger. Every time the creature figured out which door would deliver a prize the next time that door gave a shock. The door that had been booby-trapped to deliver a shock was then converted into the door that delivered a treat.

In search of food, the rat approaches each door cautiously not knowing whether it will receive a jolt or a goody. Professor Maier describes how the rat eventually sits equidistant from the two doors and resigns to starve rather than risk getting zapped. At this point even I begin to feel sorry for the poor rat.

Life is filled with teachable moments. Everyone has a need to know "why" so they can make sense out of a situation and figure out a better "how". Then even an affliction can be filled with meaning and feel like a hug. Kids who come to my office know already that they are not in trouble- that is if they learn a lesson and improve. If HASHEM, the ultimate authority, truly deserving of absolute trust spells out the reasons first, then we mere mortals **must not bust the trust**.