

MOSHE LIES LOW

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Toward the end of parshas Behalosecha a very unfortunate incident occurs. Miriam, Moshe's older sister, grows impatient with what she perceives as Moshe's disregard for his wife's feelings, and is vocally critical of him. Moshe Rabbeinu had separated from his wife, Tziporah, in order to avail himself completely to Hashem and to Israel. In Miriam's eyes, her brother had done so of his own accord. She sensed in his actions a "holier than thou" attitude, and said as much to Aaron, her other brother. In fact, Moshe had no ulterior motives. He had separated from Tziporah at Hashem's behest. Hashem was swift with His harsh criticism of Miriam (12:6-8):

Hashem said: "Hear now My words. If there shall be prophets among you, in a vision shall I, Hashem, make Myself known; in a dream shall I speak. Not so with My servant Moshe; in My entire house, he [alone] is trusted. In a clear vision do I speak to him... he gazes at the image of Hashem. So why did you not fear to speak against My servant, Moshe?"

Miriam was instantly afflicted with tzaraas - a physical malady which, according to our Sages, afflicts those who slander their friends and relatives. Aaron is devastated. He beseeches Moshe to do something (12:11-12):

Aaron said to Moshe, "I beg you, my master, do not cast a sin upon us, for we have been foolish and we have sinned. Let her not be like a corpse, like one who leaves his mother's womb with half his flesh consumed!"

Moshe acquiesces (12:13): Moshe cried out to Hashem, saying, "Please, Hashem, heal her now!"

Rashi poses the obvious question: Why did Moshe pray so succinctly? Is there no more he could come up with for his sister's sake than an abrupt, five-word prayer? Rashi's answer is simply baffling: Moshe did not pray at length, says Rashi, so that people wouldn't say, "His sister is in pain - and he's standing and prolonging his prayers!" What type of objection could people possibly have had if Moshe would have spent another few minutes praying for her wellbeing? Would a lengthy prayer not demonstrate his love and concern for his sister?

The young man didn't know what else to do. He was suffering from a degenerative disease that grew worse with each passing week, and not a single one of the doctors he had gone to could successfully diagnose his illness - let alone find a cure. All was not entirely hopeless, however. In happier and healthier days he had been a talmid (student) of the holy Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin zt"l. As a last resort, he decided he would make the trip to Radin and ask his

Rebbe for a blessing.

The young man arrived in Radin totally exhausted from his journey, but his longing to once again gaze upon the holy face of the Chofetz Chaim was stronger than his tiredness. So, as soon as he got off the train, he made his way to his Rebbe's home.

The Chofetz Chaim remembered the talmid well. His heart ached to see him in such a state, and he wholeheartedly agreed to help - but on one condition. "You must never divulge to anyone," said the Chofetz Chaim, "what is about to happen."

The young man, of course, agreed to the terms. The Chofetz Chaim instructed the talmid to travel to the town of a certain little-known rabbi. "Tell him exactly what you told me," said the Chofetz Chaim. "Ask him for a beracha, which he will surely give you, and with Hashem's help you will be healed."

The young man did not have to be told twice. He found lodgings in Radin for the night, and the next morning he rose early and boarded the first train to the town of the mysterious rabbi. By the afternoon, he sat with this rabbi, who listened with great sympathy to his plight. He gave him a heartfelt beracha for a refuah shleima (full recovery), just as the Chofetz Chaim had predicted.

After so much travel, the man needed a good rest. He found simple lodgings in town and slept well that night, but the next morning he found it difficult to get up. He therefore remained at the small inn for another day, and another. The rest began to have a positive affect on him, and after a week he began to feel a little stronger. Slowly, day by day, he could feel his previous strength coming back. After thirty days had passed, his illness had almost completely disappeared. Ten days later, he was in such good health and spirits that it was almost impossible to believe that less than two months before he had been knocking on death's door.

Years passed; he bore a family of his own. Yet despite the colds and flues that came up, he never once said a word about his miraculous recovery.

Twenty years after his illness, his sister-in-law became ill with a strange disease that baffled the doctors. After hearing the details of her symptoms, he realized she was suffering from the exact same illness that had afflicted him so many years ago. But what could he do? He remembered the instructions of the Chofetz Chaim, and he kept silent.

His sister-in-law grew steadily weaker. The man's wife became distraught. In the back of her mind, she remembered that her husband had once mentioned a miraculous recovery that he had experienced for an illness in his youth. She begged her husband to tell her more - perhaps what had helped him might also cure her sister. But he refused to say a word. His wife, however, continued to plead with him, and in time his defences crumbled.

After careful consideration, he came to the conclusion that he would tell all. After all, with his sister-in-law hovering between life and death, it was within his rights to reveal the secret. He sat his wife down and told her about the trip he had made so many years ago to the home of the Chofetz Chaim,

and subsequently to the city of the mysterious rabbi. He described to her how he began to recuperate from his illness almost immediately after receiving this rabbi's bracha. His wife found hope in his story; she begged her husband to once again make the journey to the same rabbi.

As they spoke, however, he felt the beginnings of a headache. As the night wore on, the pain intensified. By the end of the week, he

realized he was once again in the grips of the same illness that had plagued him twenty years ago. "I must go to Radin while I am still able to travel," he told his wife, "and seek out the advice of the Chofetz Chaim. He will tell me what to do for myself, as well as for your sister."

The Chofetz Chaim was already elderly and frail, but he recognized his talmid instantly. His initial pleasure at seeing his former student quickly vanished, though, as he realized what had happened.

"I'm sorry but I can't help you this time," the Chofetz Chaim told him. "You see - back then I was still young and strong, and I was able to fast for 40 days on your behalf. But now I'm too frail and old to take that kind of fasting upon myself." It had all been a ruse - to hide the true source of the man's salvation.

Perhaps this is what Rashi meant. Moshe did not pray at length so that people wouldn't say, "His sister is in pain, and he's standing and prolonging his prayers!" Moshe didn't want the credit. Were he to have stood and prayed his heart out at length, he would surely have been "the talk of the town" (Miriam's affliction went away after a paltry seven days). And for Moshe, whom the Torah describes as "extremely humble from all man upon the face of the earth" (12:3), nothing could be more abhorrent. He took care of business quickly, and compacted his feelings into a short but heartfelt prayer that broke open the heavens and aroused the Almighty's response.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored by R' Shlomo Eliezer Isaac, "in memory of my sisters, Tzipporah and Hadas, daughters of my father R' Moshe Yehudah a"h and my mother Piniah a"h, who were killed al kiddush Hashem 14 Sivan 5704. And in memory of my father's mother, Hadas bas R' Shraga, who passed away 11 Sivan 5697. And in memory of my mother's father, Eliezer ben R' Chaim who passed away 22 Sivan 5697. And in memory of my mother's mother, Esther bas R' Yitzchak who died al kiddush Hashem 22 Iyar 5704.

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