

REMEMBER WHAT G-D DID TO MIRIAM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 369, Bris Millah That Causes Chilul Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

Remember What G-d Did To Miriam

Both Parshas Tazria and Parshas Metzora deal extensively with the laws of Tzaraas. The Talmud [Eruchin 15b] says that the plague of Tzaraas is a consequence of the sin of Lashon Harah [improper speech]. Tzaraas was a 'miraculous' disease, which occurred when the Bais Hamikdash was still standing. If a person spoke evil about someone else, first his home was affected. If he did not repent, his clothes were affected. If he still did not repent, his body was ultimately affected. He had to separate from civilization. He was publicly proclaimed an "impure person" as a result of his evil speech.

In Parshas Ki Teizeh, the Torah writes "Guard against the plague of Tzaraas, guard exceedingly and do all that will be instructed to you by the Kohanim, the Levites. As I commanded them, thus you shall observe to do." [Devorim 24:8] Immediately after this pasuk, the Torah commands [24:9] "Remember that which HaShem your G-d did to Miriam on the road at the time you went out of Egypt."

Miriam spoke "lashon hara" about her brother. She was stricken with "Tzaraas". As a result, she was sent outside the camp. The Torah is reminding us about this event.

When Miriam was sent outside the camp as a result of her "Tzaraas", the entire camp waited for her for seven days. No one traveled. No one moved forward. Everyone waited for Miriam. [Bamidbar 12:1-16]

Why did they wait for her? Why didn't they move on and force her to catch up with them later? Our Sages teach us that the Jewish people waited for Miriam as a 'reward' or 'payback' to her for having waited for her brother, Moshe, when his basket was placed in the Nile [Shemos 2:4]. Now the Jewish People waited for her.

If we were in Miriam's shoes, we might very well have not wanted such a 'payback'. If she had the option, she might very well have preferred that the Jewish nation travel on without her, with the intent of "catching up with them" later. Most likely, the last thing she would have wanted would have been to cause everyone to wait for a whole week with nowhere to go. Everyone would be asking one another "Why aren't we moving?" The answer would be "It is Miriam's fault. It is because she spoke evil words about her brother." What kind of 'reward' or proper 'payback' is this for her?

The answer to this question can be found in a passage in Ramba"m in his Yad HaChazakah [Tum'as Tzaraas 16:10]. The Rambam does not usually launch into philosophical discussions in his legal code (Mishneh Torah), but in this case he writes as follows:

"...and concerning this matter we are warned in the Torah. 'Remember that which HaShem your G-d did to Miriam on the road'. The Torah is saying, contemplate what happened to the prophetess Miriam. She spoke about her younger brother who she loved and helped raise. She had endangered her own life to save him from the Nile. She (furthermore) did not speak malicious evil about him. She just erred by equating his greatness to that of other prophets (who do not separate themselves from their wives). And Moshe was not bothered by any of her comments, as it is written 'And the man Moshe was extremely modest'. And nevertheless she was immediately punished with Tzaraas. Kal v'Chomer [how much more so] how great a punishment will be coming to those wicked fools who frequently speak great and wondrous (criticisms).

The Rambam is saying that Miriam's Lashon HaRah is really not typical Lashon HaRah. It was not said maliciously. It was not said to harm anyone. It did not harm anyone. It was an innocent mistake. But such is the power of Lashon HaRah -- whether it is ill intended or well intended, it is like poison. Regardless of the reason why poison is taken, it kills. The same is true regarding Lashon HaRah.

Therefore, when the Torah says "Sit out in the wilderness and remember what Miriam did for Moshe (when she waited for his basket by the Nile)," the Torah is not denigrating Miriam. She is not being criticized. She is righteous. The Torah is saying, "while you are waiting for Miriam, keep in mind the destructive power of Lashon HaRah." If what she just did is considered Lashon HaRah and is deserving of such a punishment, certainly how much more so regarding denigrating Lashon HaRah.

Miriam was truly righteous and had nothing about which to be embarrassed. Her action was really not a sin at all. It was just a 'mistake'. And yet we see the powerful consequences. This is the lesson of 'Remember that which HaShem your G-d did to Miriam'.

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