

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BEHA'ALOTEKHA

The Episode of the Cushite Woman
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A. "For he had taken a Cushite wife"

The Torah attaches great importance to the brief narrative concerning the Cushite woman (*Bamidbar* 12:1-16), going so far as to exhort, "Remember that which the Lord your God did to Miriam, on the way, when you came out of Egypt" (*Devarim* 24:9).¹ This narrative raises a number of difficulties:

(1) Miriam spoke, and Aharon, about Moshe, on account of the Cushite wife whom he had taken, for he had taken a Cushite wife. (2) And they said, "Did God then speak only with Moshe? Did He not speak also with us?" And God heard it. (3) And the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than all men upon the face of the earth.²

Who is this Cushite woman who is the subject of the conversation between Miriam and Aharon, and what is the problem that they are discussing? What is the connection between the two complaints that Miriam and Aharon raise against Moshe? Why is Miriam more dominant in the first verse, while in the second verse, "they said" - collectively? Further on in the narrative, we encounter more questions: Why is only Miriam punished? And why specifically with *tzara'at*?

We shall try to answer these questions through a study of the narrative text.

Let us start by addressing the first complaint, concerning the Cushite woman. Who is she? Rashi, enlisting the *midrash*, explains that both complaints pertain to Tziphora, who is referred to here as a "Cushite woman."³ According to this interpretation, Moshe had separated himself from Tziphora, his wife, and Miriam and Aharon claim that in committing himself to celibacy, he was acting improperly, since God has spoken with them, too, but they had not consequently been required to abstain from marital relations.

This interpretation is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it is difficult to find any basis for identifying Tziphora as a "Cushite woman." She is a Midianite, and the justifications that Rashi supplies for this appellation for her (see n. 3) appear to represent homiletical lessons rather than exegesis (*inter alia*

because nowhere in the text is there any mention of Tziphora's beauty.) Second, the text mentions only the *taking* (marrying) of the Cushite wife – "on account of the Cushite wife whom he had taken, for he had taken a Cushite wife" – and it is therefore difficult to posit that their complaint concerned Moshe *separating* himself from her.

It would seem, therefore, that on the literal level of the text, Tziphora is not involved here. Moshe had indeed taken a Cushite wife, and this union, in and of itself, is what disturbed Miriam and Aharon.⁴ Seemingly, marrying a Cushite was scandalous – both because of the different skin color (as the prophet formulates it, "Shall a Cushite change his skin, or a leopard his spots?" – *Yirmiyahu* 13:23), and because of the lineage from Cush, eldest son of Cham, the father of Canaan, who was cursed: "A slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (*Bereishit* 9:25).⁵

B. Did [God] not speak also with us?

In light of the above, it would seem that the grievance raised in verse 2 refers to a different matter entirely. Rashbam explains:

In other words, they said further concerning Moshe: "What reason has he to glorify himself over us? After all, God spoke through us, too, to Israel!"

This claim, seemingly expressing a sense of unfair discrimination, must be understood against the background of the events of the preceding chapter. There, Moshe had declared:

"I cannot bear alone, myself, this entire nation, for it is too heavy for me." (11:14)

In the wake of this declaration, seventy elders are selected to share the leadership of the nation, and they are even granted a one-time prophecy. This leads to the upset concerning Eldad and Medad, who prophesize in the camp instead of before Moshe. Yehoshua views this as an affront to Moshe's honor, but Moshe responds:

"Are you jealous for my sake? If only all of God's people were prophets, that God would put His spirit upon them!" (11:29)

Moshe feels no insult to his honor. However, it seems that Aharon and Miriam do feel slighted. Thus far, the nation has been led by the three of them, as described by the prophet:

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. (*Mikha* 6:4)

¹ This command is listed in *siddurim* as one of the "six remembrances," along with such central topics as remembering Shabbat and erasing Amalek.

² All verses cited here are from *Bamidbar* 12, unless otherwise specified.

³ Rashi's commentary as it appears in the standard printed edition offers three explanations for this appellation. Common to all of them is the assertion that the text means to tell us that Tziphora was beautiful: (1) "[The appellation] tells us that her beauty was universally recognized, just as everyone acknowledges the blackness of a Cushite; (2) The numerical value of the word 'Cushite' (*kushit*) is equivalent to that of "beautiful" (*yefat mar'eh*)...; (3) She is called 'Cushite' because of her beauty, just as a person might call his handsome son 'Cush' so that the evil eye will not rule over him." Notably, the manuscripts of Rashi's commentary indicate that only the third explanation is original, while the first two are later additions, based on other *midrashim*.

⁴ Rashbam also maintains that the woman referred to here is not Tziphora, but he understands the marriage in question as having taken place in Moshe's distant past, based on the *midrash* concerning Moshe's doings following his flight from Egypt: "As written in the Chronicles of Moshe Rabbeinu, who ruled over the land of Cush for forty years, and took one solitary queen but did not lie with her, as it is written there. But they [Miriam and Aharon] did not know, when speaking of him, that he had not had relations with her."

⁵ Indeed, the servitude of the children of Cush has been an historical phenomenon. Pictures of black slaves appear in ancient Egyptian paintings, and in *Tanakh* as well we find "*Eved Melekh*, the Cushite, a eunuch..." (*Yirmiyahu* 38:7).

Alongside Moshe in charge of leading the people there is also Aharon, the *Kohen Gadol*, and Miriam, who leads the women, as evidenced in the Song of the Sea (see *Shemot* 15:20-21). But now Moshe has declared, "I cannot bear myself alone this entire nation" – ignoring completely the role that his elder brother and sister have played. Moreover, Aharon and Miriam are the only individuals other than Moshe who have thus far been called "prophets."⁶ Now, the seventy elders have been granted prophecy, with the result that Aharon and Miriam have been left outside of the official leadership of *Am Yisrael*. (And Moshe has gone even further, declaring, "If only all of God's people were prophets.") This diminishing of the status of Aharon and Miriam would seem to be the root of their grievance concerning Moshe's unique status.

This helps us to understand the special involvement of Miriam, who appears to be the dominant figure in this episode. On the words, "Miriam spoke, and Aharon," Rashi comments, "She spoke out first;" she is therefore punished. An allusion to Miriam is to be found in Moshe's words to God, in the previous chapter:

"Did I conceive this whole nation, or did I give birth to it, that You should say to me, 'Carry it close to you, as a nursing father carries a nursing child?'" (11:12).

The same images of pregnancy, birth and nursing appear in the story of Moshe's birth:

The woman conceived and she gave birth to a son... And his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter: "Shall I go and summons for you a wet-nurse from the Hebrew, that she may nurse the child"... And Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Take this child with you, and nurse him for me, and I shall give your wages." So the woman took the child, and nursed him." (*Shemot* 2:2, 7, 9)

Later on, Moshe is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. Through the linguistic parallels, the Torah hints at Miriam's acute emotional sensitivity with regard to Moshe, having once played such a critical role in his rescue and early welfare. Indeed, *Midrash Tadshe (Beraita de-Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair)*, teaches explicitly that the foundation of Miriam's behavior here is an unjustified feeling of personal insult:

We find that there are three sins that cause *tzara'at* to adhere to people: for senseless jealousy, as was the case with Miriam...⁷

From our discussion thus far, one might conclude that there is no real connection between the two complaints raised by Miriam and Aharon against Moshe. However, the Torah creates a very clear connection through the use of the expression "*le-dabber be-*," meaning "to speak against" or "to speak with." The root "*d-b-r*" serves as a key word in this episode, appearing in our chapter seven times. Six of these appearances involve the expression "*dibber be-*": the first three refer to the speech between Miriam and Aharon, while the other three refer to God's speech to them, which we will examine below. (The seventh

appearance of the root appears in between these two groups, where God declares, "Hear now My words [*devarai*]..."). Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe ["*va-tedabber Miriam ve-Aharon be-Moshe*"], arguing that God had spoken not just with him but also with them. They speak badly about Moshe. (A similar use of the expression occurs in *Bamidbar* 21:7 – "We have sinned, for we spoke against God and against you" [*dibbarnu ba-Hashem u-vekha*].) When God responds to them, the expression "*le-dabber be-*" is used in the sense of God "speaking with" – i.e., prophecy. Nevertheless, the connection is clear: Miriam and Aharon are jealous of Moshe, believing that God has *spoken with* them in the same way that He has spoken *with* him; as a result, they *speak of* (or "against") him, with disaffection.

Even before God speaks, the Torah responds (but in the opposite manner) to the grievances offered by Miriam and Aharon. Concerning the Cushite woman, the Torah affirms the facts: "For he had taken a Cushite wife." But following their questioning of Moshe's status, the Torah states simply:

And [or but] the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than all men upon the face of the earth.

The intention here seems to be a rejection of the claim that Moshe is motivated by any sort of personal interest. The *vav (Ve-ha-ish Moshe...)* is used here in the sense of contrast: from the words of Miriam and Aharon one might conclude that they are accusing him of arrogance or haughtiness, but in truth Moshe is exceedingly humble and acts altogether without personal bias or interest.

C. God's response

God's response is preceded by an act that differentiates Moshe from Miriam and Aharon:

(4) And God spoke suddenly to Moshe and to Aharon and to Miriam: "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." And the three of them went out. (5) And God descended in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and He called to Aharon and Miriam, and the two of them went out.

The tent of meeting to which the three siblings are summoned is not the *Mishkan*, but rather the tent which Moshe had pitched outside of the camp:

Moshe would take a tent and pitch it for himself outside of the camp, at a distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting... And it was, when Moshe came to the tent, that the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance to the tent, and [God] would speak with Moshe. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, all the people stood and prostrated themselves, each at the entrance of his own tent. And God spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his neighbor... (*Shemot* 33:7-11)

At this stage, the reader senses a certain tension. Does God mean to side with Miriam and Aharon, and to reveal Himself to them as He had, in the previous chapter, to the seventy elders? ("Gather for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and its officers, and you shall take them to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you.") However, it soon becomes apparent that the gathering in the tent of meeting is meant to highlight the difference between Aharon and Miriam, on one hand, and Moshe, on the other:

And God descended in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the

⁶ In several places, God has spoken "to Moshe and to Aharon," and in three instances to Aharon alone (see *Shemot* 4:27; *Vayikra* 10:8; *Bamidbar* 18:1, 8, 20). In addition, prior to the Exodus, God had told Moshe, "Aharon, your brother, will be your prophet (spokesman) [*neviakha*]" (*Shemot* 7:1; see Ibn Ezra ad loc.). See also *Shmuel* I 2:27 and the commentators there. Miriam is referred to explicitly as "Miriam, the prophetess" at the Song of the Sea (*Shemot* 15:20).

⁷ We may perhaps find the textual source for this *midrash* in Moshe's previous words to Yehoshua: "Are you jealous for my sake?"

entrance to the tent of meeting, and He called to Aharon and Miriam, and the two of them went out.

God removes Aharon and Miriam; in the tent – which represents the face-to-face encounter with God – Moshe remains alone.

This idea is further clarified in God's words that follow, drawing a clear distinction between the nature of His revelation to Aharon and Miriam and the nature of His revelation to Moshe:

(6) He said: "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. (7) Not so My servant, Moshe: in all My house he is trusted. (8) I speak with him mouth to mouth, and clearly, not in riddles, and he sees the likeness of God; why, then, were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?"

Although Miriam and Aharon are also defined as prophets, there is a fundamental difference between God's speech to them and His speech to Moshe. For them, God makes Himself known to them "in a vision," while for Moshe, prophecy comes "mouth to mouth." This comparison gives rise to the question, "Why, then, were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?!"

The grievance and the response thus create a perfect chiasmic structure:

1. Miriam spoke, and Aharon, against Moshe, concerning the Cushite woman whom he had taken...
2. They said, "Did God then speak only with Moshe?"
3. Did He not speak also with us?" And God heard it...
4. He said: "Hear now My words:
 - 3a. If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream.
 - 2a. Not so My servant, Moshe: in all My house he is trusted. I speak with him mouth to mouth, and clearly, not in riddles, and he sees the likeness of God;
 - 1a. Why, then, were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?"

The outermost branches (1-1a) address the first grievance raised by Miriam and Aharon, in which they "speak against Moshe." The next-to-outermost branches (2-2a) deal with God's speech to Moshe, and the inner branches (3-3a) address God's speech to Aharon and Miriam. At the center is God's introductory phrase, "Hear, now, My words" – listen to Me and see the matter as it really is. In this way, God connects the two complaints of Miriam and Aharon. They had maintained that they were on the same level as Moshe, and could therefore permit themselves to "speak against him." Had they understood that there was an essential difference between his level and their own, and that God "spoke with him" in a completely different manner, they would have feared to "speak against him."⁸

Indeed, careful examination of the verses shows that God says nothing at all on the subject of the Cushite wife, indicating that the complaint in this regard is not worthy of any

⁸ The difference between them is also emphasized in the way in which Moshe is referred to in the two outer branches: Miriam and Aharon call him simply "Moshe," while God twice refers to him as "My servant, Moshe." Through this, too, God may be alluding to their mistake, as if to say: it is only through your lack of understanding that Moshe is a servant of God that you permit yourselves to argue against him that he took a wife from among the descendants of Cham, the servant tribes.

response at all. As to the issue itself, it appears that the Torah sees nothing wrong with the fact that Moshe had married a Cushite wife.

D. The punishment

God's rebuke is followed by a punishment:

(9) And God's anger burned against them, and He departed. (10) And the cloud moved from the tent, and behold – Miriam was leprous like snow, and Aharon turned to Miriam, and behold, she was leprous.

What is the nature of this punishment? The *tzara'at* seems a fitting punishment for both complaints jointly. First, there is the contrast between "leprous like snow" and the "Cushite." Miriam, who had complained against Moshe for having taken an unusual wife, was punished by becoming unusual herself – in the opposite direction. Second, the essence of *tzara'at* is the removal of the sufferer from his place, as a result of his mistaken belief that he is worthy of a better and higher status. This is what happened to Uzziyahu, king of Yehuda (see *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 26:16-23), whose punishment is described in similar language to the episode of Miriam:

And Azaryahu, the chief Kohen, turned to him, as did all the *kohanim*, and behold – his forehead was leprous. (verse 20)

To a certain degree, the punishment of Gechazi (*Melakhim* II 5) may be understood in the same way.

Further on in our *parasha* (verse 14), God compares Miriam's punishment to spitting in her face. This image may be understood on the basis of another *parasha* where it assumes literal proportions – the law of *chalitza*:

And she shall spit in his face and answer and say, "So shall be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house." (*Devarim* 25:9)

The similarity here lies not only in the spitting in the face, but also in the broader context of the proper attitude towards a brother. The *yabam* (brother of the deceased) who refuses to build up his brother's house by marrying his widow and bearing a child who will bear his brother's name is an example of someone who sets his own personal interest before his concern for his brother; the same fault was manifest in Miriam, as well.

E. Repentance

The rebuke and punishment are immediately followed by *teshuva* – repentance:

(11) Aharon said to Moshe: "I pray you, my lord, please do not lay sin upon us, for our having acted foolishly, and for that we have sinned. (12) Let her not, I pray you, be as one who is dead; whose flesh is half eaten upon his emerging from his mother's womb."

Although it was Miriam who spoke out first, and she is the one who is punished, Aharon takes responsibility, acknowledges their joint sin, and asks Moshe to help Miriam. This appeal to Moshe represents an immediate *tikkun* – repair – for the sin, both in terms of its formulation ("I pray you, my lord"), and in the acknowledgment that it is Moshe who is capable of helping Miriam.⁹

⁹ The image "as one who is dead, whose flesh is half eaten upon his emerging from his mother's womb" is enigmatic. Rashi suggests that the

Moshe holds no grudge against his siblings, and is quick to offer a brief prayer for his sister:

(13) Moshe cried out to God, saying, "I pray You, God, heal her, I pray You."

God's response is,

(14) God said to Moshe: "Were her father to have spat in her face, would she not be shamed for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and afterwards she shall be gathered back in."

The contrast between Aharon's appeal and God's response is interesting. Aharon mentions "her mother," evoking associations of empathy and compassion, while God says, "Were her father to have spat in her face."¹⁰ In other words, even if Moshe is forgiving of her insult, owing to family closeness, God Himself will not forego Moshe's honor. Therefore, God does not erase the punishment entirely, but rather shortens it: instead of eternal *tzara'at* (like that of Gechazi and Uzziya), Miriam is shut out of the camp for just seven days.

In contrast to Aharon's response, Miriam is silent. Apparently, this silence expresses her acceptance of God's judgment (like "And Aharon was silent" – *Vayikra* 10:3). Having instigated the sin, she does not see herself as being entitled to ask for a lessening of her punishment. It is in this light that the conclusion of the unit, which speaks in Miriam's honor, should be understood:

(15) So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days, and the people did not journey until Miriam was gathered back in. (16) And afterwards the people journeyed from Chatzerot and they encamped in the wilderness of Paran.

Thus, this episode with its dismal beginnings turns into an inspiring lesson. It teaches us about the greatness of Moshe, who was more humble than all men and who never entertained for a moment the idea of taking revenge on his siblings for speaking against him. It teaches us about the severity of *lashon ha-ra* – which, even when it appears in the guise of "ideology," may still be tainted with personal interests. It also teaches the praiseworthy example set by Aharon and Miriam, who are not ashamed to acknowledge their sin and to recognize their mistake.¹¹

text actually means to say "our flesh" and "our mother's womb," so as to suggest that if Miriam is leprous, a state considered comparable to death, then it is as though the flesh of Moshe and Aharon is half eaten, as it were, since their sister – their own flesh and blood – is afflicted with *tzara'at*. As Rashi summarizes the meaning of statement, "Since [Miriam, too] emerged from our mother's womb, it is as though half of our own flesh has been consumed."

¹⁰ Thus, there are two sets of contrasting images in this narrative: Cushite – snow, and mother – father.

¹¹ In conclusion, it is worth noting an important discrepancy between the literal reading of the text, as addressed above, and the *midrash Chazal* (discussed briefly above, as cited by Rashi). Aside from the difference between the literal text and the *midrash* as to the extent of the sin involved, there is also a significant contrast between them on the matter of sexual abstinence in Divine service. According to the *midrash Chazal*, Divine service on the level of Moshe requires complete abstinence. From the literal reading, however, it would seem that even the greatest prophet is permitted to marry (a Cushite wife, at that), and that his separation from her at the time of the Revelation at Sinai (see *Devarim* 5:26-27 and Rashi on verse 8 in our chapter) was only a temporary measure, not a practice extending over many years.