

Miriam's Slander: Why Publicize the Sin?

At the end of this week's *parsha*, *Parshas Beha'alos'cha*, the Torah tells us that Miriam and Aharon spoke about their brother Moshe, in regard to the wife he took (and that he subsequently separated from, *by instruction from and command of G-d*). For the *lashon harah* they spoke about Moshe, which Miriam initiated, she was subsequently stricken with the affliction of *tzara'as*, and was sent out of the Israelite camp for seven days. During these seven days, Moshe offered a brief prayer on her behalf, so that she would heal, and the people did not journey from their encampment, but waited for her till she was cured from the *tzara'as* (see Bamidbar 12).

It is difficult for us to understand how Miriam and Aharon, two leaders of the generation - the *Prophetess* Miriam and the *Kohen Gadol* Aharon - could be blamed for speaking, only *to each other*, of their younger brother Moshe and his separation from his wife.

However, the Torah does not attempt to hide this incident from us, but rather gives us full details, and then further commands us to remember this incident well: *זכור את אשר עשה ה' - אלקיך למרים בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים - Remember what Hashem your G-d did to Miriam, on the way when you were leaving Egypt* (Devarim 24:9).

Though we cannot fully understand that two such righteous, pure, holy, leaders and *ovdei Hashem* were punished for speaking *lashon harah*, which seems to have been out of concern for Moshe and his family life, nevertheless, the Torah commands us to know about the incident, remember what happened and *learn from it*.

The Ramban (Devarim 25:17) powerfully comments, and notes the need for *publicizing* Miriam's sin, though we might think it should be concealed to save her shame. On the contrary!

וכן במעשה מרים נצטוינו להודיעו לבנינו ולספר בו לדורות ואע"פ שהיה ראוי גם להסתירו שלא לדבר בגנותן של צדיקים אבל צוה הכתוב להודיעו ולגלותו כדי שתהא אזהרת לשון הרע שומה בפיהם מפני שהוא חטא גדול וגורם רעות רבות ובני אדם נכשלים בו תמיד כמו שאמרו והכל באבק - לשון הרע - And so too regarding the incident of Miriam, we have been commanded to make it known to our children and retell it to future generations. *And even though it would have been fitting to conceal this incident, so as not to speak disparagingly about the righteous* (Miriam and Aharon), *nevertheless, the Torah commanded us to make it known and revealed, so that the warning against speaking lashon harah would be well known to us. **For lashon harah is a grave sin that causes many evils, and people constantly stumble in regard to this prohibition.*** As the Sages have said: everyone sins through the "dust" of evil speech.

R' Soloveitchik succinctly summed up the root cause of speaking *lashon harah* as follows: "If you want to know what *lashon harah* is, whatever you enjoy when you talk about someone else is *lashon harah*."

Parshas Beha'alos'cha, Sivan 5777 - 6.17

The Chafetz Chaim (R' Yisrael Meir Ha'Kohen Kagin of Radin zt'l, 1839-1933) was once traveling from town to town, selling his book on the topic of *Shmiras Ha'Lashon*. He found himself in the town of Yedvabne, in the Lomza Province, where he spent Shabbos at the home of Reb Feivel, the local *shochet*. As the Chafetz Chaim was about to wash for the third Shabbos meal, he overheard R' Feivel talking to his wife, "Well, what do you think of the nerve of Yossel the butcher? Some day he is going to fall right into the trap of his own lies..." and R' Feivel continued to speak disparagingly of Yossel the butcher.

Without a moment's hesitation, the Chafetz Chaim fled the home! When Reb Feivel realized what had happened, he went looking for the Chafetz Chaim. He found the distinguished guest at the home of an acquaintance, having the third Shabbos meal. Reb Feivel was perplexed, and asked the Chafetz Chaim why he had fled and found a new host. The Chafetz Chaim replied, that regretfully, he could not stay in Reb Feivel's home anymore.

"Look," he said, "If you have a complaint against this butcher, it concerns our religious laws on what is forbidden and what is permitted (to be eaten). You have the ability to summon him to your local rabbi and have it out with him; or you can rebuke him privately, between the two of you; but is it not something to tell your wife! That is evil gossip! Here I am traveling about to sell a volume on the subject of how to beware of *lashon harah*. How can I allow myself hospitality in a house where sins of this kind are being committed?"

Once Miriam and Aharon spoke of Moshe, their actions influenced others... As Chazal teach, why does the story of the scouts who slandered the Land follow the story of Miriam's slander? *For she was stricken over matters of speech, which she spoke against her brother, and these wicked ones (the scouts) saw what happened to her, and did not take a lesson from her* (see Rashi to Bamidbar 13:2).

Let us ensure that we remember, and take a lesson from, what happened to Miriam, "*so that the warning against speaking lashon harah would be well known to us. For lashon harah is a grave sin that causes many evils.*"

Though the Sages teach that everyone sins through the sin of slanderous speech and its "dust," we may not become discouraged in any area of our *avodas Hashem* - including that which is perhaps the most difficult realm of Divine service and interaction between man and fellow man: guarding our tongue. For the Chafetz Chaim would teach: *The fact that a human being is unable to become perfect does not mean that he can therefore neglect his duty to be good.*

בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום