

Parasha Beha'alotkha
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Welcome friends to the Torah portion that deals head on with one of the most important women in the Bible. Welcome to the parasha about Miriam.

We already know a lot about her. According to a Torah explanation (what we call a "midrash) Miriam is the one who desperately wanted a baby brother or baby sister and who pestered her parents to have another child. And it was Miriam who loved her baby brother like he was her own baby. It was Miriam who thought up the idea of saving the baby in his own waterproof basket and it was Miriam who waited on the banks of the Nile, standing guard until Pharaoh's daughter found him.

And who else was it, none other than our own Miriam who, bold as anything, stepped out of the reeds and offered to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the rescued infant... a Hebrew woman who just happened to be Moses' very own mother! Miriam, who had more guts than Laura Croft Tomb Raider, concocted and carried out an elaborate plan to save her brother's life.

And that was just the beginning. When we Jews left Egypt it was Miriam who boosted our spirits. Miriam with her dancing and singing, Miriam with her drum and timbrels leading the celebration, Miriam who made up the "Michamocha" song and taught it to everyone after we crossed the Sea of Reeds.

The Bible recognizes Miriam's leadership abilities by calling her, "*Miriam Ha-Niv-i-ya*" or Miriam the Prophet, a term given to no other woman in the Bible, except for Miriam. Miriam is clearly someone special, almost perfect, until now. What happened to bring Miriam down? The Torah is clear when it says, "*Miriam gossiped against her brother because of the woman he had married.*"

Moses married a Cushite woman and Miriam gossiped about it. As the Torah tells it Miriam made what she thought was a little dig against her sister-in-law, Tsiporah. And some believe that for this gossip, Miriam was punished. When she says, "Tsk. Tsk. He married Cushite women!" what she's *really* squawking about is her brother's interfaith marriage to a woman from Ethiopia, a woman who most probably was black.

But it didn't end there. Earlier in the story, we read that Moses chose seventy elders to be a kind of cabinet. These seventy people would help him lead the Jewish community. Everyone rejoiced for these seventy men who had been given such a great honor. Everyone, that is, but Moses' wife, Tsiporah. When she saw everybody toasting and celebrating, she was not impressed. Tsiporah probably said something like "Good for them, but *nebech* for their wives." Imagine that Miriam overheard what her sister-in-law said and asked Tsiporah, "What in the world do you mean by making a comment like that?"

Tsiporah hangs her head and sighs, “Ever since your brother Moses became a prophet, he’s had up to his ears in work. Day after day, night after night, he just falls into bed, exhausted. He’s got no time for anything... including me.”

Miriam is shocked. Moses neglects his wife? How can this be? After all, the Torah specifically says that a husband must pay attention to his wife’s spiritual needs *and* to her physical needs. Miriam gasps. “If Moses is neglecting his wife, then he is *violating the Torah!* Miriam knows she has to do something, but what? She decides, “I’ll go to Aaron and talk to *him*. I’ll tell our big brother just how badly Moses is behaving!”

And this, our sages tell us, was her sin. Not the nasty comment Miriam made about Tsiporah’s background (bad as that was) but the real sin was that she took a complaint about her brother, to somebody else. If you have a complaint against Moses, you have to go to Moses. If you have a complaint against Aaron, then you have to go to Aaron. But to go to Aaron with a complaint against Moses is to commit the sin of *Lashon Hara*, and for this Miriam was punished.

Her intentions were good. It’s clear that Miriam cares about Moses and, after she got over the initial shock of their marriage, Miriam cared about Tsiporah, too. All she wanted to do was to bring them closer together. She wanted to help them patch things up so that there would be more Jewish children in the world. She wanted to remind Moses of God’s will, at least God’s will as *she* understood it!

But all those good intentions aside, Miriam did the wrong thing because she sidestepped her brother and ran to Aaron instead. If she had a complaint against Moses, the Torah tells us, Miriam should have gone directly to Moses. If you go to someone else, you’ve committed a sin.

Every rabbi and every synagogue president has had first hand experience with this sort of thing. If someone has a complaint against the rabbi, they call the president. But if they’ve got a bone to pick with the president, the rabbi gets the call. Someone doesn’t like what the condo president said or did, so they call the treasurer and do what Miriam did with Aaron, make the complaint and hope that it gets to the president.

And then, if the president or rabbi finally hears the complaint, but they don’t like what they heard, then the complainer can always say something like, “My words were twisted. That’s not what I said at all.” *Lashon Hara*. What could have been a simple, honest exchange turns into the “Telephone game.” A complaint, legitimate or not, turns into vicious gossip.

This is what Miriam should have done. She should have gone directly to her brother and said, “Pay attention to your wife. She’s unhappy and I’m concerned.” But maybe Miriam was shy. Maybe she didn’t want to talk to her brother about such an intimate subject. The Torah seems to have a zero tolerance policy on this point. Miriam went to Aaron instead and for that she got leprosy!

But look what happens next. Moses prays for his big sister. He doesn't say, "Nu! So, Miriam, this is what you get for not minding your own business." Moses doesn't say, "You've got a whole lot of nerve mixing into my private affairs. You got what you deserved for gossiping about me." No. Instead Moses prays for Miriam because he understands what she's trying to do. Moses doesn't get all defensive and think the worst of his sister. No. Moses thinks, "So, she didn't go about it the right way, but I'll give Sis the benefit of the doubt here. Maybe she was just trying to help."

So Moses takes some time out of his busy schedule and says, "*El na, Rifa na la*" or "Dear God, please heal her." And that's just what God does. Why so quickly? Why does God, who punishes Miriam with a particularly gross and messy disease, turn around and heal her just like that? Maybe because, instead of getting really mad, God was impressed that Moses prayed for her. And when God saw Moses praying, maybe God thought, "Hmmm...if Moses, who was the *victim* of her gossip could forgive her then, maybe I should do the same."

In our Shabbat prayers we have the opportunity to read and to think about the words come at the end of the Amidah "*My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from lies..*" Which in contemporary language might translate into, "Help me shut my mouth when I'm tempted to gossip."

And the prayer continues, "*Help me ignore those who slander me and let me be humble before all...*" Which means that when others have a complaint about me and choose to gossip instead of speaking with me directly, let me be like Moses. So that before I retaliate, before I gossip back, let me set aside hurt and disappointment. Instead let me be like Moses and think of that person, not with anger but with compassion. Not with hate, but with love.