

There are a number of momentous things going on in this parsha. I read it many times and I have boiled it down to three essential questions, which I still don't understand, and I will pose them to you.

The parsha begins and ends with the number 7. It starts with Aaron learning to light the 7 candles of the menorah. He learns to do this while elevating himself, hence the word "behaalotkha," to elevate, instead of "bechadlikha," to kindle. It ends with Miriam being exiled for 7 days because of loshen hara, for gossiping about Moses and his wife. During her exile, everything stopped. The Clouds of Glory departed, nobody did anything, they just waited breathlessly for Miriam to come back.

So the first question is: **Why 7 days?** (Creation, etc.) The Ishbitzer Rabbi says that the seven candles of the menorah represent the seven kinds of Jewish souls. That they are facing each other with the center one being closest to Hashem. The Kabbalah says that there are 7 elements to the human personality.

As a test, we were stricken with pangs of hunger for the tiny handful of things that the manna did not provide, we complained, and we were punished for that. Besides being pelted with showers of quail, hard enough to kill people, our 70 elders who acted as the first judges were killed.

Moses asks Gd for 70 new elders and they were chosen by both Moses and Hashem, 6 from each tribe. This comes out to 72, so the odd men out were Eldad and Midad. Each of the elders would receive a portion of Moses' ruach hakodesh, his holy spirit. Eldad and Midad started walking around spouting prophecy about Moses not coming into the Promised Land, about his death, and that alarmed some people but not Moses. He said it would be great if everyone was so holy as to be a prophet.

Meanwhile, Moses's wife, Zipporah, heard about Eldad and Midad prophesying, and she said "Oy, their poor wives. Now they're going to stop sleeping with their wives the same way Moses has stopped sleeping with me." Midrash says that Miriam overheard Zipporah and ran to Aaron to say, "We have to remind Moses of his obligations to Zipporah. He's been too busy with work..." This did not go over well, as Moses had been acting in accordance with Gd, and he was not to be criticized by people who should know better, so Miriam was stricken with Tzaraas and banished from the camp for 7 days.

Now this is just one of many midrashes. Let's look at what the Torah actually says:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, "Was it only to Moses that Hashem spoke? Did He not speak to us, as well?"

It's hard to tell what was said or what was meant here. For starters, Zipporah wasn't a Cushite woman, she was from Midian, the opposite direction from Cush. Rashi says that Cushite just means that she was beautiful. Others say that Miriam might have been criticizing the darkness of Zipporah's skin. Other commentators say that Moses had taken a second wife, who was from Cush, and that Miriam plain didn't like her.

This sentence in the Torah, which questions, with Aaron, their ability or right to prophesy are the last words we ever hear from Miriam in the Torah. It's a peculiar and difficult final vision of the prophetess who means so much to Jews, especially Jewish women.

And that surly notion leads me to the second question: **When Gd spoke to Moses at the burning bush, Gd chose a physical sign as a symbol of divine communication - tzaraas. When Moses' hand turned white & leprous, it was an honor, to show his worthiness to Bnai Israel. Why is it different for Miriam?**

Gd chastised both Aaron and Miriam and then the Cloud departed and behold - Miriam was stricken with tzaraas, a disease like leprosy, but not - it's Gd's Own Leprosy. The book of Kohelet talks about it and says Miriam's tzaraas will "destroy the work of thy hands." Meaning the great mitzvah of her taking timbrels in hand and dancing at the Sea of Reeds was in danger of being negated by her sin.

So let's talk about the tzaraas for a minute. I chose this parsha because of something Howard said in Talmud class. We were studying a section that described a certain mitzvah which everybody is required to do, and you then hear about the exceptions to "everybody." Who is not included in "everybody"...women, children, the blind, the deaf, the lame. Then it goes on for many pages about what if you're lame in one leg in the morning but you can walk

in the afternoon, etc. By the time you've been through all the listings of disabilities and exceptions, everybody in the room has come to identify with the disabled in one way or another. Howard says that is on purpose. That aberration is Gd's imprint on the world. People try to make the playing field fair through law. And that Miriam in her exile shows that disabilities that cause exclusion teach us how to live, how to make meaning in our lives.

So my third question: **What is it that Miriam teaches us from her exile? Are Miriam and the people Israel any different after her exile?**

Zohar: Miriam's death (a couple of chapters later, not from tzaraas) follows immediately after section of Red Heifer to show that just as judgment was executed on this heifer to purify the world, so judgment was executed on Miriam to purify the world... It is also said that suffering can be inflicted on the righteous for no other reason than to purify the world...

The Zohar also claims that Gd is more *with* people who, like Miriam, are alone, or disabled, or suffering, than with even the most pious of people. But I also read a commentary that said the opposite, that Miriam's exile was marked by the absence of Gd, and by the absence of anything, a place so empty and hollow it was like the world before creation.

So my questions:

Why was Miriam's exile 7 days - does it somehow mirror the "elevation" of the menorah ritual?

Why was tzaraas a badge of honor for Moses and a badge of humiliation for Miriam - what's the parallel there? Can something like a disease or disability function as an honor for one person and humiliation for another?

What do we learn from Miriam's banishment - is there truth to the idea that Gd is more present with people in a lonely place, and also with people excluded from the mainstream of Judaism?

My favorite account of Miriam's exile is a speech delivered by Marion Weinberg at her adult Bat Mitzvah, a few months before she died:

"Everything stopped. The silence was deadening. People stopped kvetching and

priorities of the moment, day, and week shifted. Miriam was ill. Even the thinking stopped. Suddenly what was important shone like a moonbeam in the clear desert sky. And all that remained were the heartfelt inner voices of brothers, family and friends. Aaron pleaded with Moses to save Miriam. This was an unusual reversal of communication between these brothers. Moses listened to Aaron, and with heartfelt simplicity, spoke to Gd "El na, refa na lah." Please, Gd, pray heal her. It was a moment of faith and submission.

Miriam was sent out to the wilderness for seven days and the people waited. Miriam was sent to the wilderness – a wilderness not unlike the nothingness described in the Kabbalah upon which all existence would be based. Not unlike the nothingness of Genesis into which Gd spoke existence: 'Let there be light.'

The woman who wrote this was ill, she was dying. She considered Miriam to be her guide in the wilderness of illness. She went to the beach to contemplate life and death... She said, "And at that moment, I knew what Miriam did in the wilderness. She danced. And so did I."

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