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**PARASHAT BEHA'ALOTEKHA**

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**Moshe, Aharon, Miriam and the "Kushite Woman"**  
**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

**A. DEFINING THE SUBJECT OF THE STORY**

What is the subject of the story that concludes our parasha (12:1-16)? The story contains so many elements that it becomes difficult to decide which is the most important, and what the parasha is teaching us. A review of the principal issues will illustrate the problem.

i. The story opens with a verse containing a surprising and somewhat opaque revelation about Moshe's family life:

(1) "Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe because of the Kushite woman that he had taken, for he had taken a Kushite wife."

ii. The next verse continues to deal with what Miriam and Aharon have to say about Moshe, but this time they are quoted in direct speech:

(2) "And they said: Did God then speak only with Moshe? Did He not speak with us too?"

With these words they would seem to be accusing Moshe of arrogance because he is a prophet; they reject his behavior in light of the fact that they, too, are prophets. This interpretation finds support in the following verse:

(3) "But the man Moshe was very humble, more than any other person upon the face of the earth."

We expect, then, that the subject of our story will be an attempted undermining of Moshe's leadership or the impugning of his character. But this aspect is abruptly abandoned, with no development in the continuation of the parasha. Moreover, even the connection between these two verses and the one preceding them is not clear: What has Moshe's Kushite wife to do with his supposed haughtiness towards his siblings because he is a prophet?

iii. God's words to Aharon and to Miriam in verses 6-8 describe the superiority of Moshe's prophecy compared with theirs and with that of all other prophets. This speech is of fundamental importance with regard to the nature of Moshe's mission - an importance that extends far beyond the boundaries of this narrative. The words God says here clearly relate to verse 2 above: Miriam and Aharon compare their prophecy to that of Moshe, and God's reproof corrects their mistake. But attention should be paid to the different emphasis in God's words: He does not reprove them for unjustly accusing Moshe of arrogance while in fact he is extremely humble; rather, God only reproves them for comparing their level of prophecy to his.

This subject, too, has no further development in the continuation of the story, and it is therefore difficult to regard it as the main subject.

iv. The next subject mentioned is Miriam's tzara'at (leprosy), and the story ends with God's instruction to Moshe, and its fulfillment:

(14) "...Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and thereafter she shall be gathered in.'

(15) And Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days, and the nation did not journey until Miriam had been gathered in."

This conclusion seems to point to a reinforcement of the observance of the laws of tzara'at, as we are told:

"Take care concerning the plague of tzara'at, to observe well and to do according to all that the kohanim and leviim instruct you; as I commanded them, so shall you observe to do. REMEMBER WHAT GOD YOUR GOD DID TO MIRIAM, ON THE WAY WHEN YOU LEFT EGYPT." (Devarim 24:8-9)

This emphasis does not connect in any way to the previous subjects covered in the story, and so we return to our original question: What is the main message of our story, creating a common denominator for all the diverse elements included in it?

**B. THE STRUCTURE OF THE STORY CLARIFIES ITS SUBJECT**

In order to try to define the subject of our story, we must examine its literary structure. As I have pointed out often in the past, a biblical narrative is usually divided into two more or less equal halves, with the division identifiable by means of the dramatic turn of events in the story. Where does this turning point occur in the course of our narrative?

In two places in our story the Torah describes Divine action. The first is in verse 4, which presents God's sudden intervention:

"And God SUDDENLY said to Moshe and to Aharon and to Miriam: Go out, you three, to the Ohel Mo'ed."

God's other action is described in verse 9, where He leaves the scene:

"And God's anger burned against them, and He departed."

This point, in verse 9, represents the dramatic turning point of the story - not because it is located in the middle, but for a different reason. God's sudden appearance in verse 4 brings in its wake the words of rebuke (verses 6-8), which we have expected since the end of verse 2, where we read, "And God heard...." God's departure, at the end of verse 9, brings in its wake another dramatic and unexpected result: "And behold, Miriam was covered in tzara'at, like snow."

Thus, the story is divided into two equal halves, each consisting of eight verses. What is the subject of the first half of the story (verses 1-8)? It is easily distinguishable in the style of the text: this half opens and concludes with almost exactly the same words -

(1) "And Miriam SPOKE, and Aharon, ABOUT MOSHE..."

(8) "...And why did you not fear TO SPEAK about My servant, ABOUT MOSHE?"

The opening verse here sets down the defining fact of the first half: Miriam and Aharon spoke (disparagingly) about

Moshe. The concluding verse of this half turns this fact into a sharply rebuking question. It is not a simple question of "Why did you speak about Moshe?," but rather "Why did you NOT FEAR to speak ABOUT MY SERVANT, about Moshe?" - how could you dare to do such a thing?

We may therefore conclude that the subject of the first half of our story is THE SIN of Miriam and Aharon, who spoke about Moshe, and GOD'S REBUKE of them for having done so. This first half may be divided into the following parts:

- i. (1-3) The speaking about Moshe
- ii. (4-5) God's appearance: gathering of the three siblings, and separation of the other two from Moshe
- iii. (6-8) God's rebuke of Aharon and Miriam

What is the subject of the second half? Its subject is Miriam's punishment (it appears that her sin in the first half was more severe than that of Aharon). Miriam's punishment is addressed both in the opening section of this half, in verses 9-10 - "And behold, Miriam was leprous as snow," and in the concluding section, verses 14-16 - "And Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days." Between these two sections we find Moshe's prayer on behalf of his sister (13) - "Please God, please heal her." Was his prayer effective?

Chizkuni interprets Moshe's prayer in accordance with Onkelos - "God, please heal her now." He explains the repetition of the word "please" (na) in Moshe's prayer as follows: "The first [time] is an expression of appeal, and the second is an expression of immediacy." What is God's response? Chizkuni comments:

"And to this the Holy One responded: If she is healed immediately, she will not have been reprimanded for even one day."

Chizkuni deduces God's negative response from His instruction to Moshe in verse 14: "Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and thereafter she shall be gathered in." The law that the leper must remain outside of the camp applies only so long as his disease is upon him:

(Vayikra 13:45-46) "And the leper WHOSE DISEASE IS UPON HIM, his clothes shall be torn... SO LONG AS HIS DISEASE IS UPON HIM he shall be impure. He is impure; he shall dwell alone; his dwelling place shall be outside of the camp."

It would therefore seem that during those seven days Miriam was still leprous, and hence we may deduce that for that time Moshe's prayer was not accepted.

However, the attempt to match our story to the laws of the metzora in Sefer Vayikra gives rise to a problem. In our story we are told, "SHE SHALL BE SHUT OUT FOR SEVEN DAYS." The term "shut out" concerning the metzora and the duration of this banishment - seven days - is mentioned several times in Vayikra 13:

(4) "And if the light spot is white... the kohen shall SHUT UP the person with the disease FOR SEVEN DAYS."

(And likewise in verses 6, 21, 26, 31, 33.) But this law of isolating a person pertains specifically to someone who bears symptoms that MAY TURN INTO tzara'at, and it is meant to allow the kohen to follow up on the development of the symptoms after seven days (or after seven and then a further

seven). The need to isolate Miriam - who was clearly definable as a leper - is therefore unclear.

Chazal raise another question: in order for a metzora to be impure, a declaration is required by the kohen attesting to his status. But according to one opinion, "A person cannot determine the status of his kindred" - and if this is the case, then neither Aharon nor any of his sons could diagnose Miriam and declare her impure. Who, then, declared her to be a metzora'at?

This question leads the Sifri to conclude:

"She shall be shut up' - the Holy One shut her, He declared her impure, and He [thereafter] declared her pure."

The Sifri would seem to be teaching that this was not a regular procedure of tzara'at, as commanded in the parashot of Tazria and Metzora, but rather that Miriam's tzara'at and its laws were determined directly by God.

Having arrived at this understanding, we may perhaps explain that God did indeed accept Moshe's prayer and healed Miriam of her tzara'at at the very moment that Moshe requested it, but He commanded that Miriam nevertheless be "shut out." This was not the same "shutting up" as that of someone whose leprous status is in doubt, but rather a different sort:

(14) "If her father were to spit in her face - would she not be shamed for seven days?"

Miriam's tzara'at, although it lasted only for a moment, was like the experience of a father spitting in the face of his daughter - an act aimed at embarrassing the daughter who sinned against her father and causing her to hide herself for seven days. Likewise, Miriam had to hide herself from everyone as an expression of her humiliation resulting from God's anger, which caused her momentary tzara'at. According to this interpretation, we may formulate the subject of the second half of our story more precisely: it is MIRIAM'S PUNISHMENT, AND ITS ALLEVIATION in the wake of Moshe's prayer on her behalf.

The second half may also be divided into three sections:

- i. (9-10) The disappearance of God and the cloud, and Miriam's tzara'at.
- ii. (11-13) Aharon's request of Moshe, and Moshe's plea to God to heal Miriam.
- iii. (14-16) Alleviation of her punishment: Miriam is shut out of the camp for seven days.

The subject of our story is therefore "the sin and its punishment." Many biblical narratives dealing with a sin and its punishment are divided into two halves in a similar fashion to our story. But in our case the subject of each half may be defined in a slightly more complex way:

First half (1-8): the sin and the rebuke  
Second half (9-16): the punishment and its alleviation

### C. PARALLEL BETWEEN THE TWO HALVES OF THE STORY

A revelation of the structure of a biblical story as being composed of two equal halves serves to facilitate a comparison of the two halves. This comparison sometimes reveals insights that would otherwise escape the reader's notice. What does a comparison of the halves of our story teach us? Firstly, let us

present the elements treated in each half in contrast with each other:

- First half: a. (1-3) Miriam and Aharon speak about Moshe  
Second half: a. (9-10) Disappearance of God and His cloud, and Miriam's tzara'at
- First half: b. (4-5) Appearance of God and His cloud in the Ohel Mo'ed, and His meeting with the siblings  
Second half: b. (11-13) Aharon's request of Moshe concerning Miriam, and Moshe's plea to God that He heal her
- First half: c. (6-8) God's rebuke of Aharon and Miriam  
Second half: c. (14-16) God alleviates Miriam's punishment

The third section (c) of each half contains God's word, which relates to what took place at the beginning of each half. In the first half, God rebukes Aharon and Miriam for speaking against Moshe, as described at the beginning of the story. In the second half, God commands Moshe that Miriam should be shut out of the camp for seven days and compares her to one shamed by her father; this command relates to the tzara'at with which Miriam was affected at the beginning of this half.

Is there any connection between these two important utterances by God in our story? In His first utterance, God is fighting Moshe's battle, without Moshe himself being involved (since he is apart from his two siblings). During the course of the first half it becomes apparent that Moshe himself, who is "very humble," wholeheartedly forgives the insult to his honor and pleads with God to heal his sister Miriam. But while "A rabbi may forego his honor" (since the Torah learning he has accumulated is his, and he is permitted to forgive any insult to the honor to which he is entitled in light of that scholarship), it seems that a prophet may not forego the honor due him, for prophecy is a mission with which God entrusts him; it is not the property of the prophet himself.

This is already hinted at in God's rebuke of Aharon and Miriam (7-8): "Not so MY SERVANT MOSHE; OF ALL MY HOUSE HE IS MOST LOYAL... and why did you not fear to speak ABOUT MY SERVANT, about Moshe?" In this verse, God compares Moshe to a faithful servant who is trusted by his master in every regard, who is placed in charge of running the household and who has the authority to decide in all matters. We learn that "The servant of a king is like the king" - and so he may not be lenient concerning honor that is not his.

It is precisely to this that God hints in His response to Moshe's plea: Miriam cannot be "let off the hook" altogether. She insulted the honor of her "Father," Who has sharply rebuked her. In human relations, such a rebuke by a father to his daughter could not pass without making some impression; how much more so, then, in this exchange between God and Miriam. I explained above that God's "spitting in Miriam's face" was the tzara'at that afflicted her - but ultimately this tzara'at is only a punishment for having spoken disparagingly about Moshe. But the Holy One is actually standing on His own honor, for she had spoken against GOD'S SERVANT Moshe. God is prepared to ease up on Miriam's punishment, at the request of His servant, who is the most humble of people, and to heal Miriam of her tzara'at, but He is not prepared to nullify all signs of the insult caused to His loyal servant. Thus God's speech to Moshe at the end of the second half explains what was only hinted at in His speech to Aharon and Miriam at the end of the first half.

Let us now examine the parallels between the previous sections of each half (sections a and b of each half).

1. Section a in the first half describes the sin, while its parallel in the second half describes the punishment. Chazal perceive tzara'at as the fixed punishment for the sin of "lashon ha-ra" (disparaging speech), more than for other sins, but in our story we may perhaps point to a special element of "measure for measure:" Miriam's words about Moshe concerned "the KUSHITE woman that he had taken." A "kushite" woman is one with black skin, and Miriam's punishment turned her into a "leper LIKE SNOW" - demonstrating quite eloquently that white can be very much worse than black.

2. The disappearance of God and His cloud from the Ohel Mo'ed in the second half is a direct contrast to His sudden appearance in the first half:

- (4) And God suddenly said...  
(9) And God's anger burned against them and He departed.  
(5) And God descended in a pillar of cloud, and He stood at the entrance to the Ohel...  
(10) And the cloud departed from upon the Ohel Mo'ed...

Whereas God's appearance in the first half was in order to declare words of rebuke, His disappearance in the second half is meant as a punishment.

3. What is the correspondence between section b of each half? In the second half, section b (verses 11-13) contains Aharon's request of Moshe and Moshe's subsequent prayer. In section b of the first half, God commands two different things: first (verse 4), "Go out, THE THREE OF YOU, to the Ohel Mo'ed," and after this command is fulfilled and God's cloud stands at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed we find the second command (verse 5), "And he called: Aharon and Miriam! And BOTH OF THEM came out." If God separated Aharon and Miriam in order to rebuke them, why did He summon Moshe at all? A satisfying answer is to be found in the parallel section of the second half: when Aharon turns to Miriam and, to his surprise, finds that she has been struck with tzara'at, Moshe happens to be close by and Aharon is able to ask Moshe's forgiveness for their sin, and to request that Moshe do what he can to bring healing for Miriam. Moshe indeed responds at once, and prays for his sister so that her punishment is alleviated.

God, Who knows everything in advance, prepared this situation in order to teach Aharon and Miriam a double lesson, which confirms through action what is stated in the first half in general terms:

- A. "And the man Moshe was extremely humble..." - Moshe's humility is narrated to us in the first half, and is illustrated in his immediate readiness to fulfill Aharon's request and to cry out to God that Miriam be healed.  
B. God's response to Moshe's prayer teaches Aharon and Miriam that Moshe is indeed God's faithful servant, and God accepts his prayers at any time.

4. However, section b of the second half parallels principally section a of the first half, by way of contrast. At the beginning of the story, the relations between the siblings are something like this: MIRIAM - the principal speaker against Moshe; AHARON - sides with her; and MOSHE - neither knows nor takes offence at what people say about him.

Now let us turn to this triangular relationship in section b of the second half. MIRIAM, who spoke about her brother, is now silent - perhaps because, as the Netziv explains on verse 10, "She was astounded, and dumbfounded from sorrow." AHARON, who was Miriam's partner in speaking against Moshe, now turns to Moshe and represents his sister, too, in requesting of Moshe: "Do not hold our sin AGAINST US...", and requesting that he heal Miriam. MOSHE - the humble, silent one - now "cries out" to God, asking that He heal Miriam.

The one who "was spoken about" now cries out without any grudge or any accounting, thereby revealing his humility and his trait of returning evil with kindness.

This change of status in the sibling triangle demonstrates the positive effect of the punishment on Aharon and Miriam's perception of their brother Moshe.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.  
The unabridged Hebrew version of this shiur is archived at:  
<http://www.vbm-torah.org/hparsha-7/hparsha7.htm>.)

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