

## **Behaalotcha, 5780 – Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener**

והעם לא נסע עד האסף מרים

Quarantine slowing travel is nothing new. After uttering Lashon HaRa about Moshe Rabbeinu, Miriam the Prophetess was made to quarantine outside of the Israelite camp until her Tzaraat healed. Although the entire nation was ready to resume traveling toward its eagerly-anticipated destination, travel plans were put on an abrupt hold until Miriam was healed. The Mishnah (Sotah 9b) explains this most unusual occurrence:

לפיכך נתעכבו לה ישראל שבעה ימים, "ותתצב אחותו מרחוק": שנאמר (שמות ב), מרים המתינה למשה שעה אחת "והעם לא נסע עד האסף מרים": במדבר, שנאמר (במדבר יב)

"Miriam waited one hour for Moshe (when she stood by the Nile, watching his basket as a baby); on account of that kindness, the Jewish people waited for her an entire week."

It is remarkable. More than a million people were delayed on account of a single person. Having assisted Moshe during his time of vulnerability eighty years earlier, Miriam merited having everyone wait for her during her own moment of vulnerability.

The spiritual importance of meticulous gratitude towards one's benefactor cannot be overstated. The Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 9:10) teaches that Moshe did not strike the Nile with his staff to initiate the plagues of blood or frogs because the Nile had saved him as a baby. Moshe similarly did not strike the sand to initiate the plague of lice, because the sand had buried and concealed the Egyptian that he previously killed (Shemos Rabbah 10:7). The Torah astoundingly even obligates us to acknowledge gratitude to Egyptians (Devarim 23:8), because, in the words of Rashi, "שהיו לכם אכסניא בשעת הדחק" -- the Egyptians were our host during a time when we were in need, i.e., the years of famine during the life of Yaakov Avinu. It is perhaps no wonder that the Torah introduces Pharaoh, Moshe Rabbeinu's spiritual foil, as a "מלך חדש" -- "a new king over Egypt who did not remember Yosef." The ultimate radix trait that establishes Pharaoh as the absolute opposite of everything Moshe stood for is ingratitude -- forgetting Yosef's acts that saved his entire country.

While gratitude towards those who have benefited us is always critical, it is never more important than when our benefactor finds him or herself in a position of vulnerability, like Miriam. Indeed, our Sages (Avot 2:3) look askance upon people who appear to be friends during easy times, but "אין עומדין לו לאדם בשעת דוחקו" -- do not stand by a person when that person is in distress. This point is particularly worthy of contemplation during these times. Without diminishing the evil of racist hate crimes one iota, or the need for society to actively fight against racist agendas, I have felt deeply uncomfortable by the sweeping demonization of all members of law enforcement that we have recently witnessed. We, as religious Jews living in the Diaspora, unfortunately know too well the holy work that police officers do, allowing us and all people to live in safety and security. I myself have had the opportunity to meet numerous police officers, both through my medical training as well as in shuls, and have always been impressed by their professionalism and apparent integrity. While experts must of course implement appropriate measures to eliminate racially motivated police mistreatment, for society to overlook the

immense sacrifice that so many officers have made is, in my estimation, a profound spiritual flaw. And for Jews to simply observe this silently runs the risk of, G-d forbid, warranting the status of "אין עומדין לו לאדם בשעת דוחקו." In the spirit of our ancestors' repayment for the protection that Miriam had provided, it seems appropriate for each of us to not forget the many upstanding and courageous police officers who have protected us for decades. Each one of us should find ways -- whether through letters of appreciation to officers and government officials, dropping off treats at the local precinct, or thanking officers on the streets -- to convey our Hakarat HaTov for their kindness to us. And through this sacred act of gratitude may all people know of no more bloodshed.