

## Parshat KI Tetze 5778

### Tzara'at and Lashon Hara

In this week's parsha (Chap 24, pasuk 9), we read: ""Remember what Hashem, your God, did to Miriam on the way, when you went out of Egypt."

What does this refer to? In Parshat Beha'alotcha the Torah relates an incident where Miriam initiates a conversation with Aharon about Moshe, where having heard that Moshe had separated, or possibly divorced his wife Tzipporah, she compares Moshe to them and questions his decision to separate from his wife. Hashem summons her and Aharon and then punishes her with Tzara'at, which requires her to be excluded from the camp for 7 days.

The Torah does not state there what the sin was to justify the punishment of Tzara'at. The Gemara (Arachin 16a) lists seven possible sins that could cause Tzara'at – murder, deceit, incest, arrogance, theft, and envy are also listed, but the key sin most strongly associated with Tzara'at is lashon hara, or "evil speech".

In this week's parsha Rashi brings a connection between pasuk 9 and the previous pasuk in the parsha, which reads "Be cautious regarding the lesion of Tzara'ath, to observe meticulously and you shall do according to all that the Levite priests instruct you; as I have commanded them, you should observe to do." Rashi's comment is clear: "If you wish to take precautions against being stricken with Tzara'ath, then do not speak lashon hara. Remember what was done to Miriam, who spoke against her brother and was stricken with lesions." So Rashi makes explicit the connection between lashon hara and the punishment of Tzara'at.

The Rambam however disagrees that Miriam spoke lashon hara about Moshe. He writes "She was older than he was; she had raised him; and she had endangered herself to save him from the sea. She did not speak negatively about him; rather she merely erred in equating him with the other prophets. Nevertheless, she was immediately punished with Tzara'at, and had to be healed by Moshe praying on her behalf."

In contrast to the approach of Rashi that the primary purpose of these pesukim is to prohibit lashon hara, Rashbam takes a different approach, where the lesson is not to treat important people differently when it comes to Tzara'at: "Be careful to keep the laws of Tzara'at: ...even with regard to people like King Uziyahu – do not honour him. Instead, send him outside the camp ... for remember what happened to Miriam: Even though she was a prophetess and Moshe's sister, they did not honour her; instead, they sent her outside the camp...". So Rashbam mentions the case of Miriam to emphasise this point of no exceptions, but with no specific connection between Tzara'at and lashon hara.

**Lashon Hara as a specific mitzvah-** Ramban's approach to this pasuk learns a stronger requirement regarding remembering Miriam's sin. He writes "In my opinion this should be considered a positive commandment" i.e. not simply a reminder but an actual mitzvah to remember the incident involving Miriam.

Ramban remarks that where the pasuk states: "Zachor et asher asah Hashem...", this is comparable to three other places where the Torah introduces a mitzva with a similar expression: Shabbat ("Zachor et yom ha-shabbat" - Shemot 20:7), Yetziat Mitzrayim ("Zachor et ha-yom..." - Shemot 13:3), and Amalek ("Zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek..." - Devarim 25:17).

Ramban cites these three examples as proof that a pasuk beginning with the word Zachor teaches a positive commandment and therefore here also.

"... Hence, this is a warning not to speak lashon hara, commanding us to remember the terrible punishment that Miriam received .. though a righteous prophetess, and she spoke only about her brother, and only privately with her brother, not in public, so that Moshe himself would not be embarrassed... But despite these good intentions, she was punished. How much more so must we be careful never to speak lashon hara..."

So Ramban derives that the incident with Miriam emphasises how careful we must all be in all matters which may involve even the slightest degree of lashon hara, and that we are obligated to verbally recount this incident every day, so that we remember not to make a similar mistake.

"For how could it be that lashon hara – which is equivalent in its severity to murder – would not be considered a mitzva in the Torah! ...Rather, this pasuk serves as a serious warning to refrain from lashon hara, be it in public or in private, intentional or unintentional...and it should be considered one of the 613 mitzvot..."

### Six Remembrances

On that basis this remembrance has been incorporated to what is termed the shesh zechirut, the 6 remembrances that are found in many siddurim after weekday shacharit, which some recite daily.

Regarding these 6 remembrances, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments in the Koren Siddur that they can be divided into 3 positive and 3 negative parameters of Jewish faith and life: Remembering exodus from Egypt, giving of the Torah and Shabbat link to the 3 positive ones, and remembering sin of golden calf, what Amalek did, and what Hashem did to Miriam link to the 3 negative ones. He identifies remembering the incident with Miriam as a general reminder to sins against our fellows, especially lashon hara, which is a very timely message for us to be reminded off for the month of Ellul.