

Parashah One Hundred and Eight

Numbers 12:1–16; Isaiah 59:1–21; John 1:1–18

notes by Tim Hegg

The story of our *parashah* pertains to the sin of slander or gossip, called לִשְׁוֹן הָרָע, *lashon hara*’ (“evil speech”) in Hebrew. Its connection to the previous *parashah* is evident. There, the people murmur against God; here there is discontent and slander against God’s appointed spokesman, Moses. In both cases, God Himself is slandered, for He is the One who provided the food against which the people murmured, and He chose Moses to be His spokesman. Furthermore, our present *parashah* makes it clear that the sin of murmuring and slander is not limited to the “riffraff” (note אֲסַפְסֻף *’asafsuf* in 11:4), for in our *parashah*, Miriam and Aaron are the culprits. The obvious message in both stories is that God is not pleased with the spirit of discontentment that evidences itself in *lashon hara*. In both instances He metes out swift and direct disciplinary measures. Taken together, these *parashot* remind us that God hates the spirit of discontent and the slander or gossip it often engenders.

The opening verse of our *parashah* appears to contain some grammatical difficulties, but in reality these are important indicators offering greater clarity about the sin of gossip committed against Moses. The first question that arises is why the opening verb (וַתְּדַבֵּר) is a singular feminine form (the fact that it is in piel is not significant, because the verb דָּבַר, when used in direct discourse, is most often in the piel stem) when the subject is plural: “Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses....” Since at the conclusion of our story, Miriam alone is punished, the Sages taught that she was the primary instigator in the matter. This fact is also subtly emphasized by the fact that Miriam is listed first, even though in every other place where Aaron and Miriam are listed together, Aaron’s name is listed first. But in v. 11 Aaron specifically confesses that both he and Miriam had acted foolishly and sinned. Here we may discover a very important thing about slander: the sin is both in the telling and in the listening. The verb is singular, because it began on the lips of Miriam. But Aaron partook in the sin because he willingly listened and received her slanderous report.

The second question is why the phrase “for he had married a Cushite woman” is added. It seems redundant. But it was added to substantiate that what Miriam had spoken was true: Moses had, indeed, married a Cushite woman. So the added phrase alerts us to the fact that even though what Miriam related to Aaron was true, it was still slander. In other words, slander is not confined to telling falsehoods about another person. *Lashon hara* is speech that results in tearing down another person’s character.

The third question that our opening verse raises is why Miriam would have thought Moses’ marriage to a Cushite was a sin on his part. What does “Cushite” (הַכְּשִׁיטָה) mean here? The Lxx and Vulgate translate it as “Ethiopian,” and those Sages that took this view cite an elaborate legend of Moses’ marriage to an Ethiopian. Obviously, Zipporah was not an Ethiopian. The Targum (cf. also Sifre Num. 99) translates “Cushite” with the word שְׂפִירְתָּא (*shafirta*) which means “beautiful,” allowing an identification with Zipporah. Some, on the basis of Hab 3:7 (“I saw the tents of Cushan under distress, the tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling”) understand “Cushite” to be synonymous with “Midianite,” the people of Zipporah.

Regardless of how one understands the word “Cushite,” the issue is clear: Miriam judged that Moses’ marriage was wrong, and that as a result, he could not be trusted as God’s spokesman. Apparently her own assessment of the situation did not match God’s perspective. While it is surely possible (and probably likely) that Miriam felt her assessment to be righteous, it is clear she lacked some vital information, because her assessment of Moses’ actions did not match God’s point-of-view. Even though Miriam may have been sincere in wanting a righteous judgment in terms of Moses’ actions, she was, in this case, sincerely wrong. Even though what she related was true (Moses had married a Cushite), her assessment of the situation was flawed.

Why was Miriam concerned about Moses marrying a Cushite? We really don't know. If the Targumim are correct in understanding the word "Cushite" to actually mean "beautiful," there may have been a spirit of jealousy in Miriam. Or, if "Cushite" emphasizes that Moses' wife was a foreigner, Miriam may have felt that Moses was too much influenced by her, and therefore not sufficiently loyal to his own people. But though we cannot be sure about the nature of Miriam's complaint, the ultimate motivation for it is announced in v. 2: "Has Adonai indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" The real issue was that Miriam and Aaron wanted a share in the leadership God had given to Moses. They wanted control. They were unhappy with the fact that God had chosen to speak *only* (note the emphatic Hebrew הִרְקֵךְ אֶךְ) through Moses, for being his siblings, they considered themselves as his equal. But Moses' position as God's spokesman or prophet was not based upon family identification, but upon God's sovereign choice.

Verse 3 is an editorial comment, whether written by Moses or added (under the guidance of the Ruach) by another hand. Some, feeling that Moses must have written these words, are troubled with the obvious fact that a humble man does not assert his own humility, and especially by saying that it is greater than anyone else! For this reason some have suggested that the word עָנָו (the Qere has עֲנִי), "his humility," should be understood as "bowed down with care," "oppressed," "burdened down," or "miserable" (see Cleon Rogers, "Moses: Meek or Miserable" *JETS* [29:3 (Sept, 1986)], pp. 257–63). This surely is possible, since the adjective עָנָו (from the root עָנָה II) has this primary sense. If this is the meaning in our verse, then the point would be that Moses was a man (note "the man Moses," הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה, cf. Ex 11:3) who carried a great burden, and that the slander against him by Miriam and Aaron added to this burden. If the adjective is taken to mean "humble," then this may be an editorial comment by another hand, emphasizing that Moses was aware of the slander, yet he did not take matters into his own hands, but humbly relied upon God to rectify the situation.

However we understand v. 3, the reality that God is fully aware of the situation is made clear in v. 4, "Suddenly (פְּתָאֵם) Adonai said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam, 'You three come out to the tent of meeting.'" In the secret rooms of slander, God's ear is attentive. This should give pause to each of us when we are tempted to engage in slander. And it should give comfort to those who are slandered: God can be trusted to act righteously on their behalf.

The three are summoned to the tent of meeting to hear the Divine word regarding the matter. Miriam had spoken against Moses, and Aaron had entertained her slander, so they are summoned to come forward. God's word is directed primarily to them. The sin in which they had engaged related to speaking and listening to words, so the Almighty begins by saying, "Hear now My words" (v. 6). The solution to the sin of slander is to take heed to God's words.

God's speech is cast in chiasmic poetry, contrasting the manner in which God communicates to the prophets on the one hand, with the way He speaks "mouth to mouth" with Moses. The arrangement of the poetry may be visualized as follows:

Introduction: Hear these words of Mine

- A. If either of you is Adonai's prophet
- B. I make Myself known to him in a vision
- C. I speak with him in a dream
- D. Not so with My servant Moses
- D¹. He (alone) is trusted in all My household (cf. Heb 3:2, 5)
- C¹. With him I speak mouth to mouth
- B¹. Plainly and not in riddles
- A¹. And he beholds the form of Adonai

Conclusion: How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses?

The point of the chiasm, noted by the emphasis of the two inner lines (D, D¹) is that the position of Moses as God's spokesman is unique. The Torah that comes through Moses is the exemplar against which all other revelation is to be judged.

What does it mean that God speaks to Moses "mouth to mouth" (פֶּה אֶל פֶּה)? The only other time the exact idiom is used is Ezra 9:11 (cf. 2Ki 10:21; 2Ki 21:16 which use פֶּה לְפֶה). In these examples the idiom means "fully," "from one end to the other," "from one door to another" (where "mouth" is used metaphorically of a "door"). But here, in our text, the phrase "mouth to mouth" must describe direct revelation while fully conscious. No dreams or visions. God speaks directly to Moses, and His word is given directly to the people from Moses. The mouth of Moses (his words) are to be received as coming directly from the mouth of God. While prophets are to be judged as to whether their words are true or false; whether they act as God's prophets or as false prophets (cf. 1Cor 14:29), Moses is not to be scrutinized. His words are the direct revelation of God. This strong statement of the Almighty ought to give pause to anyone who speaks against the Torah. As the writer to the Hebrews states: "Anyone who has set aside the Torah of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Heb 10:28).

The conclusion of the dialog is given in v. 9: "the anger of Adonai burned against them and He departed." This was no light matter. Slander against God's appointed spokesman could not be tolerated. His word to the people must be held as sacred and could not be diminished by undermining the authority of Moses.

While God spoke with the trio, the cloud of His presence enveloped them and the tent of meeting. When He was finished speaking, the cloud lifted, and Miriam was discovered to be מְצֹרֶת (*m'tzora'at*). The noun from which this adjective is derived (צָרַעַת, *tzara'at*) is often translated "leprosy." Actually, *tzarat* can be any skin disease, but in this case, the *tzarat* is said to be "scaly like snow," and may well have been some form of leprosy. The Sages play on the word מְצֹרֶת, understanding it as מְצִיא רָע, "going forth of evil" (=slander), and derive from this that skin disease is often the Divine punishment for *lashon hara* (cf. *ARN* 9 [pp. 56-7 in Goldin's translation], Mid. Rab. *Lev* 16.1-6).

When Aaron sees what has befallen Miriam, he pleads for her cure, but does so to Moses, not to God. Aaron confesses his sin to Moses ("we have acted foolishly... and sinned") and requests that Moses entreat God on behalf of Miriam. Moses does this, and his intercessory prayer is immediate and succinct: "O God, heal her, I pray!" (v. 14). We may use this interchange as an illustration of how one is to overcome the sin of slander. The sin is both against God and the one slandered, and forgiveness is to be sought from both. We may also note from this that in asking Moses to intercede for Miriam, Aaron has demonstrated his willingness to submit to Moses as God's appointed mediator. Throughout the Torah narratives, Moses is cast as the mediator between God and Israel, and as such, he foreshadows Yeshua: "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and

men, the man Messiah Yeshua” (1Tim 2:5, note the similarity between “the man Messiah Yeshua” and “the man Moses” in our text).

Moreover, we see in Moses the proper response of forgiveness when slandered. Given the fact that the fate of Miriam lay in his hands, had he been vindictive, he could have refused to intercede on her behalf. But he responds with immediate forgiveness, not considering his own reputation, but rather extolling the mercies of God. He does not harbor a grudge, but seeks the good of the one who has slandered him. This is what our Master taught when He said, “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28).

It is ironic that the only remedy for Miriam’s disease is to appeal to the very one they had slandered. This reminds us of verses such as Ps 118:22, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone.” Indeed, the despised One, the Man of Sorrows, is the only One through Whom we have access to God.

Why is Miriam struck with the skin disease and not Aaron? The most obvious explanation is that the sin of slander began with Miriam, and even though Aaron sinned by wilfully receiving and harboring her slanderous words, the punishment is meted out against the one who perpetrated the evil report in the first place. Aaron attempts to diminish their sin by labelling it as “foolish” (לְאִי), indicating that they did not act with malice. The Lxx translates “for we were ignorant wherein we sinned.” But *lashon hara* is not judged on the basis of intent. Slander is wrong regardless of the sincerity of the slanderer.

It is obvious that God had forgiven both Aaron and Miriam, for He receives the prayer of Moses on her behalf. Yet her sin is not without consequences. The sowing and reaping principle is at work. Thus Miriam is banished to the outside of the camp for seven days, on the basis that humiliation by an earthly father, which could last a week, is surely not greater than the punishment of the heavenly father. (No adequate explanation has been found in ancient records for the notice that when a father spits in the face of his daughter, she is humiliated for seven days.)

It would appear that Miriam was immediately cured of the skin disorder, for if it were leprosy, her banishment would have been a minimum of 14 days (Lev 13:5). If she had been healed at once, banishment for seven days would have been for the period of quarantine (Lev 13:5). But the fact that the skin disorder is said to be like snow (perhaps indicating it was white), and that Lev 13:13, 17 indicates that the white color is a sign of being clean, we may surmise that Miriam was immediately cured following Moses’ prayer, and that her banishment was due to the shame of her sin, and marking her as an example to the rest, so that the sin of slander might be carefully avoided in the future.

The narrative notes that the people did not set out during the seven day period of Miriam’s banishment, but camped, awaiting her return to the community. The one whom God had forgiven was to be received without hesitation by the rest. Restoration is the goal of divine discipline.

The *haftarah* portion has its obvious connection to our Torah portion. In the opening verses we read: “For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken falsehood, your tongue mutters wickedness” (v. 3). As is often the case, the sin of slander is viewed as shedding of blood, for in the same manner that murder injures physically, so slander injures one’s reputation. Moreover, the metaphors of the prophet remind us that slander multiplies—it cannot be contained: “They hatch adders’ eggs and weave the spider’s web; he who eats of their eggs dies, and from that which is crushed a snake breaks forth” (v. 5). Once words of slander are uttered, there is no way to contain their multiplying.

Likewise, the *haftarah* parallels our Torah portion because the remedy for the sin of slander is in the hands of an intercessor. In v. 16, He looks for a man and finds none. Then His own right arm effected salvation, and His own righteousness brought about the remedy (v. 17). Note also v. 20: ““A Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,” declares

Adonai.” As in the Torah portion, where Moses acts as the intercessor for Miriam and Aaron, so in the prophetic passage, the Redeemer, our Messiah, is foreseen as the One Who brings God’s mercy and forgiveness to sinners.

And this is the connection to our Apostolic portion. The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and in His coming, our disease has been cured. “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:11–12). Though we were formally banished as those outside of the camp, through His mercy and grace we have been received into His family. “Miriam was received again” (Num 12:15).

This Torah portion has, once again, caused us to think deeply about the sin of slander, or evil speech (*lashon hara*). But it is often the case that we are bewildered about exactly what constitutes this sin. How do we unwittingly engage in it, and how can we avoid it? Is it possible that we, like Miriam, commit the sin of slander even though we do so without malice or clear intent to harm another person?

First, slander can be defined as any thing that causes another person to be diminished in the eyes of others. It besmirches their reputation, or belittles their character. It is not slanderous to disagree with someone, or to take a different opinion or approach to matters. But slander enters in when we attack the character of someone in order to discredit their viewpoint.

Secondly, even if we are sharing things that are true, we still may be engaged in slander. Here we must check our motives. Have we taken up someone else’s offence? Are we seeking to devalue those who may have offended someone we know and care about? In such cases, the usual motivation is to win people to one side or the other, which in itself is divisive. Slander always breeds division.

But what are we to do if we overhear slander? First, slander is not to be believed. We cannot repeat what we have heard as though it is true. Secondly, if someone begins to engage in slander, we should carefully and graciously attempt to stop them and remind them that slander is simply not permitted. Leaving the room, or walking away from those engaged in slander may be necessary. We may also have the opportunity to remind the one who began a slanderous report that they should talk directly to the one with whom they have a problem, and not to others.

But what happens if we observe clear sinful behavior? First, we must be certain that the issue is clearly defined in the Scriptures and not a matter of personal preference. If we have observed sin in another person’s life, we should seek ways to go directly to that person, in private, in order to help and restore that person. What we are not allowed to do is talk to others about what we have seen. But we must be a first-hand witness to the sin, and be sure that what we have seen is clearly contrary to God’s word. If we confront our brother or sister, and they turn from their sin, then God’s mercy has been demonstrated. The matter remains private (Matt 18:15).

If one goes to a brother or sister who has sinned, and is not received, then that one should return with another witness of the event. If there are no other witnesses, the matter cannot proceed further. It is in the mouth of two or three witnesses that a matter is confirmed (Matt 18:16, quoting Deut 19:15). If, however, two witnesses confront the sinner, and there is no subsequent repentance, the matter must then become public to the community, but always with the desire for the restoration of the one who has erred (Matt 18:16–17).

In all of this, our example is Yeshua in Whose footsteps we strive to walk:

For you have been called for this purpose, since Messiah also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1Pet 2:21–23)