

Who Honored Miriam, and How?

No good deed goes unnoticed

By Yossi Ives

The Torah tells us that “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses,”¹ for which they received a severe reprimand. As the instigator,² Miriam was struck with a skin condition called *tzara’at*,³ which required that she be barred from entering the Israelite encampment for a full week.

Thus the Torah reads: “So Miriam was confined outside of the encampment for seven days, and the people did not travel until Miriam rejoined. Thereafter the people departed . . .”⁴ Now, since the verse explicitly states that “the people departed” only after Miriam’s confinement, why was it necessary to also state that “the people did not travel until Miriam rejoined”? It is saying the same thing twice!

Rashi explains that the Torah uses the repetition to highlight the reason for this special consideration towards Miriam: “This honor was accorded her by G-d because of the time she remained with [her brother] Moses when he was cast into the river, as the Torah says,⁵ ‘His sister stood by from afar to know what would be done to him.’”

This courtesy afforded to her, by waiting to journey until she was restored to society, was in recognition of the kindness that she had shown waiting for baby Moses when he was placed in the Nile.

Who Decided to Wait?

There is a discrepancy here. The Torah specifies that it was “the people” who did not abandon Miriam, whereas Rashi suggests that it was an honor accorded to her by G-d. This is particularly confusing, as the very words on which Rashi comments are “the people did not travel.” Who, then, was paying respect to Miriam?

Moreover, Rashi’s comment is based on a Mishnah⁶ which states, “Therefore the Israelites waited for her,” suggesting this was a gesture from the people. Why would Rashi deviate from the simple meaning of the biblical text?

There is a much bigger problem with Rashi’s commentary. Whether it should be attributed to G-d or to the people, how can waiting for Miriam be described as an act of honor or respect? Abandoning her in the desert wasteland would have put her in imminent danger! There is no way to imagine that the people would have left anyone behind in a place the Torah describes as “that great and awesome desert, [in which there were] snakes, vipers and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water.”⁷ How can Rashi say “this honor was accorded her” by staying in place during the week of her seclusion, when moving on and leaving her to her own devices would have endangered her life? “Honor” seems entirely the wrong term. They had no choice but to wait for her. Minus this special honor, would the camp have moved on without her? Surely that is inconceivable.

Starting and Stopping

To solve these problems, the Rebbe shows us that the questions stem from a fundamentally incorrect assumption. When we read that the people did not depart until Miriam rejoined the camp, this is not meant to imply that there was any question of Miriam being left behind. Whatever the circumstances, neither Miriam nor anyone else would have been abandoned in the harsh and dangerous desert.

Had the people begun to journey during Miriam's seven days of seclusion, she would have had to halt her seclusion and move together with everyone else.

By waiting the full seven days until "the days of her confinement were completed," Miriam did not have to suspend her seclusion period until the Israelites settled elsewhere.

Should they have decamped in the middle of her seven days, then once they had camped anew she would have to resume her seclusion. This would have prolonged the process of her cleansing, which would have been dishonoring. So the special honor shown to Miriam was that she could get her period of disgrace over and done with as quickly as possible.

How do we know that travel days could not count toward her seven days of seclusion? The Torah states that Miriam's seclusion was to be for "seven days *outside the camp*."⁸ Indeed, the Torah mandates that anyone diagnosed with the *tzara'at* skin condition "shall dwell isolated; his dwelling shall be *outside the camp*."⁹ Being "outside the camp" presupposes the existence of a camp. One can be outside of a camp only if a camp exists.

Had the Israelites decamped and set off on their journey, there would have no camp for Miriam to dwell outside of. Thus, her seven-day time period would have had to be put on hold until the camp was restored. Only her honor was at stake, not her safety.

Who Chooses When to Travel?

During their 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites followed the clouds of glory. When the clouds lifted, they would break camp and follow the clouds. When the clouds would descend, they too would settle. Thus, the fact that they did not travel for seven days was determined by G-d, who chose not to lift the clouds.

So while the honor was *orchestrated* by G-d, it was *accorded* by the people who actually waited for her. G-d arranged that the progress of an entire nation was put on hold so the people could show their appreciation for the selfless act of a young girl many decades earlier.

There are few virtues more promoted in the Torah than that of gratitude. Being sincerely grateful for good things done to us is a mark of humility and grace. No matter how many years have passed, it is never too late to show appreciation. Gratitude is not only something one should feel; it should be displayed in public, and if possible before the person who was responsible for the good deed.

The Torah wants us to know that it was important to the Almighty that the Israelites use that moment of Miriam's personal distress to show her the honor she earned all those years earlier.

FOOTNOTES

1. Numbers 12:1.
2. Rashi ad loc.
3. Often translated as “leprosy,” but which in reality has little in common with that condition.
4. Numbers 12:15–16.
5. Exodus 2:4.
6. Sotah 1:9.
7. Deuteronomy 8:15.
8. Numbers 12:14.
9. Leviticus 13:46.

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