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# Every Child Needs a Miriam

## A Single Gesture Toward a Baby Reverberates Throughout History

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### Miriam's Skin Disease

At the end of this week's portion (Behaaloscha), we catch a rare and fascinating glimpse into the interpersonal relationship of Moshe, his brother Aaron, and their sister Miriam.

Miriam, speaking to her brother Aaron, was critiquing Moses' marriage. The Torah is decidedly cryptic about what exactly she was criticizing, stating merely that "Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married<sup>[1]</sup>." There are various ways to explain what it was she said and who this Cushite woman was<sup>[2]</sup>. Whatever the case is, an older sister voicing criticism of her baby brother's marriage is easy enough to understand—even if that younger brother happens to be Moses himself.

G-d hears their conversation and decides to clarify to Aaron and Miriam who their younger brother is. He says to them: "Please listen to My words. If there are prophets among you, I make myself known to them only in a vision or a dream. Not so is My servant Moses; he is faithful throughout My house. With him, I speak mouth to mouth... he beholds the image of the Lord. So how were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?"

G-d departs in a huff, and Miriam – and according to Rabbi Akiva in the Talmud<sup>[3]</sup>, Aaron too—is left stricken with leprosy, the biblical punishment for slander. Moses then intervenes, crying out to G-d<sup>[4]</sup>: "I beseech you, G-d, please heal her!" G-d limits her affliction to seven days, that she (like all lepers) must spend in isolation outside the camp. Following these seven quarantined days, she would be healed and could reenter the camp. In the words of the Torah:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן יִרְקוּ בְּפָנֶיהָ הָלֹא תְקַלְמוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תִּסָּגֵר שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחֵר תֵּאָסֵף.

*"She shall be quarantined for seven days outside the camp, and afterward can she re-enter."*

The Torah finishes the story: *"And the people did not travel until Miriam had re-entered."*

The greatest biblical commentator, the 11th-century French sage, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, known as Rashi, quoting the Talmud<sup>[5]</sup>, tells us that the nation waiting for Miriam was a unique honor conferred upon her in the merit of something she had done eight decades earlier. At the beginning of Exodus, Pharaoh decreed that all male Jewish children be drowned in the Nile Delta. Moses' mother had placed her infant Moses in a basket and had set him afloat in the Nile. It is here that Miriam debuts in biblical history: "His sister stood from afar, to know what would happen to him<sup>[6]</sup>." It is the merit of her waiting for Moses that the nation now waited for her.

Although the nation was ready to embark on the next leg of its journey, they stopped for seven days, waiting for Miriam who was quarantined outside of the camp, as a reward for her noble deed decades earlier when Moses was an infant floating in the river.

## Would They Let Her Die?

Yet, upon deeper reflection, this explanation by Rashi is deeply disturbing.

Is the only reason the nation waited for Miriam, while she was quarantined for a week because she once waited for Moses as an infant? What was the alternative? Not to wait for Miriam and leave her alone in a parched and barren desert, without food, water, or any protection, a place the Torah describes [\[7\]](#) as “a desert great and awesome, full of snakes, vipers, scorpions, and drought, where there was no water?”

Suppose Miriam would have never watched over Moses as an infant. Would she have then not been rewarded this “honor” and left to die in the desert alone?

Equally disturbing is the expression Rashi uses that the Jewish people waiting for Miriam was an “honor” (“kavod”) bestowed upon her. Yet, this was no honor; it was a matter of life and death. It is impossible for any human being, let alone an elderly woman (Miriam at that time was 87, being seven years older than Moses, who was 81 at the time), to survive alone in a dangerous desert.

And what happened to the other lepers expelled from the camp, who did not receive this special “honor” of the nation waiting for them? Were they simply abandoned to die whenever the people continued their journey?

## The Camp

In an ingenuous presentation, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (in an address delivered on Shabbos Behaaloscha 1965 [\[8\]](#)) presented the explanation.

We must draw attention to two words in the text. The verse states: “She shall be quarantined for seven days outside the camp (mechutz lamachaneh), and then she should reenter.” Each word and expression in Torah is precise. The words “outside the camp” intimate that her exclusion and expulsion would be effective when the people **are encamped**; when they are dwelling in one place as a camp (“machaneh” in Hebrew means to dwell in one place, as in the term “vayachanu”), and she would remain outside of the camp.

Only if she is quarantined for seven days outside of the nation’s dwelling when it constitutes a stationary “camp”, would she fulfill her duty and would be able to heal and reenter the community.

What this meant was that travel time did not count for this seven-day quarantine period. Even if Miriam were to travel in isolation behind the rest of the nation, this would not be counted as part of her seven-day quarantine necessary for her healing and reentry, since she was not quarantined “outside the camp”, because during their traveling the Jews did not constitute a “camp”, a “machaneh.”

Thus, if the nation would not have waited the seven-day period for Miriam, she would have certainly traveled along with them. But she would not have had the ability to go into isolation for seven days to heal until the nation would cease traveling and become a “camp” once again. This would have delayed her healing process as long as they were on the move.

This, then, was the special honor bestowed upon Miriam. By delaying their journey for seven days, Miriam could be quarantined immediately outside of the camp, and at the conclusion of the week, reenter the camp after a full recovery. Her leprosy would not linger for even one extra day. This was not a question of life and death; it was only a question of how long she would endure her malady.

## 81 Years Earlier

Why did Miriam deserve this honor?

Let us now go back 81 years earlier. Let us see what Miriam actually did for her baby brother Moses, and then we can begin to appreciate the spiritual dynamics of history – how all of our actions return to us: what we put out there comes back to us.

Picture the scene: The king of the country, the most powerful man on the planet, the leader of the most important civilization at the time, had decreed that all Jewish newborn boys must be drowned. Miriam's baby brother is one of those slated for death. Their mother had just sent the infant to his divinely ordained fate by letting him sail into the Nile, which happens to be the longest river in the world. This desperate act was carried out in the hope that perhaps an Egyptian would, against odds, be aroused to compassion and save the innocent Jewish boy.

Miriam goes to the river. "His sister stood from afar, to know what would happen to him [6]." She gazes at her brother from a distance to see how things would play themselves out. Miriam was a seven-year-old girl at the time. If he is captured by Pharaoh's soldiers, she knows she cannot save him; she is also probably too far away to help if the basket capsizes, nor will she be able to do much if an Egyptian takes the baby to his own home. Nor can she nurse the infant if he is crying for milk.

So what does she actually achieve by standing guard (besides finding out what might happen to him)? She achieves one thing. We may see it as a small achievement, but from the biblical perspective, it is grand.

When Pharaoh's daughter discovers baby Moses wailing, she naturally attempts to find a wet nurse to feed him. Moses, although starving, refuses to nurse from an Egyptian woman [9]. That was when Miriam steps in: "Shall I go and call for you a wet nurse from the Hebrew women, so that she shall nurse the child for you?" she asks the Egyptian princess [10]. The princess, Batya, agrees. Miriam calls the mother of the child. Batya gives her the child so that she can nurse him. Moses is curled up again in the bosom of his loving mother. He survives, and the rest is history.

Let's now engage in the "what if" hypothesis. Suppose that Miriam was absent from the scene, what would have occurred? It is likely that after observing that the baby is not taking to any Egyptian women's milk, Batya would have eventually realized, that Moses, whom she knew was a Jewish child (as she states clearly, "he is a child of the Hebrews"), might take better to the milk of a Jewish woman. She would have summoned a Jewish woman and Moses would have received his nourishment. It would have taken longer, Moses would have cried for another hour or two, but eventually, he would have been fed.

So what did Miriam accomplish? Miriam's actions caused Moses' hunger to last for a shorter period of time. Miriam alleviated Moses' hunger pangs sooner, shortening the span of his discomfort.

Miriam caused a young Jewish baby, a "Yiddishen kind," to weep for a few moments less. She alleviated the agony and distress of a baby.

Eighty-one years pass. Miriam is experiencing discomfort. She has a skin disease. The nation is supposed to travel, on route to the Holy Land. (This was before the sin of the spies, and the people were still moving towards the Land of Israel, hoping to fulfill the great dream.) But if they begin traveling now, Miriam's agony would be prolonged, maybe a few hours, maybe a few days, as long as the Hebrews are journeying. On the road, she would not have the opportunity to be quarantined for the requisite seven days.

Because she diminished the discomfort of her brother, eight decades later an entire nation—around three million people, men women, and children—plus the holy Tabernacle, the Ark, Moses, Aron, all of the leaders, and G-d Himself - all waited. She minimized her brother's pain, and now millions of people waited patiently to minimize her distress.

Because the energy you put out there is the same energy that comes back to you, in one form or another form.

## Your Weeping Child

How many times a night do you wake up to your crying infant who yearns to be fed or just held? Mothers often awake every few hours (if they even get that amount of rest) to cradle and nurture their little wailing angels. Some husbands do not even take note; they sleep through the night and then wonder why their wives are exhausted the next day...

It can become stressful to tend continuously to the needs of our little ones. Babies certainly know how to let themselves be heard and we caretakers often become overwhelmed and drained in the process. The serene corridors of office buildings seem so much more serene and interesting.

Yet, as this Miriam episode teaches us, real history is not created in office buildings. It is created in the arms of mothers and fathers nurturing the souls G-d granted them to create our collective tomorrow. On a single day, a little boy was spared, for a short time, hunger pangs. Eight decades later, millions of people and G-d himself, interrupted their journey to pay homage to that individual gesture.

Every child needs a Miriam in his or her life--and all of us can become that Miriam. We meet or hear of children or teenagers who are in pain, starving for nourishment, love, validation, confidence, and meaning. We may say: They will grow up and learn how to manage. Or we may tend to them, be there for them, embrace them, and shorten the span of their agony.

And when we do that, as little Miriam did, millions will be thankful to us for making a difference in that one individual's life.

### **Godi and Shlomo**

It was 1989. An Israeli Defense Force soldier named Godi Remon was shot by an Arab terrorist outside of the town of Ramallah. The Arab gunman assumed he was dead and moved on.

Shortly afterward, a young Israeli named Shlomo Bergman happened to be driving by and saw Godi bleeding on the ground. He brought him into his car and sped off to the nearest Israeli hospital. He underwent surgery and survived. Shlomo left the hospital minutes before the parents of the victim arrived.

Godi's mother was bothered by not being able to thank the mystery person who saved her son and tried unsuccessfully for a year to find out who he is. But to no avail.

Godi's parents put up a sign at their grocery store which they owned in the city of Ashdod, describing what happened. They reasoned that Israel is a small country and eventually they might find the person who saved their son.

Months passed with no response. Finally, one morning about a year later, Anat Bergman, Shlomo's mother, was visiting friends in Ashdod. She entered a grocery store and noticed the sign hanging by the door of the store. She asked the store owner who put up the sign. When Godi's mother said it was her, the two mothers embraced for a long time.

Then Shlomo's mother said, "Look at me -- you don't remember me?" "No", Godi's mother said, "I'm sorry. Did we meet before?"

"Yes," Shlomo's mother said. "Twenty years ago I used to live around here and I came all the time to buy basic groceries. One day you noticed that I looked really down and you asked me why I was down. I told you that I was going through a very difficult time and on top of that I was pregnant with my first child and planning on having an abortion because I could not with the mental and financial pressure. As soon as I said "abortion" you called your husband over and the two of you didn't seem to care about your own store but sat and patiently listened to my story and my challenges. I still remember what you said."

"You told me that it is true that I was going through a hard time, and that you understood how stressed out I was, but sometimes the greatest things in life come through the biggest difficulties. You spoke of the joy of being a mother and

that the most beautiful word to hear in the Hebrew language is “Ima” (mother) when spoken by one’s child... You explained how all the challenges pale in comparison with the inner joy coming from raising a child, from embracing your little one, from cultivating a living miracle. You explained how with each child born, a new channel opens up in our lives, generating a greater consciousness, and more livelihood. You both spoke for a while with so much empathy, love, and sensitivity, until I was convinced that I should have this baby.”

Shlomo's mother continued, "I gave birth to the baby twenty years ago. My son Shlomo wouldn't have been alive if not for you. Two decades later, he was the one who saved your son, Godi's life.”

You see, you saved my son's life; now he saved your son's life.

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[1] Numbers 12: 1-16.

[2] Rashi and others say that the Cushite woman was Tziporah, and Cushite, “black,” is a euphemism for “beautiful.” Miriam was criticizing Moshe for abstaining from physical relations with her. Daas Zekanim and Rashbam say that the Cushite was a second wife of Moshe, one that he had married during the forty years he was king of Kush, and she was criticizing him for marrying a Cushite woman, and not a Jewish one. (Ibn Ezra brings both explanations, and settles for Rashi's explanation.) Alshich suggests that Moses married a black woman, and Miriam felt he abstained because she was black. Miriam protested what seemed like a “racist” act.

[3] Shabbos 97a – the opinion of Rabbi Akiva (Rabbi Yehudah ben Beseira argues with him.)

[4] Numbers 12:13

[5] Sotah 8b and 9b. “With the measure one measures, he too is measured. Joseph the greatest among his brothers, personally took charge of his father Jacob's burial, and none other than Moses occupied himself with Joseph's burial. Moses personally took charge of the burial of Joseph, and none other than the Omnipresent occupied Himself with Moses' burial, as it is said, ‘and He buried him in the valley.’

[6] Exodus 2:4.

[7] Deuteronomy 8:15.

[8] This essay is based on Likkutei Sichos vol. 18 Behaalosecha. To study it inside with Rabbi Jacobson, and for the source sheets from which this essay is taken, please [click here](#).

[9] Rashi Exodus 2:7.

[10] Exodus ibid.