

במדבר פרק יב

- (א) ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה על אדות האשה הכשית אשר לקח כי אשה כשית לקח:
(ב) ויאמרו הרק אך במשה דבר ה' הלא גם בנו דבר וישמע יקוק:
(ג) והאיש משה <ענו> עניו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה: o
(ד) ויאמר ה' פתאם אל משה ואל אהרן ואל מרים צאו שלשתכם אל אהל מועד ויצאו שלשתם:
(ה) וירד ה' בעמוד ענן ויעמד פתח האהל ויקרא אהרן ומרים ויצאו שניהם:
(ו) ויאמר שמעו נא דברי אם יהיה נביאכם יקוק במראה אליו אתודע בחלום אדבר בו:
(ז) לא כן עבדי משה בכל ביתי נאמן הוא:
(ח) פה אל פה אדבר בו ומראה ולא בחידת ותמנת ה' יביט ומדוע לא יראתם לדבר בעבדי במשה:

Miryam (and Aharon) spoke about Mosheh negatively regarding the Cushite woman (*ishah*) whom he had taken; for an *ishah* Cushite he had taken.

They said: "Is it really only with Mosheh that Hashem spoke?! Indeed he spoke also with us!". Hashem heard.

But the man (*ish*) Mosheh was very *anav*, more than any human being (*adam*) on the face of the earth (*adamah*).

Hashem said suddenly to Mosheh and to Aharon and to Miryam: "Go out, the three of you, to the *ohel Moed*." The three of them went out.

Hashem descended in a pillar (*amud*) of cloud that stood (*vayaamad*) at the entrance to the *ohel*. He called Aharon and Miryam, and the two of them went out.

He said: "Please heed my words . . ." (the ellipsis contains an extended but extremely opaque explanation of what differentiates Mosheh from other prophets. This is followed by Miryam's affliction with tzoraat and her eventual cure through Mosheh's intercession with G-d.)

I'm spending as much time as possible these days preparing for the 2009 Summer Beit Midrash, which will focus this year on Hilkhos Investigative Journalism. This week's dvar Torah is therefore underresearched and heavily influenced thematically.

The passage begins by describing Miriam (and Aharon) as speaking "*b'Mosheh al odo*"; *b'Mosheh*, could be translated as "against Mosheh", and five of the six uses of "*al odo*" in Tanakh suggest a negative connotation, although see later in this week's parashah (13:24). It then quotes both of them (the verb above was singular/feminine, and here is plural/masculine) as rejecting a hypothetical contention that G-d spoke only to Mosheh, when in fact He spoke to them as well. G-d hears what they say, and then "suddenly" speaks to all three.

Even this skeletal outline reveals many of the "gaps" Meir Sternberg sees as crucial to Biblical narrative technique:

- a) there is no obvious connection between what Miryam and Aharon actually say and Mosheh's choice of spouse
- b) if the point is that Mosheh is unique, why does Hashem address all three of them simultaneously?
- c) Why is it necessary for the narrator to interject a defense of Mosheh, and for that matter a defense that has a different axis (*anavah*) than the defense Hashem gives Moshe and Aharon (*neemanut*)?

My interest this week, however, is more halakhic: what is it that Miryam and Aharon did wrong?

- 1) The text seems to emphasize that the wrong was embedded in their speech, rather than in their thoughts; thus "and Hashem heard". But is it really forbidden to discuss the possible failings of our leaders? How will we ever be able to respond to abuses of power, or for that matter incompetence, if no one can ever check their negative impressions with anyone else?
- 2) Here is a general modern consensus that human mental health often requires us to speak to others about what's troubling us. Now for many of us, a primary stress in life is workplace interaction – is it a violation of *lashon hora* to tell one's spouse about problems at work? Rabbi Howard Jachter is on tap to give a shiur to SBM about spousal privilege in this regard, but for now, I wonder if a similar notion shouldn't apply to siblings who are confidants, or for that matter even to best friends. But perhaps Miriam and Aharon disprove this suggestion.

- 3) The narrator here tells us that Miryam and Aharon were objectively wrong about Mosheh. But if Mosheh behaved in a manner that would reasonably be interpreted as arrogant absent Divine denial, how can we blame Miryam and Aharon for reaching the wrong conclusion?
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