

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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פרשת בהעלותך
י"ט בסיון תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 8:1-12:16

In this *parasha*, the Bnei Yisrael receive instructions regarding Pesach; they journey forth from Sinai and complain to God on several occasions, provoking God's anger; Miriam and Aaron speak against Moshe.

The episode of Miriam and Aharon speaking against Moshe sounds like something any of us might involve ourselves in. The event unfolds as follows (12:1-16):

א ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה, על-אדות האשה הכשית אשר לקח: כִּי-אִשָּׁה כשית, לקח. ב ויאמרו, הרק אד-במשה דבר ה'--הלא, גם-בנו דבר; וישמע, ה'. ג והאיש משה, ענו מאד--מכל, האדם, אשר, על-פני האדמה. ד ויאמר ה' פתאום, אל-משה ואל-אהרן ואל-מרים, צאו שלשתכם, אל-אהל מועד; ונצאו, שלשתם. ה וירד ה' בעמוד ענן, ויעמד פתח האהל; ויקרא אהרן ומרים, ויצאו שניהם. ו ויאמר, שמעו-נא דברי; אם-יהיה, נביאכם--ה' 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', נביט; ומדוע לא יראתם, לדבר בעבדי במשה. ט ויחר-אף ה' בם, וילך. י והענו, סר מעל האהל, והנה מרים, מצרעת פשלג; ויפן אהרן אל-מרים, והנה מצרעת. יא ויאמר אהרן, אל-משה: בי אדני--אל-נא תשת עלינו חטאת, אשר נואלנו ואשר חטאנו. יב אל-נא תהי, כמות, אשר בצאתו מרחם אמו, ויאכל חצי בשרו. יג ויצעק משה, אל-ה' לאמר: א-ל, נא רפא נא לה. יד ויאמר ה' אל-משה, ואביה ירק ירק בפניה--הלא תכלם, שבעת ימים; תסגר שבעת ימים, מחוץ למחנה, ואחר, תאסף. טו ותסגר מרים מחוץ למחנה, שבעת ימים; והעם לא נסע, עד-האסף מרים. טז ואחר נסעו העם, מחצרות; ויחנו, במדבר פארן.

1 And Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman. 2 And they said: 'Has Hashem indeed spoken only with Moshe? Has Hashem not

spoken also with us?' And Hashem heard it. **3** Now the man Moshe was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth. **4** And Hashem spoke suddenly to Moshe, and to Aharon, and to Miriam: 'Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.' And the three of them came out. **5** And Hashem came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the Tent, and called Aharon and Miriam; and they both came forth. **6** And Hashem said: 'Hear now My words: if there is a prophet among you, I, Hashem, do make Myself known to him in a vision, I do speak with him in a dream. **7** My servant Moshe is not so; he is trusted in all My house; **8** with him do I speak mouth to mouth, and not in dark speeches; and he sees the image of Hashem; why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?' **9** And the anger of Hashem was kindled against them; and Hashem departed. **10** And when the cloud was removed from over the Tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow; and Aharon looked upon Miriam; and, behold, she was leprous. **11** And Aharon said to Moshe: 'Oh my lord, lay not, I pray thee, sin upon us, for that we have done foolishly, and for that we have sinned. **12** Let her not, I pray, be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb.' **13** And Moshe cried to Hashem, saying: 'Heal her now, O God, I beseech You.' **14** And Hashem said to Moshe: 'If her father had but spit in her face, should she not hide in shame seven days? Let her be shut up outside the camp seven days, and after that she shall be brought in again.' **15** And Miriam was shut up outside the camp seven days; and the people did not journey until Miriam was brought in again. **16** And afterward the people traveled from Chazerot, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Rashi [11th Century Franco-Germany] questions what it was that Miriam and Aharon said about Moshe. He comes to the conclusion that they were speaking about the fact that Moshe had separated from his wife, Tzipporah. Says Rashi:

She opened the conversation, therefore the Torah mentions her first. And from where did Miriam know that Moshe had separated himself from his wife? R. Nathan answered: Miriam was beside Tzipporah when it was told to Moshe, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp' (Bemidbar 11:17). When Tzipporah heard this, she exclaimed, 'Woe to the wives of these if they have anything to do with prophecy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband has separated from me!' It was from

this that Miriam knew about it, and she told it to Aharon. Now what happened in the case with Miriam who had no intention to disparage him? She was punished thus severely! How much more so will this be in the case of one who intentionally speaks in disparagement of his fellow person!"

According to Rashi, the Torah is trying to teach us the severity of speaking about someone else out of turn, even if we are not speaking evil of them, and trying to raise our consciousness to avoid this however and whenever we can.

In response to the action of people gossiping about each other, some modern rabbis, most notably the Chafetz Chaim [Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, late 19th-early 20th Century Eastern Europe] created the concept of a *תענית דיבור* – *Taanit Dibbur* – literally, a fast from speech. During this fast, the person undertakes not to speak words unrelated to Torah for a particular amount of time.

Says the Chafetz Chaim in his work, the *Mishneh Brurah* (Orach Chaim 571), "I saw written in one holy book that when a person wishes to conduct a voluntary fast day, better that he should undertake a fast from speech than from food, for avoiding speech will do one no harm, either to his body or to his soul, nor will it weaken him." The same idea can be found in *Shemirat HaLashon*, his work on the *mitzvot* surrounding speech (Sha'ar Ha-Tevunah, chapter 2).

One common way of practicing a *Taanit Dibbur* takes three days. The first task is to remain silent for an entire day. (Clearly, this can only be done in sync with the needs of one's profession and with giving advance notice to those with whom one will come in contact.) The second day is limited to quoting from the Torah, siddur, or other holy text. The third day, one may increase speaking, while only speaking about Torah matters. The fourth day, one resumes his or her regular speech. The idea is that this will sensitize us to how careless we are with speech, in terms of speaking about others, speaking coarsely, and speaking unnecessarily. When we refrain from immediately saying what is on our mind, we realize the power of the gift of speech that has been bestowed on us, so that when we resume normal conversation, we become more careful about our use of this gift.

Whether one resonates towards this practice or not, it is certainly constructive for each of us to be aware of how and about what or whom we are speaking.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What do you think of the idea of a *Taanit Dibur*?
- For the next four hours, keep track of how many times you speak about other people, either positively or negatively.
- How can words hurt someone? How can they help someone?