

Parashat Beha'alotecha 5780, 2020:

The Dangers of Lashon Harah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

“Remember what the L-rd, your G-d, did to Miriam on the way, when you went out of Egypt” (*Sefer Devarim* 24:9) is one of the Six Remembrances that many people recite at the end of *Tefilat Shacharit*. It is a brief reminder of a famous narrative in our *parasha* that recounts the incident of Miriam and Aharon having spoken *lashon harah* against their beloved brother, *Moshe Rabbeinu*. It must be noted that while both Miriam and Aharon slandered Moshe, Miriam began this action. This is clear from the initial verse depicting this woeful incident wherein her name is mentioned first: “Miriam and Aaron began speaking against Moses because of the dark-skinned woman he had married... (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:1, translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*) As a result, it is Miriam, rather than Miriam and Aharon, with whom this negative behavior is associated.

What caused Miriam, one of our seven great prophetesses (*Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 14a), to speak *lashon harah* against Moshe? After all, she loved, honored and recognized him as the authentic leader of *klal Yisrael*. While it certainly does not exonerate her behavior, it appears that she was overcome by her heartfelt emotions on behalf of her sister-in-law, Tziporah. According to *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 87a, Moshe ceased to fulfill his conjugal

obligations to Tziporah following the Revelation at Mount Sinai. This is something that he initially decided on his own, since at this point, he was in constant contact with the Almighty and needed to maintain a total state of *taharah*. It should be noted, however, that Moshe subsequently received Hashem's approbation for having acted in this manner.

How did Miriam become aware of such a private change in Moshe and Tziporah's marriage? Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on *Midrash Tanchuma* to Parashat Tzav (13), relates how Miriam discovered what Moshe had done, and the heartbreaking pain and suffering it had caused Tziporah:

Miriam and Aaron spoke: She spoke first, [and was, therefore, the one who was punished]. Therefore, Scripture mentions her first. How did she know that Moses had separated from his wife? R. Nathan says: Miriam was beside Zipporah when Moses was told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp. When Zipporah heard this, she said, "Woe to their wives if they are required to prophesy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband separated from me." From this, Miriam knew [about it] and told Aaron. (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

Although Miriam and Aharon had no intention of harming Moshe, their actions directly diminished his status in the eyes of the nation. Rashi further explains: "Now if Miriam, who did not intend to disparage him [Moses] was punished, all the more so would someone who [intentionally] disparages his fellow [be punished]." Beyond a doubt, Rashi's words should be viewed as a spiritual "wake-up" call to each of us. If Miriam and Aharon, two of the greatest leaders in the history of the Jewish people, could err so grievously, certainly we must redouble our efforts to refrain from speaking and listening to *lashon harah* — especially in those scenarios wherein we convince ourselves "we are doing the right thing." Rationalizations regarding the propriety of speaking *lashon harah* are completely worthless. As Rav Chisda in the name of Mar Ukba declared: "Anyone who speaks *lashon harah*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* Himself declares: 'He and I are unable to dwell in the same

world!” (Talmud Bavli, Arakin 15b, translation my own)

May the Almighty give us the wisdom to recognize the dangers of *lashon harah* and the endless pain and sorrow it brings in its wake. Moreover, with His help and our fervent desire, may we change our behaviors in this crucial area and do our best to avoid its many pitfalls. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.