YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Beha'alotekha**

**Leadership that is attentive to the People**

**Sicha of HarAV MosHeh Lichtenstein**

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The story related at the end of our *parasha*, the story of Miryam and Aharon's slanderous talk about Moshe, is a difficult story. First, the story is difficult on the interpretive level: Moshe is criticized "because of the Kushite woman whom he had married" (*Bemidbar* 12:1), but the precise content of the criticism is not clear. Nor is it clear what is the relationship between this criticism and what is reported afterwards – Moshe's greatness, described with the words: "Now the man Moshe was very humble, more than all the men upon the face of the earth" (*Bemidbar* 12:3). Furthermore, the attitude toward the nature of Moshe's prophecy that is mentioned in the exchange between Miryam and Aharon and God is also not clear:

And they said: “Has the Lord indeed spoken only with Moshe? Has He not spoken also with us?”… And the Lord came down… and He said: “… With him do I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord does he behold." (*Bemidbar* 12:2-8)

The story is also difficult on the personal-human level: Miryam was thus far portrayed as the older sister who stood at a distance to see what would happen to the infant Moshe, the sister who accompanied her brother in the leadership of the people of Israel in the wilderness, who led the women at the Sea of Suf with cymbals and dances while Moshe led the men in a song of thanksgiving. How could the relationship between Miryam and her younger brother shatter with such great fanfare? How did this grave crisis between the two siblings come about? How did Miryam the prophetess turn into someone in whose face the *Shekhina* spits and who must be shut in shame outside the camp for seven days?

In order to understand the motives that led to the human drama revealed in our *parasha*, we must examine Miryam's actions in greater depth, beginning with the dark days of bondage in Egypt as described in the book of *Shemot*.

According to the plain sense of the verses, Miryam stands at a distance to watch over her baby brother on "his journey" in the Nile:

And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him. (*Shemot* 2:4)

Her interest certainly does not stem from mere inquisitiveness and curiosity; Miryam feels responsible for Moshe, and she afterwards puts her life in danger in order to protect him:

And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river… and she saw the ark among the reeds… And she opened it, and saw it, even the child… and said: “This is one of the Hebrews' children.” Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter: “Shall I go and call you a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?” (*Shemot* 2:5-7)

When Miryam approaches Pharaoh's daughter, she does not know the end of the story; she does not know how the daughter of the king will respond. She has no idea whether Pharaoh's daughter really "has compassion" for the child, as is attested to by the verse, or whether she is shocked by the idea that "this is one of the Hebrews' children," by the boldness and chutzpa expressed in the attempt to hide the baby and save his life. Nevertheless, she turns to Pharaoh's daughter, only because of the slim chance offered to her to save her younger brother's life, his education, his belonging and entry into his Jewish family - that is to say, in order to preserve his national identity and the spirit that will guide him throughout his life.

What brought Miryam to put her life in jeopardy for the sake of Moshe? *Chazal* find the foundations for this in earlier events, in which Miryam stood firm with inspiring strength:

"And there went a man of the house of Levi" (*Shemot* 2:1). Where did he go? R. Yehuda bar Zevina said: He went in the counsel of his daughter. A *Tanna* taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river," he said: “In vain do we labor!” (*Sota* 12a)

We say in the *Haggada*: "'Our labors [*amaleinu*]' – these are the sons." The word *amal* in the Bible denotes useless effort. When Iyov says: "But man is born into labor (*le-amal*)" (*Iyov* 5:7), he refers not to the labor of Torah or the labor of work, but rather to the futility of human life (as is evidenced by the previous verse). Amram's statement reflects a similar sentiment: In vain do we labor! There is no reason to have children. There is no future or hope. There is no point in bringing children into the world.

We know this reality from our recent history. Under the horrors of the Holocaust, when people found themselves at the lowest point in every respect, the last thing they could think about was bringing children into the world. Why have a child? To suffer? What would be the point of bringing a child into this dark period of history? This was Amram's conclusion: In vain do we labor. We grieve over the former ones, the children that are already born, and you propose to add to their number?![[1]](#footnote-1)

The *gemara* continues:

He arose and divorced his wife. All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him: “Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's, for Pharaoh decreed only against the males, whereas you have decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world, whereas you have decreed concerning this world and the World-to-Come. In the case of the wicked Pharaoh, there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in your case, you are righteous, and it is certain that your decree will be fulfilled… He arose and took his wife back; and they all arose and took their wives back.

Miryam represents a different approach, an approach that does not give up. Even in the darkest times, there is hope. There are some people who are not willing to despair, who will lead the people forward, in whom hope can be pinned. Even if the old generation lacks the strength to deal with the bleak reality, a new generation will arise with the necessary forces to deal with it. Miryam manages to encourage her father and lead a revolution in his approach and leadership of Israel. "They all arose and took their wives back"!

*Chazal* recognize this conduct of Miryam's in other places as well. The midwives in Egypt, mighty in spirit and prepared to sacrifice their lives and oppose Pharaoh's decree for the sake of the people of Israel, are identified by *Chazal* as Yocheved and Miryam:

For it has been taught: Shifra – this is Yocheved; and why was her name called Shifra? Because she would straighten (*meshaperes*) the limbs of the newborn baby. Another explanation of Shifra is that the Israelites were fruitful (*sheparu*) and multiplied in her days. Puah – this is Miryam. And why was her name called Puah? Because she cried out (*po'ah*) to the child and brought it forth. Another explanation of Puah is that she used to cry out inspired by the holy spirit and say: My mother will bear a son who will be the savior of Israel. (*Sota* 11b)

Miryam is a midwife, not only by profession. She has a vision; she has spirit. Miryam does not give up or despair; she stands firm against the tremendous erosion that is threatening the people of Israel.

All this stands in contrast to Moshe, who apparently inherited more of his father's genes. The first time that he encounters difficulty, he runs away to the wilderness, to Midyan. Even after God revealed Himself to him at the burning bush, when Pharaoh rejects him and what he has to say and even casts more difficult work upon the people of Israel, Moshe despairs and turns to God with complaints:

“Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? Why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt ill with this people; neither have You delivered Your people at all.” (*Shemot* 5:22:23)

The Ramban (ad loc.) cites *Midrash Rabba*, which understands that Moshe fled to Midyan for the second time for six months and left his wife and sons there before returning to Egypt to continue his mission. Moshe lacks the fundamental faith that he will succeed.

Miryam apparently stood up to Moshe's despair as well. Just as she succeeded in leading her father to a change of perception, so too she taught Moshe the proper attitude, the belief in the redemption of Israel and its success.

Thus, the people of Israel leave Egypt under the leadership of Moshe. All along the way, there are crises – but these are tolerable, understandable crises. A nation of slaves that run away from their taskmasters will certainly cry out when they are being pursued by horsemen and chariots and there is no other escape but straight into the sea. Complaints about food and water are also understandable. Moshe relates to the people and their complaints in an inclusive, understanding, embracing, accepting, and loving manner, and he responds with infinite patience to their requests and demands. One who brought them out of Egypt must also provide them with their needs in the wilderness. All this he accepted!

After setting up the *Mishkan*, Moshe begins to develop expectations. Now it is time for the people to set out on their journey:

And it came to pass in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, that the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of the testimony. And the children of Israel set forward on their journeys out of the wilderness of Sinai. (*Bemidbar* 10:11-12)

Moshe is already imagining the triumphal journey, conquering the land of Canaan, building the Temple in Jerusalem that will never be destroyed, fulfilling the great prophetic vision of the resting of the *Shekhina* in the Land of Israel and the people of Israel, and from there to the entire world, bringing all the nations under the wings of the *Shekhina*, with everything working out as planned:

We are journeying to the place of which the Lord said: I will give it you… for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel. (*Bemidbar* 10:29)

Moshe is already preparing God's march of victory over His enemies:

And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moshe said: “Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate You flee before You.” And when it rested, he said: “Return, O Lord, to the ten thousands of the families of Israel.” (*Bemidbar* 10:35-36)

What excitement, what force, what expectations!

And then – a great crisis. As the *gemara* in *Shabbat* (116a) puts it, a punishment, a calamity. What are the people of Israel complaining about now? About watermelons, about meat?

“If flocks and herds be slain for them, will they suffice them? Or if all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, will they suffice for them?" (*Bemidbar* 11:22)

They complain for the sake of complaining.

These complaints break Moshe. He is fed up, he has neither the strength nor the desire to continue:

“Have I conceived all this people? Have I brought them forth, that You should say unto me: Carry them in your bosom, as a nursing-father carries the sucking child, to the land which You did swear to their fathers?” (*Bemidbar* 11:12)

What have I to do with them? I am not capable of carrying this people as one carries a child, and I have no intention of continuing to do so:

“I am not able to bear all this people myself alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if You deal thus with me, kill me, I pray You, out of hand, if I have found favor in Your sight; and let me not look upon my wretchedness.” (*Bemidbar* 11:14-15)

God accepts Moshe's argument and cuts back his authority, but we will not deal with that issue at this time. In any case, the impression left by what happened does not go away; on the contrary, Moshe despairs. This fact cannot be erased by hiding behind deputies and under-deputies.

Once again, Miryam sees her despairing brother, and she remembers the days when Moshe ran away to Midyan. She expresses this with the words: "For he had married a Kushite woman." She too is fed up’ she is fed up with her brother who thinks that the solution to every problem is "kill me," her brother who only wants to be released of responsibility and distance himself from the people. If she were the leader, Miryam thinks to herself, she would know how to rebuke the people, how to return them to the straight path; she would reprimand them and tell them that their decree is more severe than that of Pharaoh! Pharaoh wanted to leave them as slaves in Egypt, whereas they want to die in the wilderness. She would teach them all a lesson and succeed in returning them to the right path, the path taking them directly to the Land of Israel!

From this perspective, Miryam corresponds to Kalev at the time of the sin of the spies, who speaks out against the prevailing mood in the camp of Israel and proclaims that the emporer has no clothes: "We should go up at once and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it" (*Bemidbar* 13:30). Indeed, *Chazal* in the *gemara* in *Sota* literally marry off Miryam to Kalev:

"And Kalev the son of Chetzron begat children of Azuva" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 2:18)… Azuva is Miryam. And why was her name called Azuva? Because all men forsook her (*azavuha*) at first. "Begat" – But he was married to her! R. Yochanan said: Whoever marries a woman for the name of heaven, the text ascribes it to him as though he had begotten her. (*Sota* 11b-12a)

According to the plain sense of Scripture, this is not the same Kalev, Azuva is not Miryam, and we are dealing with a daughter, and not a wife. But it was important to *Chazal* to connect the two, because they are, indeed, connected in a most essential way.

The *midrash* teaches us another thing; Miryam is "*azuva*," forsaken. She does not recognize that a solution in one situation to problems of one kind is not necessarily the most efficient solution in another situation to problems of a different kind. Just as every generation is different, so too the way to deal with the changed reality must be different. Not everything that worked with Amram in Egypt can work with the Israelites in the wilderness. Miryam is incapable of digesting this simple fact, one which Moshe is able to understand, and therefore she is reprimanded. Moshe understands that what is needed is a new leadership arising from the younger generation, a leadership that is connected to the people and attentive to its problems, and he disperses authority. Miryam wants to shout in the manner of Kalev the son of Yefuneh, who proclaimed before the hostile people: "We should go up at once and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it" (*Bemidbar* 13:30).

Kalev does not lead the people of Israel after Moshe. The next leader of the nation is Yehoshua, whose conduct at the time of the sin of the spies was different than that of Kalev – conduct that was more attentive to the people. Yehoshua is indeed a young man, who "departed not out of the tent" (*Shemot* 33:11) – but this is what allowed him to learn from his master how to lead the people and how to be brought from outside the camp into the camp and the people, with all their problems and stresses, as Moshe in the end did at Kivrot Ha-Ta'ava. We will not analyze now the drama with Eldad and Medad, who claim that one can prophesy even within the camp; but the message that arises from that story, that which is learned by Moshe and Yehoshua, is that leadership must not be detached from the people.

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What was stated here is true for our generation as well. We must recognize that the problems that exist today are not the problems that existed a generation or two ago, and that the solutions are not the same solutions. Those who really want to influence the people, and not just shout, must first and foremost turn to the arena of education. Only through education is it really possible to influence and guide people. Proper ideology, like that of Miryam and Kalev, which was certainly correct, is not enough; tools are also needed to spread it. This can only be done by connecting with the people and developing forces within them in the direction of proper spiritual and moral activity.

1. See Rashi, *Shemot* 18:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)