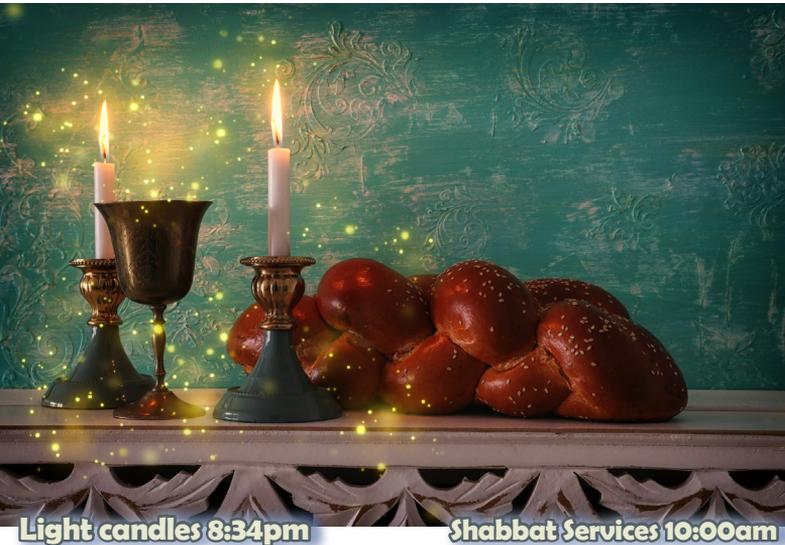




# Carnegie Shul Chatter

June 16, 2022



## Behaalotecha in a Nutshell

**Numbers 8:1–12:16**

Aaron is commanded to raise light in the lamps of the menorah, and the tribe of Levi is initiated into the service in the Sanctuary.

A “Second Passover” is instituted in response to the petition “Why should we be deprived?” by a group of Jews who were unable to bring the Passover offering in its appointed time because they were ritually impure. G-d instructs Moses on the procedures for Israel’s

### Zoom in for Services

*Shabbat services are held by Zoom, at 10am and last 60-90 minutes. A link is sent to all Shul members; if you don't receive it, contact Wendy Panizzi at [panizziw@gmail.com](mailto:panizziw@gmail.com).*

## Speak No Evil

In today’s parshah we find that Aaron and Miriam were guilty of lashon hara, malicious speech, against their brother Moses. And haven’t we all at some time or another been guilty of lashon hara?

Sadly, lashon hara is one of the easiest sins to commit but is also one of the most destructive.

It is so easy to spread gossip about others, isn’t it? We hear something and often repeat it to others without taking the time and effort to find out if it is true, and even if it appears to be true we often fail to find out the other side of the story.

And what do we do in the process? We damage someone’s reputation and, unfortunately,



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often the damage cannot be undone.

Innocent until proven guilty? It sounds good, but when we hear that someone is accused of a crime, don't we often prejudge, even before all of the facts are in? And even if the facts tell us that the accusation was false, how often do we say that the accused got off on a technicality, or that there must have been at least some truth in the accusation or it would never have been made?

There is very little that we have that is more important than our reputation. We must always do all that is in our power to be sure that we do not commit lashon hara, that we do not besmirch another's reputation, for the consequences can be severe, as Miriam and Aaron learn in this parshah.



Moses, and is punished with leprosy; Moses prays for her healing, and the entire community waits seven days for her recovery.

journeys and encampments in the desert, and the people journey in formation from Mount Sinai, where they had been camped for nearly a year.

The people are dissatisfied with their "bread from heaven" (the manna), and demand that Moses supply them with meat. Moses appoints 70 elders, to whom he imparts of his spirit, to assist him in the burden of governing the people. Miriam speaks negatively of

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## Miriam, Aaron and Moses – A Family of Leaders

The Jewish people were truly blessed to have three leaders of the caliber of Miriam, Aaron and Moses, and they were, of course, all three, brothers and sisters.

Moses was our greatest prophet, our lawgiver, and the man who so often argued with God to spare us when we went astray and raised God's wrath. Aaron was Moses's spokesman before Pharaoh, and he was our first high priest. And Miriam was a prophetess in her own right, who not only placed the baby Moses in the Nile and followed his basket to assure its safe recovery, but also led the Jewish women during the period of the Exodus.

But none of these three great leaders was without flaw. And in this week's parshah, Aaron and Miriam speak negatively about Moses drawing God's ire and Miriam is punished with leprosy for her criticism.

It is an interesting story, and on the next page is a commentary from The Jewish Theological Seminary that discusses it.

# An All-Too-Easy Transgression

*Leonard A. Sharzer, Associate Director for Bioethics Emeritus  
The Finkelstein Institute of Religious and Social Studies  
Jun 24, 2016 / 5776 | Torah Commentary*

The concluding episode of this week's parashah is one of the most well-known and intriguing stories in the Torah, that of Miriam and Aaron publicly maligning Moses and the consequences thereof. The basic elements of the narrative (Num. 12:1–16) are these: Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he has married, and complain that he is not the only prophet in the family. God has spoken through the two of them, as well. God hears all of this. The story interjects that Moses is the humblest man on the face of the earth. All of a sudden, God summons the three siblings to the Tent of Meeting, descends to the entry of the Tent in a cloud, and calls out Miriam and Aaron. God chastises them and informs them that, though they may have been given the gift of prophecy, they are not in the same class as Moses. Moses's relationship with God is unique, his communication more intimate, and his prophecy of a different order than that of all other prophets—a superior order.



After berating them, God is still angry, and when the cloud representing God's presence withdraws from the Tent, Miriam is left afflicted with *tzara'at*, her skin turned white and flaking off. Recognizing the severity of her condition, Aaron acknowledges the grave wrong he and Miriam committed against Moses and begs his brother to intercede on Miriam's behalf. Moses utters the famous prayer "El na, refa na lah," "Please, God; please heal her!" God orders that she be publicly disgraced by being banished from the camp for seven days, after which she is readmitted and the Israelites decamp for the wilderness of Paran.

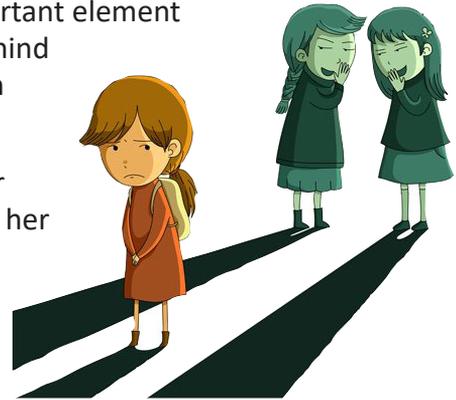
The story raises questions on many levels, questions that have fascinated commentators for generations. What was the nature of Miriam and Aaron's complaint, and what were the family dynamics underlying it? Was this simply a case of sibling rivalry? Why did God single out Miriam, and not Aaron, for punishment? Did Miriam—the older sister, who had not only helped save Moses's life when he was placed in the basket on the river, but had helped him maintain his connection to his people by arranging for his mother to nurse him after Pharaoh's daughter had adopted him, and had helped Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt—feel she should have had a say in Moses's choice of a wife? Was it perhaps because Moses had become the singular prophet, the supreme leader? Did Miriam feel she and Aaron were being tossed aside now that their help was no longer needed?

What about Zipporah, the Cushite wife? Was she the problem? Was there something about her that aroused Miriam's disfavor? Was it her beauty, her blackness, her foreignness, her other-ness? All these have been invoked by Bible commentators. Or was she merely a vehicle for the criticism and belittling of Moses?

We are told that Moses was the humblest man in the world, but what was the nature of that humility? Some translate *anav* as “meek” rather than “humble,” and some commentators explain that on account of Moses’s meekness, God had to intervene on his behalf because he was unable to do so for himself. Some take the opposite tack and explain that Moses was so sure of his value, his abilities, and his stature that he had no need to respond to the attacks leveled against him, that doing so would be beneath him.

Some explain that God called Miriam and Aaron out of the Tent of Meeting before chastising them so that their degradation would be public. This public shaming was, according to some, particularly appropriate because an important element of their transgression was that their complaint was made behind Moses’s back; they did not have the courage to face him with their criticism.

When Miriam is stricken with the skin malady that makes her look like death itself, why does Moses intercede with God on her behalf? Is he ambivalent, or does he believe she is getting what she deserves? Does sibling feeling trump justice, or does he need her with him to continue the journey? Finally, Miriam suffers the humiliation of ostracism from the community, which must await her return to its midst before continuing its journey.



This story has inspired numerous midrashim and commentaries exploring the narrative elements within its boundaries. And yet, as I read the story today, I have found it impossible not to reflect on the current political season in the United States and, more broadly, on the state of interpersonal communication in our society as a whole. The lack of civility and the vulgarity in our political discourse has been both shocking and, in some instances, truly frightening. We are witnessing a political campaign of the battling tweets. To be sure, ad hominem attacks, negative campaign ads, and smear tactics are not new, but avenues of electronic communication like Twitter and comments sections have brought them to a whole new level. Users can post anonymously and never have to face those about whom they are writing. They can instantaneously reach thousands or even millions of people.



It is not only our political discourse which has suffered. Online bullying has become a serious problem, especially among adolescents. It is so easy to do. It is so easy to be anonymous. It is so easy to gang up on those who are vulnerable and unable to defend themselves. There are so few repercussions. We hear all too often about young people driven to suicide by this bullying. We must ask how many of them would have acted as they did if they had had to face their victim directly and see firsthand the suffering they caused. Remember, our Sages have told us that the reason God

became so angry at Miriam and Aaron was that they spoke out against Moses behind his back.

Even electronic communication that is more benign has negative potential. Who of us has not sent an email we wish we could retract? We have become so used to instantaneous communication that we do not take the time to reflect before hitting the

Send button. The word friend has become a verb and connotes an entirely different kind of relationship than the noun used to. And our thoughts are measured by the number of characters into which they can be put rather than the character they reflect.

Lest you think I am some kind of Luddite, I will readily admit that social media and newer methods of communication have much to offer. But we should remember that it comes with risks and it comes at a price. We risk inflicting pain, intentionally or unintentionally, and we risk making mistakes that cannot be undone. We pay a price in empathy and intimacy, the kind that comes from truly seeing the *tzelem Elohim*, the image of God, in our fellow human being.

Our Sages paid close attention to this story of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses and found in it a warning about *lashon hara* ("malicious speech") and *motzi shem ra* ("slander"). They recognized that the potential damage to the individual and the body politic had to be dealt with by at least temporary social ostracism. This is not a story about evil people; Miriam and Aaron are heroic figures. But even heroes can give in to this all-too-easy transgression. How much more so for the rest of us?

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## Yahrtzeits

This week the Carnegie Shul acknowledges the yahrtzeits of:

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**Harry Zemon**

**Mitzi Roth**

May their memories be for a blessing.

