



## **His Feet Were on the Ground. His Head Was In Heaven**

HaRav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook zt"l endeavoured to unravel one of the most puzzling episodes recorded in the Torah - the slander spoken against Moshe by own his sister, Miriam. He began by sharing the following intriguing passage in the Talmud at the third meal of Shabbat B'haalot'cha, in the summer of 1929.

King David desired to select a suitable place to build the Beit HaMikdash in Yerushalayim. Where would it be constructed? There were those who argued that it should be situated on the highest mountain in the area. After all, it should represent the peak of spirituality and the lofty levels required of man to commune with God above. King David felt otherwise. The Mikdash, he thought, must represent accessibility. It is the place on earth that affords all who wish to enter to worship God. Service of God is not designated for the elite. It is not an exclusive club. Therefore the mountain chosen should not portray grandeur and height; not a mountain that conveys intimidation or haughtiness. A mountain that exudes equality and impartiality was chosen; it would be Mount Moriah (Talmud Zevachim 54b).

Rav Kook suggested that this teaching may help us understand Miriam's thought process. She accused Moshe of assuming a stature of holiness that is unbecoming and contrary to the spirit of the law. Every person is entitled to a holy lifestyle - and we all uniformly share the same guidelines in serving the Creator (Shmu'ot Raya, Parshat B'haalot'cha, 1929).

Rashi's explanation of Miriam's slander is well known (Bamidbar 12:1). The medieval commentator argued that Miriam criticized her brother Moshe for separating from his wife. Moshe, on the other hand, was convinced that he was required to adopt a more stringent conduct. He was routinely receiving prophecy which required that he adopt a more ascetic and elevated lifestyle.

Rav Kook continued that Shabbat afternoon by noting another fascinating feature in the architecture of the Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem. The mikva, the ritual bath, which was used by the Kohein Gadol was located at the highest point. It was actually on the roof, and strikingly, it was equal in height to the highest peak in Jerusalem (Talmud Yoma 31a).

A mikva represents purity. Its location on the highest plane, along with the Kohen ascending to that location, represents the idea that there are individuals of remarkable spiritual strength and grace who achieve a degree of sanctification superior to

and elevated above the community at large. These individuals often take on personal restrictions and practices that may differ from most others.

This was Moshe. He attained a unique status. “With him I speak mouth to mouth” (Bamidbar 12:8). Miriam failed to recognize his singularity.

There is a widely known custom of reciting a list of ‘six remembrances’ at the end of our morning prayers. It appears in most siddurim. We recall significant moments in our history that should be eternally remembered. For example, we are to regularly recall the Exodus from Egypt, the attack of Amalek, and the day we stood at Sinai. Another of the ‘six zechirot’ we recite is: “Remember, what Hashem, your God, did to Miriam, on the way when you departed from Egypt.”

The passage concerning Miriam is generally understood to convey the serious repercussions to speaking slander. Rav Kook suggested a second layer of meaning why we call to mind Miriam’s misdeed. He posited that beyond the infraction of lashon hara there is even a more critical issue at stake here.

Rambam in his ‘Thirteen Principles of Faith’ listed the belief in Moshe as the father of the prophets as a fundamental principle in Judaism. This principle expresses the uniqueness of Moshe which differentiated him from all who preceded him and all who came

afterwards.

This foundational idea was established by God through his conversation with Miriam and Aharon: Do not interact with him as if he was prophet like you in regard to the quality and nature of My conversation with him. He is separate from you. You are entirely outside his domain as a prophet: ‘With him I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of the Lord (verse 8).’ Moshe recorded the Torah word for word from God, ‘peh el peh.’

This principle is relevant for every generation, therefore, it must always be recalled. Without establishing this fundamental truth as a cornerstone of our faith, the authenticity of every God given law comes into question.

Rav Kook in his commentary on the siddur wrote: “This issue requires remembrance, since it serves as is a protective barrier for God’s Torah and ensuring its eternity... it is untenable that a later prophet, God forbid, can nullify even a single word spoken by Moshe...” (Olat Re’i’a 334)

The moment that Miriam sinned against Moshe, God appeared in a flash to respond to the infraction. “Vayomer Hashem Pitom, “The Lord suddenly said to Moshe, Aharon and Miriam...” Why did God appear so quickly? Why did the Torah note the alacrity of God reaction? The classic

early commentator, Rabbeinu Bachya (1255-1340), answered startlingly: God did not want to give Miriam a chance to repent (Bamidbar 12:4).

His answer is unsettling. Why would God prefer to punish than give Miriam a chance to correct her misdeed?

Apparently, God, so to speak, chose to prop up this incident as an example for centuries to come. This warning would be critical for the very survival of Torah and its relevance for the rest of history. The striking and unfortunate event recorded at the close of parshat B'haalot'cha serves as a teachable moment for all time. Moshe's feet were planted on this earth but his head and heart were in heaven. God's words were channeled directly from heaven, via Moshe, to the nation of Israel. They remain our guiding light, in every generation, and for all eternity.