

זָכוֹר אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְמִרְיָם בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם.
 (דברים כד:ט)

Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt. (Deut. 24:9)

This commandment refers back to the story of Miriam and Aaron talking about their brother's Cushite wife (Num. 12:1). When the two of them claim their worthiness of hearing God's words, God upbraids them and clarifies Moses' uniqueness to them.

בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא. פֶּה אֶל פֶּה אֶדְבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְחִידָת וּתְמִנָּה
 ה' יְבִיט. (במדבר יב:ז-ח)

in all my house, he is trusted; mouth to mouth I speak with him, in-plain-sight, not in riddles, and the form of God he beholds (Num. 12:7-8).

Following that, God punishes Miriam with *tzara'at* (scale



disease). Aaron implores Moses to help spare Miriam from the pain and indignity of the disease, whereupon Moses beseeches God with a short prayer.

אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ. (במדבר יב:יג)

God, pray, heal her, pray! (12:13)

Rashi sums up the plain meaning of the commandment:

אם באת להזהר שלא תלקה בצרעת אל תספר לשון הרע, זָכוֹר
 העשוי למרים שדברה באחיה ולקחה בנגעים (עי' ספרי):

If you wish to guard yourself against being stricken with tzara'at (scale disease), do not speak lashon hara (slander)! Remember what was done unto Miriam who spoke against her brother and was stricken with a leprous plague! (Sifrei)

Bottom line: **Remember** the Miriam episode, refrain from lashon hara so that you will not get tzara'at and suffer the consequences of that deadly skin disease. But should we only **remember** the Miriam incident for the punishment? After all, there was whole drama among the three siblings after the punishment that resulted in Moses' prayer. When Moses refers to the incident now, exactly what part of it does he want us to **remember**? The punishment? The healing? Or perhaps the prayer itself? Not surprisingly, the rabbis (Midrash Deut. Rabbah 6:13) present several interpretations on the commandment to remember the Miriam incident. Here are three midrashim that try to answer the question of

what is to be **remembered**, in which the rabbis pay special attention to the **intonation, cadence, and vocal coloring** of Moses' prayer: **לה** - **God, pray, heal her, pray!**

(1) **זָכוֹר**. כִּינּוּן שֶׁרָאָה מֹשֶׁה מָה הִגִּיעַ לְאַחֲיוֹתוֹ, הַתְחִיל צוֹנֵחַ וּמִתְפַּלֵּל עָלֶיהָ בְּכָל לִבּוֹ וְנִפְשׁוֹ (במדבר יב, יג): אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ. רַבִּינוּ אָמְרִי: אָמַר מֹשֶׁה: רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! כְּבֹר עֲשִׂית אוֹתִי רוּפָא! אִם אַתָּה מִרְפָּא אוֹתָהּ הֲרִי מוֹטֵב! וְאִם לֹא מִרְפָּא אֲנִי אוֹתָהּ!

(2) דְּבַר אַחֵר. מָהוּ אֵל נָא? אָמַר רַבִּי אָבָא בַר כַּהֲנָא: לְמָה הִדְבֵּר דוּמָה? לְתַלְמִידוֹ שֶׁל רוּפָא שֶׁעָלָת מְלָכְנָא לְרֵאוֹתוֹ, וְהִבִּיא אוֹתָהּ אֶצְל רַבּוֹ. אָמַר אוֹתוֹ תַלְמִיד לְרַבּוֹ: מָרִי, כְּבֹר לְמַדְתָּ אוֹתִי כָל סִדְרָן שֶׁל רְפוּאוֹת. אִם אַתָּה מִרְפָּא אוֹתָהּ הֲרִי יָפָה. וְאִם לֹא הֲרִינִי מִרְפָּא אוֹתָהּ. כֹּךָ אָמַר מֹשֶׁה: רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, כְּבֹר לְמַדְתָּ אוֹתִי כָל סִדְרָן שֶׁל נְגָעִים, אִם אַתָּה מִרְפָּא אוֹתָהּ הֲרִי יָפָה, וְאִם לֹא הֲרִי אֲנִי מִרְפָּא אוֹתָהּ.

(3) דְּבַר אַחֵר. מִשָּׁל. לְמָה הִדְבֵּר דוּמָה? לְגַבּוֹר שֶׁהָיָה הַקּוֹלֵר בְּצִנּוּרָו. נִפְגָּה מֵאוֹתוֹ הַקּוֹלֵר. לְאַחֵר יָמִים רָאָה הַקּוֹלֵר נִתּוֹן בְּצִנּוּרָו שֶׁל אַחֵר. הַתְחִיל צוֹנֵחַ. אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מָה לָּךְ צוֹנֵחַ? אָמַר לָהֶן: אֵי אַתֶּם יוֹדְעִים, אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ בְּאַיִתָּה צָעַר הוּא נִתּוֹן! כֹּךָ הָיָה הַקּוֹלֵר בְּצִנּוּרָרִי, וְאֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ בְּאַיִתָּה צָעַר הוּא נִתּוֹן! כֹּךָ הָיָה מֹשֶׁה צוֹנֵחַ. אָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: מָה לָּךְ צוֹנֵחַ? אָמַר לִפְנֵי: רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ בְּאַיִתָּה צָעַר הִיא נִתּוּנָה! שְׁאֲנִי זָכוֹר הַשְׁלִשְׁלַת שֶׁהָיָה יָדִי לְתוֹכָהּ...כִּינּוּן שֶׁנִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה עָלֶיהָ רַפָּא אוֹתָהּ הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא...

(1) *When Moses saw what befell his sister, he began crying out and praying on her behalf with all his heart and soul: God, now, heal her now* (Num. 12:13). *The Rabbis said: Moses said: Master of the universe! You have already made me into a physician! If You heal her, fine! If not, I will heal her!*

(2) *Another interpretation: Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: To what is the matter comparable? To a physician's student, who was visited by a certain sick woman. He brought her to his mentor. The student said to his mentor: Master, you have already taught me all the different medicines and protocols. If you heal her, that is fine; if not, I will heal her myself. So, too, Moses said: Master of the universe. You already taught me all the procedures for this plague. If you heal her, well and good; if not, I will heal her.'*

(3) *Another interpretation: To what is this matter comparable? To a mighty man who had a chain around his neck. He freed himself from that chain. Some time later, he saw the chain placed around the neck of another. He began crying out. People said to him: Why are you crying out? He said to them: You do not know [what that other person is going through], but I know what pain he is experiencing! The chain was once around my neck just like this, and I know what pain he is experiencing! So, too, Moses was crying out. The Holy One blessed be He said to him: Why are you crying out? He said to Him: 'Master of the universe, I know what pain she [Miriam] is suffering, as I remember the "chain" into which my hand was once placed.' (a reference to Exod. 4:6 one when God afflicted him with tzara'at). When he prayed for her, God healed her...*

Midrash 1: Moses' Prayer as an Act of Defiance.

Underlying this midrash is the premise that Moses was himself a healer. How so? The laws of *tzara'at* are found in Leviticus 13-14. In order to teach those laws, Moses would have had to know them himself! Now arguably, the cure for *tzara'at* is not explicitly mentioned in those chapters. But it is not farfetched for the rabbis to have projected onto Moses the ability to cure *tzara'at*.¹ He is, after all, a prophet, someone who is able to perform miracles, and someone most importantly, who experienced his own recovery from the disease back when he was first starting out (again, Exod. 4:6) But what is audacious about this midrash is that the rabbis are reading this prayer with a tone of defiance, even hearing within it the tone of an ultimatum. They are basing this reading on the rhythm of the prayer, a strong set of five beats: **You. Heal. Her. Or. Else. (I. Will. On. My. Own.)** They hear urgency, directness, and defiance. Perhaps also, they hear Moses issuing God an ultimatum! This is a plausible reading because it lines up with a familiar characterization of Moses as fearless, stern, and sometimes volatile. Moses after all was the man who smote the Egyptian out of a sense of righteous indignation and fierce loyalty to the victimized Hebrew (Exod. 2:11-12). He was the one who smashed the tablets as a profound expression of the breaking of the covenant (Exod. 32:19). He hit the rock out of profound frustration at God and the people (Num. 20:11). Here the rabbis are portraying Moses as someone who can hold his own with God. When he needs God to deliver healing for his sister, (from a disease that was, in his eyes, probably more deadly than the transgression) he says to God: *Heal her, or else, I will. You are God, but if you don't heal her yourself, I am going to heal her myself!*

Midrash 2: Prayer as Deference. In Abba bar Kahana's² parable, God is the Master Healer, Moses is the disciple. When faced with the patient, Miriam, Moses defers out of respect and humility to God, knowing full well that he Moses, could heal her himself. Unlike the urgency with which the first midrash reads the prayer, Abba bar Kahana reads these five words, with the repetition of **נא** translated variously as *please*, or *pray*, as a plaintive request, deferring to God's majesty while yet affirming his own dignity as a disciple without being obsequious. This is a prayer of humility. If the first midrash is the first bars of Beethoven's 5th Symphony, this midrash is Paul McCartney's *Let it Be*.

¹ In 2 Kings 5, the prophet Elisha offers a cure for Naaman, the Syrian general, of his scale disease. Naaman is told to immerse himself in the Jordan River seven times. When his skin is restored to softness and health (**כְּבֶשֶׂר נָעַר וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּשָׂרוֹ** - *And his skin was restored to that of a small child, and he was purified* 2 Kings 5:14) Naaman declares his belief in the God of Israel: **וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נֹא יְדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין** *And he said: Behold, now I know that there is no god in the entire world, except in Israel.* (2 Kings 5:15). If Elisha could cure *tzara'at*

Midrash 3: Prayer as an Expression of Empathy. What is beautiful about this last midrash is that it expresses what many of us have experienced ourselves, and something that we can easily identify with. Moses is saying: *I went through this. I know how difficult and painful it is to go through this. I know the indignity of this disease. I don't want anyone else to go through this. Therefore, God, I am asking you, on the basis of my own experience, please, please spare her from this misery.* In this iteration, the **נא** is not plaintive, not deferential, **but laden with pathos**. If Midrash 1 is *Beethoven's Fifth*, and Midrash 2 is *Let it Be*, then Midrash 3 is *Eleanor Rigby*. There are of course, many other valences that we can think of when it



comes to praying on behalf of someone else. We pray for comfort, strength and hope. We express our deepest fears and **what if's?** It is certainly possible to read all of those sentiments into Moses' five-word prayer. *These midrashim, therefore, are not the final words on the theology of Moses' prayer. Rather, they are part of a larger conversation on prayer and healing.* This chart summarizes what the Torah and the Rabbis want us to

remember in the Miriam incident:

The Torah	The Rabbis
Remember the punishment that is visited upon a person who gossips.	Remember the healing that comes after prayer.
See the causality between sin and punishment .	See the causality between prayer and healing .
Remember the Miriam story to cultivate our fear of God.	Remember the Miriam story of Miriam to elevate our relationship with God.

SHABBAT SHALOM!

This Shabbat we mark 701 days of the war and the captivity of the hostages. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God shield Israel, protect the IDF, heal the wounded, comfort the bereaved, and spare innocents from suffering.

This Parasha Sheet celebrates the 95th Birthday of Stanley Dickstein, and is dedicated by his "generations", children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Mazel Tov!

miraculously, then how much more so, could Moses have cured it! Rabbinic culture is filled with miracle stories of healing especially through prayer, but also through ritual and other methods. The idea that Moses was a healer is also simply a projection of the rabbis onto Moses.

² Abba bar Kahana is a third generation Amora. He came from Babylonia to the land of Israel around the year 300 CE. He was well known as a teacher of Aggadah, and the parable is a very common style in his teaching. He emphasizes compassion, reverence, and comfort.