

Sinning *L'Shem Shomayim* – in heaven's name?

'Remember what God did to Miriam, on the way out of Egypt.' (Deut. 24:9) What God did was to punish Miriam with leprosy after she and Aaron spoke slanderously against Moses, as we read in this week's Sidra:

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. Then they said, 'Does God speak exclusively to Moses? Doesn't He also speak to us?' God heard this. Moses, however, was a very humble man, more so than any man on the face of the earth. (Numbers 12:1-3)

Now I ask you, why on earth would Miriam say anything even semi-not-nice about Moses? We're not discussing a mean-spirited or spiteful old woman whom one might easily dismiss as some Torah archetypal slanderer or gossiper. We're talking about Miriam the Prophetess, elder sister to Aaron and Moses: a woman whose kindness, greatness and piety were legend in her own lifetime. What might have possessed her to do such a foolish or wicked thing?

In the Book of Ecclesiastes (10:1) King Solomon says, 'Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, weightier than wisdom and honor is a little foolishness.'

Solomon's meaning appears clear enough. No matter how exalted your reputation might be, when you do something stupid you spoil everyone's opinion of you; for even a little folly outweighs a lot of wisdom and honor.

It's a good reading of the Hebrew, but not quite accurate. The word *YAKAR* here translated as 'weightier' really means precious. What the verse actually says is this: 'more precious than wisdom and honor is a little foolishness.'

The Izbicy rebbe says this idea applies everywhere in life; we all need to be aware that sometimes it's more important to be wrong than right.¹ Saving face and keeping one's shining reputation from harm is not the most important object in life – doing the will of God is.

This, according to Izbicy, is one of the ways in which the Jew stands out from the gentiles. Imagine God saying to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 'Hey, Hugh, I need a favor!'

Naturally the Archbishop is going to say, 'Yes, sure. Whatever You want, Lord. Only speak Your mission for me and I will carry it out faithfully.'

Then it turns out, the thing God wants Hugh to do is very nasty, disgusting and hurtful; something really bad.

'Thy will be done, of course. But tell me, Lord, please,' asks the bishop. 'What will happen to me after I carry out my mission and do this thing?'

'Why, I'll punish you, of course, for committing such a crime.'

'Ha ha, naturally, naturally, of course; but then when it's all over, everyone will know that I was really doing Your Divine Will, yes? It'll become apparent in the end that I was only doing what You commanded, right?'

'Oh no, nothing like that. You don't get to be the hero of the narrative – there's no plucky little archbishop bearing the burden of God's ineffable plans, nobly maintaining a stiff upper lip and

keeping his silence in the face of the world's approbation while bravely carrying divine secrets, and all that sort of stuff. No, you get to be the villain. You're the baddy, simple as that.'

'For how long, O Lord? How long will my name be smirched?'

'For all eternity. And just to make sure it stays that way, I'm going to write it into Scripture for good people to remember, encouraging them to meditate on the manner of your punishment and ignominy.'

'Lord, do I have a choice in this matter?'

'Yes, Hugh, there's always a choice.'

'Might I ask, Lord, that someone else be chosen for this sacred mission?'

It is precisely on this point that the essence of a Jew pivots, says the Izbicy. We say 'Yes' to God, no matter what the mission. We don't ask why or wherefore. We don't demand recognition, nor do we expect the laws of nature to be rewritten in our favor, or the rules of consequences to be bent on our behalf. We offer ourselves, saying, '*HINENI* – Here I am.' It was for this reason alone that we were chosen; because we Jews are worthy instruments through which the divine plan will be wrought to perfection. We provide grist for the mill - *dramatis personae*. Whatever character the plot calls for at any moment, we are ready to act that part.

With this in mind, let us look at the opening of this week's Sidra.

God spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and tell him: 'When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall shine upon the face of the menorah.' (Num. 8:12)

Rashi explains the verse to mean that the six wicks in the six cups on the arms of the menorah must point inward, towards the center column where the seventh wick burned.

Now, if this is all a metaphor suggesting, as the Mishna says: 'Let all your actions be *L'Shem Shomayim* - in heaven's nameⁱⁱ,' it makes sense that the wicks in the cups on the 'arms' of the menorah should point toward the center column whose wick points upward toward heaven which represents *L'Shem Shomayim*. Likewise our physical actions need to be consciously directed toward heaven, we cannot just assume they point heavenward of their own accord. The question is this: why does the verse say *seven* lamps, when the seventh, central, upward pointing lamp is already directed toward heaven? Why isn't it sufficient for the verse to tell us that *six* lamps should point inwards to shine upon the seventh, central lamp?

The answer is this: it's not enough for the *kavvana* – intention to be *L'Shem Shomayim* – in heaven's name. That only means you don't want to do anything wrong; you're being careful and purposeful, but you are still focused on yourself and your own perception of what should be done. You're doing the right thing as *you* see it, but it may have nothing to do with the Will of God. What's demanded is that the *L'Shem Shomayim* also be *L'Shem Shomayim*.

In the liturgy for Shabbat and the Festivals we pray, 'Purify our hearts to worship You in truth,' because worship and service are not sufficient, if it isn't worship *in truth* it isn't worship of God. True worship means being available to God the way Aaron and Miriam are at the end of this

Sidra. They are ready to have bad things written about them, to have a sin recorded against them to allow the greatness of Moses to be seen and heard.

How do Miriam and Aaron know what God wants of them? That's the big mystery.

We have learned elsewhere how pleasure and delight are the highest forms of good; this is a basic tenet of Judaism. 'There is no higher good than pleasure,' (*Sefer Yetzira* Cap. II Mishna 4); ours is not an aesthetic religion, and the Torah frowns on self-denial of pleasure and delight. But there is a significant argument between Jews and gentiles over the roots of pleasure.

C.S. Lewis published a short novel during WWII. It comprises a series of letters written to a young devil by his uncle, an old devil by the name of Screwtape. The following is a quote:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. (C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter IX.)

Lewis does not account for the pleasure in Malice. If all pleasures are essentially good and God-given, where do we get the thrill and delight of speaking *Lashon Hara* – Gossip and Slander? The Midrash (Sifrei) describes what happened;

Miriam happened to be standing next to Moses' wife, Tziporah, when news came that Eldad and Medad had begun prophesying in the camp.

'I feel sorry for their wives,' said Tziporah. 'Not being able to have physical relations with their husbands anymore, now that they've become prophets.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Miriam.

'You know what I'm talking about,' answered Tziporah. 'Prophets not being allowed to have normal marital relations –like Moses and I, since he became a prophet.'

Miriam and Aaron discussed it. 'Does God speak exclusively to Moses? Doesn't He also speak to us?'

Aaron and Miriam were prophets, but they had normal married lives. They couldn't understand what was so special about Moses, necessitating a physical separation from Tziporah. 'Aren't we also prophets like him?' they wondered out loud.

'No,' said God. 'You aren't like Moses. No one is or ever will be.'

When Moses spoke his prophecy it was as though he wasn't even there; the *SHECHINA* - Divine Presence spoke directly out of Moses' throat,ⁱⁱⁱ as though he were merely the vessel for the sound.

What sets humans apart from animals is that God breathed His breath into us; in doing so He made us speaking souls.^{iv} Constructing words and speech from letters, syllables, phrases and

sentences should have remained the divine prerogative. This is the stuff of Creation; the building blocks of the universe; the very ingredients of energy as described in *Sefer Yetzira*. But God breathed all this into us, making us uniquely capable of building and destroying worlds of our own, with our words and speech.

But Moses' prophecy was not his own. He built no worlds with his speech, nor destroyed any. They were not his words, it was not his breath. The *SHECHINA* spoke directly out of Moses' throat. Throughout the Torah there are hints at Moses' greatness, but nowhere is it stated outright until we come to this Sidra. Here God tells us explicitly:

‘With him I speak mouth to mouth, in vision and not in allegory. He sees the true picture of God. How can you not be afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’ (Numbers 12:8)

How did Aaron and Miriam know to speak bad about Moses? Even if they willingly allowed themselves to be used as foils in this narrative, as butts into which God cast His darts of anger – how did they *know* what was expected of them?

There is a pleasure higher than intimacy and mating. It is the pleasure of Oneness. It stands infinitely higher than anything physical. In Hebrew it is called *YECHIDA*. Moses is the only one who ever experienced it: while remaining alive and human, he stopped speaking his own breath and words. He became a vessel for God's breath and words. Who can even begin to imagine the pleasure of *YECHIDA*? Prophecy at Moses' level moves beyond the highest World of Words into God's private domain where all words are just One word, and all breath is just that One expiration.

When Tziporah intimated that she no longer had physical contact with her husband, Miriam and Aaron both had a sudden tinge, an inkling or notion of what was going on. Where previously they hadn't even known that *YECHIDA* exists, they became aware of that pleasure which exists beyond the physical.

Which *human* pleasure is not a real physical pleasure, but a thrill and delight all the same? It is the perverted joy, the inside-out reverse of *YECHIDA*: the assassination of the 'other' through breath and words – slander and gossip.

Aaron and Miriam went with their intuition. They heard no instruction to go and sin by speaking *Lashon Hara*. It was their gut instinct, and when a person is following their gut instinct they are capable of carrying out God's will far better than when they make a conscious decision, as will be discussed in the Sidra of Korah.

Aaron and Miriam are Jews who don't mind being vanquished by God. They care nothing for their reputation when God needs a villain to revile. This is the meaning of the verse with which the Sidra opens: ‘When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall shine upon the face of the menorah.’ The wick in the middle lamp, the very spine of the menorah, isn't directed toward heaven simply because it points upwards. *L'Shem Shomayim* also has to be *L'Shem Shomayim*.

Any *Kavana* – intention to do something in heaven's name first requires being available to God for His purposes; and who can fathom God's purpose?

Lest someone interpret this to mean that any sin is permitted if you feel in your guts that you need to do it, the Izbicy rebbe pointed out that the verse in Ecclesiastes is quite specific: ‘more

precious than wisdom and honor is a *little* foolishness,' something little; a tiny amount of imprudence – not some gross offense.

ⁱ Mei Hashiloach Vol. I BeHa'alotcha

ⁱⁱ Mishna Avot 2:12

ⁱⁱⁱ Zohar Vol. III 232a

^{iv} Onkelos, Genesis 2:7