

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



## Notifications Now and Then

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How often do we hear the sound, or feel the vibrations of a mobile device demanding our attention? Breaking news, emails, traffic, and game updates—alerts both trivial and critical are brought to us by beeps, bars of music, and buzzes.

Although the medium may be new, the need to communicate across distances is not. Numbers 10:1–10 directs the making and usage of a pair of silver trumpets—not musical instruments, but sirens, calling Israelites to assemble, instructing them to travel in formation, alerting them to enemy attack and to holidays and sacrificial rites.

An obvious difference between the blare of the trumpet and the ping of a cell phone is that the latter is individualized and the former is communal. We receive our own texts and alter our app settings to choose when we are to be bothered; the trumpets of the Torah were the same for everyone.

Except: in the US, emergency alerts are now sent to every smartphone in the relevant geographic area all at once. And, during the Gaza war in 2014, the app צבע אדום (“Red Alert”) was installed by hundreds of thousands of Israelis to inform them of imminent rocket attacks, even when out of the range of hearing for the traditional sirens. At the encouragement of a US congressman, an English version of the app was also created, which served a political purpose, but also bridged another gap between our world and that of the Bible: despite the thousands of miles now separating Jews of the Diaspora from those in Israel, the ubiquitous mobile notification became one tiny way to keep us connected.

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## Parashat Be-ha'alotekha 5776

## פרשת בהעלותך תשע"ו



## An All-Too-Easy Transgression

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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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