Numbers 12

(8) In the wilderness of Paran, while they were encamped at Kadesh, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married, saying, “He married a Cushite woman.” 2 They said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?”

The Lord heard it. 3 Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth. 4 Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting.” So the three of them went out. 5 The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, “Aaron and Miriam!” The two of them came forward; 6 and He said, “Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. 7 Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. 8 With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!” 9 Still incensed with them, the Lord departed. 10 As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. 11 And Aaron said to Moses, “O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. 12 Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother’s womb with half his flesh eaten away.” 13 So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “O God, pray heal her!” 14 But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted.” 15 So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted. 16 After that the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.

(JPS Translation, slightly edited)

Questions for discussion:

1. Which places in this text do you find problematic, either logistically, morally, or theologically?
2. Why do you think Miriam was punished?
3. How do you imagine Miriam might feel before, during and after this story?
SNOW/SCORPIONS AND SPIDERS  by Alicia Jo Rabins/Girls in Trouble

Well my mother named me bitter
Although as a child I was so kind
Hiding myself in the trees to watch over my brother
But still my name was bitter
Bitter the taste of the sea
Bitter the cries of the horses drowning behind us

If anybody had asked me
I might not have chosen to go
But everyone knows
Sometimes you don’t have a choice

So when he said You’re banished,
Seven days in the desert alone
I just started walking
I knew there was nothing to say

The scorpions and the spiders
Crawled up to me and stopped in my shade
Together in silence they watched
As the sun crossed the sky

And if your father spit in your face
 Wouldn't you want to leave that place
And if your skin should turn to snow
Wouldn’t you have to go
And if your G-d should turn from you
wouldn’t you turn too.

Still I don’t regret a minute
And I don’t regret an hour
of the week that I lived all alone
at the top of the mountain
Though no voice came down from heaven
and I never saw words written in fire
I did see the birds of prey pick all the carcasses clean
And if your father spit in your face
Wouldn’t you want to leave that place
And if your skin should turn to snow
Wouldn’t you have to go
And if your G-d should turn from you
wouldn’t you turn too.

aliciajo@gmail.com | www.girlsintroublemusic.com
Moses Confronted by Aaron and Miriam, c. 1370-1300 from the Vatopedi Octateuch, Byzantine, Vatopedi Monastery, Greece

Miriam Shut Out From the Camp,
James Jacques Joseph Tissot, c. 1896-1902, French

Aaron Cleanses Miriam upon her Return to the Camp,
1530, Dutch
Midrash 1:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses: How did Miriam know that Moses had separated from the commandment of “be fruitful and multiply”? Because she saw that [his wife] was no longer wearing jewelry. She said to her, “Why have you stopped wearing jewelry?” His wife answered, “Your brother is not diligent about the matter [of marital conjugation].” Then Miriam knew, and spoke to Aaron, and the two of them spoke against Moses. (Sifrei Bamidbar Behaalotcha 99)

Midrash 2:

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and He departed” (Num 12:9). [The use of the plural] teaches that Aaron, too, became leprous. Such was R. Akiva’s opinion. But R. Judah ben Betera said to him, ‘Akiva, you will have to justify yourself for saying such a thing: if you are right, even though the Torah shielded him, you have disclosed what happened to Aaron; and if wrong, you are casting a stigma upon a righteous man.” (B. Shabbat 96b-97a)

Midrash 3:

[After Miriam’s punishment,] Moses drew a small circle and stood inside it, and begged God to have mercy on Miriam, saying: “I will not move from here until you heal my sister Miriam,” as it is written, “Please God, heal her now.” At that moment God said to Moses, “If a king spit on her, or if her father spit on her, she would have to separate herself from the community for seven days. I, who am King of Kings, how much more so: isn’t it right that she should have to separate herself for fourteen days? But for your sake I will forgive her [and shorten her punishment to seven days], as it is said, “If her father spit in her face...” (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version A, chapter 9)