

# MIRIAM IN EXILE

Source Sheet by Alicia Rabins

## Numbers 12

(א) וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכְּשִׁיית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כְּשִׁית לָקַח. (ב) וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֵף בְּמִשְׁחָה דְּבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם בְּנֹו דְּבַר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה. (ג) וְהֵאִישׁ מִשְׁחָה עֲנֹו [עֲנִיֹו] מֵאֵד מְכַל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה. (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה פְּתָאֵם אֶל מִשְׁחָה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל מִרְיָם צֹאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּכֶם אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתָּם. (ה) וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אַהֲרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיִּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם. (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ נָא דְבָרֵי אֵם יְהִיָה נְבִיאָכֶם יְהוָה בְּמִרְאָה אֵלֵיֹו אֲתֹנְדַע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ. (ז) לֹא כֹן עֲבָדִי מִשְׁחָה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא. (ח) כֹּה אֶל כֹּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא כְחִידוֹת וּתְמִנָּת יְהוָה יִבִּיט וּמְדוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעֲבָדֵי בְּמִשְׁחָה. (ט) וַיִּחַר אֵף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלֶּךְ. (י) וְהֵעֲנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם מְצֻרַעַת כְּשֹׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אַהֲרֹן אֶל מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מְצֻרַעַת. (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן אֶל מִשְׁחָה בִּי אֲדַנִּי אֵל נָא תִשֶׁת עֲלֵינוּ חֲטָאת אֲשֶׁר נוֹאֲלָנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חֲטָאנוּ. (יב) אֵל נָא תְהִי כִּמְת אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֵּאֱכַל חֲצִי בְשָׂרוֹ. (יג) וַיִּצְעַק מִשְׁחָה אֶל יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ. (יד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מִשְׁחָה וְאַבִּיָה יִרַק נִרַק בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא תִכְלֵם שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תִּסָּגֵר שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מְחֹוֹץ לְמַחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תִּאֲסֹף. (טו) וַתִּסָּגֵר מִרְיָם מְחֹוֹץ לְמַחֲנֶה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְהָעַם לֹא נָסַע עַד הָאֲסֹף מִרְיָם. (טז) וְאַחַר נָסְעוּ הָעַם מִחֲצֵרוֹת וַיִּחַנּוּ בְּמִדְבַר פָּאֲרָן.

1 When they were in Hazereth, 1Miriam 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 Hazereth 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.



*<--Moses Confronted by Aaron and Miriam, c. 1370-1300* from the Vatopedi Octateuch, Byzantine, Vatopedi Monastery, Greece



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



*above: Aaron Cleanses Miriam upon her Return to the Camp,*  
1530, Dutch

### Midrash 1:

ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה, מנין היתה מרים יודעת שפירש משה מפריה ורביה אלא שראת את צפורה שאינה מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים אמרה לה מה לך שאין את מתקשטת בתכשיטי נשים אמרה לה אין אחיך מקפיד בדבר לכך ידעה מרים ואמרה לאחיה ושניהם דברו בו

“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:

ויחר אף ה' בם וילך מלמד שאף אהרן נצטרע, דברי רבי עקיבא. אמר לו רבי יהודה בן בתירא: עקיבא, בין כך ובין כך אתה עתיד ליתן את הדין. אם כדברייך - התורה כסתו ואתה מגלה אותו! ואם לאו - אתה מוציא לעז על אותו צדיק.

“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:

באותה שעה עג משה עוגה קטנה ועמד בתוכה, וביקש רחמים עליה, ואמר: איני זז מכאן עד שתתרפא מרים אחותי. שנאמר: (במדבר יב) "אל נא רפא נא לה". באותה שעה אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: אילו מלך נזף בה, אילו אביה נזף בה, היה לה שתכלם שבעת ימים. אני שאני מלך מלכי המלכים, על אחת כמה וכמה, לא דין הוא שתיכלם ארבעה עשר יום? אלא למענך מחול לה, שנאמר: (שם) "ויאמר ה' אל משה, ואביה ירק ירק בפניה" וגו'.

[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*)