



5782 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Beha'alotcha / פרשת בהעלתך

The Sensitivity of Yerushalayim

Our parsha concludes with the story of Miriam speaking ill of Moshe and God punishing her with tzara'at. While this story does not seem to be of critical importance in relation to the other stories of the parsha, nonetheless, later in the Torah God commands the Jewish people to remember this incident. Some commentators even include this verse in their list of six hundred and thirteen mitzvot, underscoring the critical nature of this story.¹

Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz² explains that this story is central to the Torah's project since it teaches us the need to be sensitive to the feelings of others. Miriam did not intend to cause Moshe harm and despite her lack of malicious intent she was severely punished by God for a slight lack of sensitivity.

Rav Shmuelovitz adds that looking at the story from this angle helps us understand an otherwise cryptic midrash. On the verse "Remember what your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt"³ the midrash highlights the seemingly superfluous words of "on the journey." The midrash notes that "On the journey" means "when you are unsettled."⁴ What is the meaning of this?

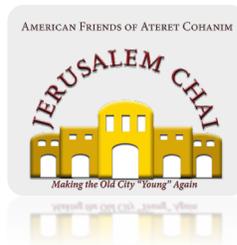
Rav Shmuelovitz explains that this further minimizes Miriam's actual violation. The Jewish people were traveling when people do not have the time or the space to think things through in a settled manner. One might have excused Miriam's speech as being a mere byproduct of the tiredness of travel. And nonetheless, Miriam was still punished for her mildly insensitive statement.

¹ See Ramban to Devarim 24:9.

² Sichot Mussar, parshat Beha'alotcha.

³ Devarim 24:9. Translation from sefaria.org.

⁴ Sifrei Devarim piska 275.



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An important lesson can be gleaned from Rav Shmuelovitz's understanding of the midrash. In his view, the midrash highlights the fact that we are expected to display a greater degree of interpersonal sensitivity when we resting at home than when we are on the road. The sense of comfort and ease that a person experiences when they are at home affords a person the opportunity to think twice before saying something that is possibly insensitive.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the heightened sense of interpersonal sensitivity that is required in Yerushalayim. This city is the "*menucha venachalah*" – the resting point and natural inheritance of the Jewish people. It is the opposite of being on a journey, rather it is pervaded with a sense of homeliness, serenity and rest. This is where Jews are meant to be. No one needs to be in a rush to go anywhere else. This is the final destination.

Therefore, Yerushalayim is the city of heightened awareness of the needs of the other. It is the city that transforms all Jews into a united whole – into friends. It is the city where there was always space for visitors and inhabitants alike. Our first introduction to the city in the Torah is with an act of kindness, when Malkitzedek brings bread and wine to a weary Avraham. The feeling of comfort, of being at home should bring us the peace of mind to always think about the other and be sensitive to their needs.