

## WHAT DID MIRIAM SAY ABOUT MOSES?

Parshat Behalotecha concludes with the infamous episode of Miriam and Aaron talking about Moses behind his back:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses concerning the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, 'Has the L-rd spoken only through Moses? Hasn't He spoken through us too?' And the L-rd heard."

This passage, however, leaves many questions unanswered. Who exactly was this Cushite woman? What did Miriam and Aaron say and what was their intent? And how does whatever was said connect to the fact that G-d spoke to Miriam and Aaron, not just Moses?

### 1. She Was Talking About Tziporah

Most commentators, including Rashi, explain that Miriam was speaking about Tziporah, Moses' Midianite wife. The term "Cushite" is not literal; it's a euphemism for beauty—just as a person of obvious complexion is universally recognized, so was Tziporah's beauty.

Miriam discovered—by overhearing Tziporah's lament—that Moses had separated from his wife in order to maintain prophetic readiness. She questioned this decision: "Why has Moses withdrawn from his wife? G-d also speaks with me and with Aaron, yet we remain with our spouses." Rashi emphasizes that even though she was motivated by concern and her words were not intended as an insult, since it involved discussing Moses' private life without his knowledge, G-d rebuked them.

Baal Haturim adds that the Hebrew word "הכושית" ("the Cushite"), has the same numeric value (gematria) as the phrase "יפת מראה", which translates as "beautiful of appearance"—both totaling 736.

### 2. Miriam Accused Moses of Separating From His Wife Because She Was a Convert

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (known by the acronym Netziv) suggests that Aaron and Miriam assumed that Moses had separated from her because, in their view, it was beneath his dignity to remain married to someone not from distinguished Israelite lineage. They argued that this was inappropriate since Moses had willingly married her, knowing her background. She hadn't deceived him, so it was wrong for him to now cause her pain by separating from her.<sup>3</sup> However, the real reason he separated was to maintain an appropriate state of readiness to converse with G-d "face to face."

### 3. Miriam Was Referencing a

### Cushite Wife Moses Had Taken Years Earlier

Rashbam, who explains the "plain meaning" of these verses, understands the Cushite woman mentioned in the verse not as a reference to Moses' wife Tziporah, but a Cushite queen he married during the 40 years he ruled in Cush, as described in Chronicles.

Miriam was critical of the fact that he had taken this woman as a wife. However, Moses never had relations with her, and Miriam and Aaron were unaware of this when they spoke about him. This explanation fits the plain meaning of the verse, since if the complaint were about Tziporah, there would be no need to introduce her as a "Cushite"—we already know she was a Midianite. Moreover, Tziporah could not accurately be called a Cushite, as Midian descended from Keturah, the wife of Abraham, whereas Cush descended from Cham.

This is similar to Bechor Shor's reading, who articulates Miriam's complaint: "Was there no woman among the daughters of Israel for Moses to marry, that he went and took a wife from among the Cushites, who are uncircumcised? Is it because G-d speaks with him that he holds himself above others—too proud to marry a Jewish woman, seeking instead a wife from afar?"

He explains that the fact that Moses married Tziporah, who was also not from the descendants of Jacob, was not something to be criticized, as he had no control over those circumstances. He had to flee Egypt to Midian after Pharaoh sought to execute him and was therefore not able to marry a woman of Jewish descent.

### 4. She Was Criticizing the Fact That He Married Tziporah in the First Place

Some commentators, while agreeing that the criticism was not about Tziporah's appearance or character, understand it as questioning how Moses—Israel's greatest prophet—could have married a foreign woman at all. These views draw on the earlier tradition that Moses once married a Cushite queen, but apply that critique instead to Tziporah, his Midianite wife. In this reading, Miriam and Aaron weren't criticizing Moses for separating from his wife, but for marrying someone not from the daughters of Israel in the first place.

### 5. It was Not What She Said

In a complex talk exploring Rashi's explanation for the juxtaposition between this episode and the disastrous mission of the Spies that immediately follows, the Rebbe uncovers the core of Miriam's error.

Her mistake was not that she wished to speak ill of her brother Moses, as Rashi points out: "She did not intend to speak negatively about him."

So what, then, was her wrongdoing? The issue, as Rashi explains, was that she was "involved in speech"—she was punished simply for speaking about her brother at all. If Miriam observed something in Moses' conduct that troubled her, the proper course of action was not to discuss it with someone else. Such conversations rarely lead to a constructive outcome. If she truly had a concern, she should have addressed it—discreetly and directly—with Moses himself.

By Mordechai Rubín

## BEHAALOTECHA IN A NUTSHELL

Numbers 8:1–12:16

The name of the Parshah, "Behaalotecha," means "When you raise" and it is found in Numbers 8:2.

**PARSHAT BEHAALOTECHA**  
15 – 21 Sivan, 5786  
31 May – 6 June, 2026  
Torah Reading: Behaalotecha:  
Numbers 8:1 - 12:16  
Haftarah: Zachariah 2:14 - 4:7

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Aaron is commanded to raise light in the lamps of the menorah, and the tribe of Levi is initiated into the service in the Sanctuary.

A "Second Passover" is instituted in response to the petition "Why should we be deprived?" by a group of Jews who were unable to bring the Passover offering in its appointed time because they were ritually impure. G-d instructs Moses on the procedures for Israel's journeys and encampments in the desert, and the people journey in formation from Mount Sinai, where they had been camped for nearly a year.

The people are dissatisfied with their "bread from heaven" (the manna), and demand that Moses supply them with meat. Moses appoints 70 elders, to whom he imparts of his spirit, to assist him in the burden of governing the people. Miriam speaks negatively of Moses, and is punished with leprosy; Moses prays for her healing, and the entire community waits seven days for her recovery.

## BEHAALOTECHA HAFTORAH IN A NUTSHELL

Zechariah 2:14-4:7.

This haftorah contains a vision of the golden Temple Menorah, whose daily kindling is discussed in the opening of this week's Torah reading.

This prophecy was communicated by Zechariah shortly before the building of the Second Temple. The haftorah opens with a vivid depiction of the joy that will prevail when G-d will return to Jerusalem: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for, behold! I will come and dwell in your midst, says the L-rd."

The prophet then describes a scene in the Heavenly Court: Satan was seeking to incriminate Joshua, the first High Priest to serve in the Second Temple, because of the "soiled garments" (i.e. sins) he was wearing. G-d himself defends the High Priest: "And the Lord said to Satan: The Lord shall rebuke you, O Satan; the Lord who chose Jerusalem shall rebuke you. Is [Joshua] not a brand plucked from fire?" I.e., how dare Satan prosecute an individual who endured the hardships of exile? "And He raised His voice and said to those standing before him, saying, 'Take the filthy garments off him.' And He said to him, 'See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I have clad you with clean garments.'"

G-d then proceeds to outline the rewards awaiting Joshua if he and his descendents follow G-d's ways. The ultimate reward is, "Behold! I will bring My servant, the Shoot, " an allusion to Moshiach, the Shoot of David.

Zechariah then describes a vision of a golden seven-branched Menorah. An angel interprets the meaning of this vision: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel [descendent of King David, one of the protagonists in the building of the Second Temple], 'Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,' says the Lord of Hosts." Meaning that Zerubbabel's descendent, Moshiach, will have no difficulty in his task, it will be as simple as lighting a menorah.

**Sunday, 15 Sivan, 5786 – 31 May, 2026**

**Birth and Passing of Judah (1565 and 1446 BCE)**

Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah, was born in Charan on the 15th of Sivan, of the year 2196 from creation (1565 BCE). He passed away on the same date 119 years later, in Egypt.

Judah took the leadership role both in selling Joseph into slavery and in the brothers' later attempts to find him and free him, and to protect Benjamin. On his deathbed, Jacob conferred the leadership of Israel upon Judah, proclaiming: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the legislator from between his feet, until Shiloh (the Moshiach) comes..." The royal house of David, as well as many of the great sages and leaders of Israel throughout the generations of Jewish history, trace their lineage to Judah.

Judah had five sons: Er and Onan, who died without children; Shelah; and his twins from Tamar, Peretz and Zerach. Their descendants formed the Tribe of Judah, the most populous and prestigious of the twelve tribes of Israel.

After the death of King Solomon in 797 BCE, the people of Israel split into two kingdoms: ten tribes formed the Kingdom of Israel in the north, with Shomron (Samaria) as the capital; only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to Solomon's son, Rechavam, and formed the Kingdom of Judea in the south, in the areas surrounding the capitol Jerusalem. Eventually, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria and the ten tribes living there were exiled and lost to the Jewish people; the inhabitants of Judea were also exiled (to Babylonia) but subsequently returned to the Holy Land and rebuilt Jerusalem and the Holy Temple. Over time, the terms "Judean" and "Jew"--which originally referred to a member of the tribe of Judah--became synonymous with "Israelite" and was used to refer to the descendants of all of Jacob's twelve sons--i.e., the Jewish people.

**Monday, 16 Sivan, 5786 – 1 June, 2026**

**Passing of Rebbetzin Freida (1813)**

Rebbetzin Freida was the daughter of the Alter Rebbe, R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi. She was especially dear to her illustrious father, and he would frequently deliver chassidic discourses specifically for her. In fact, when her brother R. DovBer, who later became the Mittlerer Rebbe, wanted to hear Chassidut, he would sometimes ask her to make a request, whereupon he would hide and listen. Rebbetzin Freida passed away a few months after her father, and was interred in Haditch, Ukraine, immediately adjacent to R. Schneur Zalman.

**Tuesday, 17 Sivan, 5786 – 2 June, 2026**

**Noah's Ark on Mt. Ararat (2105 BCE)**

Seven months after the beginning of the Great Flood, and 17 days after the waters covering the earth began to subside, the Ark sheltering Noah, his family, and members of all animal species came to rest on the (still submerged) summit of Mount Ararat.

**Hasmonean Victory (circa 140 BCE)**

The Hasmonean fighters recaptured Migdal Tzur from the Greek enemy and proclaimed this day a holiday (Talmud, Megilat Taanit).

**Wednesday, 18 Sivan, 5786 – 3 June, 2026**

**Spanish Expulsion Rescinded (1967)**

The Spanish cabinet approved a bill which granted religious freedom to Spain's Jews as well as other religious minorities. Since 1492 it had been officially forbidden to practice Judaism in Spain -- though this law had not been enforced for many years before its official abolishment.