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WAITING FOR MIRIAM

LIFE IS A JOURNEY - THE LIFE OF AN INDIVIDUAL, THE LIFE OF A FAMILY, and also of the entire Jewish nation. The Sedra¹ tells us about the journey of the Jewish people through the desert, guided by the Divine Presence. It was quite remarkable. The twelve tribes of the Jewish people were organised into four distinct camps, three tribes in each. When they began travelling, they would follow the guidance of the Pillar of Cloud.

At night instead of Cloud there would be a Pillar of Fire. Two camps would set off, then would come the sacred Ark of the Covenant. This would be followed by the other two camps. The Sanctuary had been dismantled and would be transported on special wagons. At some point the Pillar of Cloud would stop: this was the sign from G-d that they should rest.

The Sanctuary would be set up, and the Ark of the Covenant would be placed in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the Sanctuary. The Jewish people themselves would pitch their tents and organise themselves and their families.

They might spend only one night at the stopping place; or they might stay there a few days, or a month, or longer. All depended on the mysterious Cloud which led them, signifying direct guidance from G-d².

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This journey of our ancestors through the desert, over three thousand years ago, represents also the continuous journey of the Jewish people through the many countries where we have lived, and through our long history. For the most part we have kept close to the Ark of the Covenant, meaning the laws and teachings of Judaism, following the inspiration of the Pillar of Cloud.

At the end of the Sedra we notice that the journey of the Jewish people through the desert was in fact interrupted. This teaches us something.

Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was stricken with leprosy for a week. During this time the entire Jewish people waited for her. Until she was well, “the people did not travel”. Rashi explains that this honour was her due, measure for measure, since she had waited by the River Nile looking after the baby Moses in the basket. The Lubavitcher Rebbe adds a further point: the whole process of movement through the desert was interrupted by the need to wait for her - because it *could not take place without her*. Miriam’s input was essential. So the Pillar of Cloud and the twelve tribes of the Jewish people all waited until she was well.

The Rebbe presents this as relevant not only for Miriam, but also for every Jewish woman, at each stage of our journey. The spiritual power of the woman is an absolutely central factor, pivotal for all true progress. The story of Miriam emphasises the way each Jewish woman and girl is empowered to bring about the deep wellbeing of the Jewish people.

We are on a great journey, moving step by step towards our ancient dream of wholesome fulfilment for all humanity. Progress on this journey depends to a very great extent on the positive involvement of the woman.

Each individual woman is like Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Without her, the entire people cannot move forward³.

1. Numbers chs.8-12. 2. See Num. 9:15-23. 3. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.8, p.287-8.

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SEDRA BEHA'ALOTECHA

THE GOOD TONGUE

It was a peaceful evening, Yoni was sleeping, finally, Michael was reading a book on the couch, and Leah was finishing off an art project from school.

"Michael" said Leah "do you know that Shira's older sister got suspended from school".

"Really" said Michael, "what did she do?"

"Well basically they got this new teacher that the class didn't like, so she put a bucket of water on the door to the classroom, and when the teacher came in the water fell on top of her" Leah responded.

"Wow, that's terrible, and mind you, also funny" said Michael.

"Well, you know what else I heard about her?" Leah said.

"What?" Michael asked.

His sister came over and whispered something into his ear.

"Really!" he said. "That's really shocking! No wonder they suspended her from school!"

Suddenly the two children heard another voice, their mother.

"Well, I think you two are shocking!" she said.

They looked round guiltily. Their mother stood by the door,

looking very upset. She had heard what they were saying. Except the whispering, but by that time she had realised what they were doing.

“Let me ask you what you are doing?” she said.

The two were silent. They both knew: speaking Loshon Hara, the evil tongue.

“Okay, let’s put it another way. Tell me something from the Sedra which relates to you two right now.”

“Well, in this week’s Sedra it speaks about how the sister of Moses, Miriam, spoke to their brother Aaron, saying something bad about Moses” said Michael.

“And what happened to Miriam?” asked their mother.

“She got leprosy” answered Leah. “It’s some kind of skin disease”.

“So what do we learn from this?” asked their mother. “Not to speak Loshon Hara, not to say bad things about people, not to have an evil tongue” said Leah.

“Yes, that is really quite difficult sometimes,” said their mother. “And even more difficult,” she went on, looking at Michael, not to *listen* when someone is speaking Loshon Hara.”

“Sorry, Mummy,” said Leah. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have said anything. And you know, our teacher said we also shouldn’t even *think* bad things about people.”

Their mother thought to herself, it’s all part of growing up. “So, my dears,” she said, “in the future let’s all try to have only a good tongue, and good thoughts...”

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