

## *And Behold Miriam was Leprous, as White as Snow*

By: DAVID GUTTMANN

In an earlier article<sup>1</sup> I showed that according to Rambam there are two types of prophecies, one that I named Inspirational Prophecy and a higher kind which was exclusive to Moshe Rabbeinu, I named Direct Prophecy. I also proposed that according to Rambam the two types of prophecies depend on the level of the prophet's apprehension of G-d. To attain Direct Prophecy one has to acquire a level of understanding of G-d that I referred to as Negative Knowledge which can be reached by restraining the Imaginative Faculty, using only the Rational Faculty. To restrain the Imaginative Faculty one has to have one's physical needs under complete control and become שכל בלבד, which was the case for Moshe Rabbeinu. The implications of this understanding of prophecy are far reaching and as I explained in my article, legitimizes the Torah and affords it the status of immutability and supreme authority that it has for the Jewish people. Here I would like to show how understanding Rambam in this way elucidates an obscure and difficult chapter in the Torah.

In במדבר י"ב the Torah recounts the following story:

א וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה, עַל-אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית  
אֲשֶׁר לְקַח: כִּי-אִשָּׁה כֹּשִׁית, לָקַח. ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ, הֲרַק אֶת-  
בְּמִשְׁחָה דָבָר יי --הֲלֹא, גַם-בָּנוּ דָבָר; וַיִּשְׁמַע, יי. ג וְהָאִישׁ  
מִשְׁחָה, עָנָו מְאֹד--מִכָּל, הָאָדָם, אֲשֶׁר, עַל-פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה. [ס] ד  
וַיֹּאמֶר יי פְּתָאִים, אֶל-מִשְׁחָה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-מִרְיָם, צֹאוּ  
שְׁלֹשְׁתֵיכֶם, אֶל-אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד; וַיֵּצְאוּ, שְׁלֹשְׁתֶּם. ה וַיֵּרָד יי  
בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן, וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֱהֹל; וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם, וַיֵּצְאוּ  
שְׁנֵיהֶם. ו וַיֹּאמֶר, שְׁמַעוּ-נָא דְבַרְי; אִם-יִהְיֶה, נְבִיאֵיכֶם-- יי  
בְּמִרְאֵה אֱלֹהֵי אֲתוֹדַע, בְּחֹלוֹם אֲדַבֵּר-בוֹ. ז לֹא-כֵן, עֲבַדְי  
מִשְׁחָה: בְּכָל-בֵּיתִי, נֹאמְן הוּא. ח פֹּה אֶל-פֹּה אֲדַבֵּר-בוֹ,  
וּמִרְאֵה וְלֹא בְּחִידוֹת, וַתִּמְנַת יי, גִּבִּיט; וּמְדוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם,

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לְדַבֵּר בְּעֵבְדֵי בְּמִשְׁחָה. ט וַיַּחֲרֹאֲף יי בָּם, וַיִּלְךְ. י וַהֲעִנּוּ, סָר  
 מֵעַל הָאֱהָל, וַהֲנִיחַ מְרִיָּם, מְצַרְעַת כְּשִׁלְג; וַיִּנּוּ אַהֲרֹן אֶל-  
 מְרִיָּם, וַהֲנִיחַ מְצַרְעַת. יא וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן, אֶל-מִשְׁחָה: בִּי אֲדֹנָי-  
 אֶל-נָא תִשֶׁת עֲלֵינוּ חֲטָאת, אֲשֶׁר נִוְאַלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חֲטָאנוּ. יב  
 אֶל-נָא תְהִי, כְּמַת, אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אֱמוּ, וַיֵּאָכֵל חֲצִי  
 בָּשָׂרוֹ. יג וַיִּצְעַק מִשְׁחָה, אֶל- יי לֵאמֹר: אֵל, נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ.  
 [פ] יד וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֶל-מִשְׁחָה, וְאַבְיָה זֶרֶק זֶרֶק בְּפִנְיָה--הֲלֵא  
 תִּפְלֹם, שְׂבַעַת יָמִים; תִּסְגַּר שְׂבַעַת יָמִים, מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה,  
 וְאַחַר, תֵּאָסֵף. טו וַתִּסְגַּר מְרִיָּם מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה, שְׂבַעַת יָמִים;  
 וַהֲעֵם לֹא נָסַע, עַד-הָאָסֵף מְרִיָּם. טז וְאַחַר נָסְעוּ הָעָם,  
 מִחֲצָרוֹת; וַיַּחֲנוּ, בְּמִדְבַר פָּאָרֹן. [פ]

1 And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman. 2 And they said: 'has G-d indeed spoken only with Moses? has He not spoken also with us?' And G-d heard it.-- 3 Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth.—[S] 4 And G-d spoke suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam: 'Come out ye three unto the tent of meeting.' And they three came out. 5 And G-d came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forth. 6 And He said: 'Hear now My words: if there be a prophet among you, I G-d do make Myself known unto him in a vision, I do speak with him in a dream. 7 My servant Moses is not so; he is trusted in all My house; 8 with him do I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of G-d doth he behold; wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?' 9 And the anger of G-d was kindled against them; and He departed. 10 And when the cloud was removed from over the Tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam; and, behold, she was leprous. 11 And Aaron said unto Moses: 'Oh my G-d, lay not, I pray thee, sin upon us, for that we have done foolishly, and for that we have sinned. 12 Let her not, I pray, be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb.' 13 And Moses cried unto G-d, saying: 'Heal her now, O God, I beseech Thee.' [P] 14 And G-d said unto Moses: 'If her father had but spit in her face,

1. *Hakirah* volume 1, fall 2004.

should she not hide in shame seven days? Let her be shut up without the camp seven days, and after that she shall be brought in again.' **15** And Miriam was shut up without the camp seven days; and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again. **16** And afterward the people journeyed from Hazeroth, and pitched in the wilderness of Paran. [P]<sup>2</sup>

The story begins with a mundane discussion between Miriam and Aharon about Moshe's wife which evolves into one of the rare and central discussions about the essence of prophecy in the Torah.<sup>3</sup> Sifre ad locum comments that the discussion was about Moshe's separation from Tziporah and his not having any further marital relations with her. Clearly Sifre was referring to דברים ה-

כּו לך, אָמַר לָהֶם: שׁוּבוּ לְכֶם, לְאַהֲלֵיכֶם. כּו וְאַתָּה, פֹּה  
עֹמֵד עַמֻּדִי, וְאַדְבָּרָה אֵלֶיךָ אֶת כָּל-הַמִּצְוָה וְהַחֻקִּים  
וְהַמְשָׁפָטִים, אֲשֶׁר תִּלְמַדְם; וַעֲשׂוּ בְּאֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לָהֶם  
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ

**26** Go say to them: Return ye to your tents. **27** But as for thee, stand thou here by Me, and I will speak unto thee all the commandment, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which thou shalt teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess it.

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2. I copied both the English and Hebrew text from the Bible section on [www.mechon-mamre.org](http://www.mechon-mamre.org) as I did the rest of quotations from Torah or Rambam with some emendations for clarity. Quotes from the Moreh are copied, again with some emendations, from the Shlomo Pines translation.
  3. It is important to note that the previous chapter also deals with the prophecy of Eldad and Meidad, Yehoshua's reaction and Moshe's wishful **וימי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים** -- Would it that the entire people of Hashem were prophets.

The Rambam in *שבת פז א* (based on *ה' יסוה"ת פ"ז ה"ו*) explains that this means that Moshe Rabbeinu remained in a state of preparedness for prophecy at all times and therefore had to separate from his wife Tzipporah. Separating from one's wife is also a metaphor for ascetism. Rambam explains that Shlomo ha-Melech "likens matter, which is the cause of all these bodily pleasures, to a harlot who is also a married woman" (Moreh introduction, page 13). Rambam repeats several times throughout the Moreh<sup>4</sup> that "woman" allegorically refers to bodily needs and pleasures or in his words, *חומר* - matter. Commenting on the word *כושית* - Sifre suggests that the woman was singularly beautiful just like a black person stands out in a group of whites. *מה כושי משונה בעורו כך צפורה משונה בנויה יותר* - *מכל הנשים* - Rambam in III, 8 on the verse in Mishlei 31:10 - *אשת חיל מי ימצא*, A woman of virtue who can find, comments: "For if it so happens that the matter of a man is excellent, and suitable, neither dominating him nor corrupting his constitution, that matter is a divine gift." Accordingly Sifre is saying that *אשה כושית* - the Kushite woman refers to Moshe Rabbeinu's ability to control his *חומר* - matter and that was the beauty they were pointing out. The discussion therefore that Miriam and Aharon were having was a criticism of Moshe's extreme ascetism. Because Moshe was in control of his natural urges, they were critical of his complete abstention from anything physical. Sifre comments: *ויאמרו הרק במשה דבר ה' - והלא אף עם אבותינו דבר הקב"ה ולא פירשו מפריה ורביה* - our forefathers experienced prophecy too and they did not abstain. They had at this point not yet understood that, unlike their own prophecy or the prophecy of the *אבות* - the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu necessary to receive the Torah through Direct Prophecy, requires complete separation from matter. Their prophecy was acquired through contemplation into nature, using nature - matter - as the signpost to find the Creator. Thus their comment - "And they said: 'has the G-d indeed spoken only with Moses? has He not spoken also with us?'" followed by G-d's admonishment:

**ויאמר, שמעו-נא דברי; אם-יהיה, נביאכם-- י במראה  
אליו אתודע, בחלום אדבר-בו.**

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4. See I, 17 and III, 8.

And He said: 'Hear now My words: if there be a prophet among you, I G-d do make Myself known unto him in a vision, I do speak with him in a dream.'

You Miriam and Aharon only experienced Inspirational Prophecy which requires the imaginative faculty. Your apprehension of G-d is through nature which functions by analyzing what your senses perceive which is a function of the interplay of the imaginative faculty with the rational. The prophecy that results from this type of metaphysical speculation manifests itself in visions and dreams, which require interpretation.

לא-כו, עבְדִי מֹשֶׁה: בְּכָל-בֵּיתִי, נֶאֱמָן הוּא. פֶּה אֶל-פֶּה  
אֲדַבֵּר-בוֹ, וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בַחֲדִידָת, וּתְמִנַת יִי, יְבִיט.

My servant Moses is not so; he is trusted in all My house; with him do I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of G-d doth he behold;

Moshe is different because his prophecy is פה אל פה - without the involvement of the imaginative faculties and therefore does not require any interpretation (human input). To achieve this kind of prophecy the requirement is - תמנת ה' יביט - he grasps the truth of G-d. Grasping the truth of G-d can only be accomplished when one removes the self completely from the physical and becomes שכל בלבד - purely rational (פרק חלק introduction). The prophecy that results from this speculation does not require human interpretation and therefore involvement. It is the only one appropriate for giving the divine and immutable Torah. The story understood this way explains why this seemingly innocent comment elicited such a strong response. It cast a doubt on the Torah's authenticity by putting it at the same level as every other prophecy. It no longer would be immutable.

Rambam at the end of ה' טומאת צרעת comments:

טו ועל ענין זה הוא מזהיר בתורה ואומר "הישמר בנגע הצרעת . . . זכור, את אשר עשה ה' אלוהיך למרים, בדרך :

הרי הוא אומר התבוננו מה אירע למרים הנביאה, שדיברה באחיה שהיא גדולה ממנו בשנים, וגידלה אותו על ברכיה, וסיכנה בעצמה להצילו מן הים; והיא לא דיברה בגנותו, אלא טעת שהשוות אותו לשאר נביאים. והוא לא היה מקפיד על כל אלו הדברים, שנאמר "והאיש משה, עניו מאוד". ואף על פי כן, מיד נענשה בצרעת.

Clearly the issue was Miriam's comparing Moshe to other prophets. ❧