

Let her be quarantined outside the camp for seven days, and then she may be brought in. (12:14)

Miriam *HaNeviyah* partnered with her two illustrious brothers in leading *Klal Yisrael* out of Egypt and through their forty-year journey through the wilderness. The Torah relates that Miriam misspoke concerning Moshe *Rabbeinu*, making a comment that was considered *lashon hora*, slanderous speech. As a result, she was struck with *tzaraas*, spiritual leprosy. The *metzora* must be quarantined for seven days. During Miriam's seven-day isolation, the entire *Klal Yisrael* waited and did not journey to their next encampment. While this was considered a punishment to her, *Klal Yisrael's* remaining in place for the duration of her quarantine is a tribute to the esteem in which Hashem and *Klal Yisrael* held her. While this is impressive, would it not have been less humiliating had the nation moved forward, rather than everyone ruminating over the fact that they were "stuck" there because of Miriam's infraction? Furthermore, a debate in *Menachos* 95a explores whether the *metzora* should leave his quarantine when the nation travels. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the *metzora* traveled with the people. Why, then, could a dispensation not have been made with regard to Miriam?

Horav Shlomo Levinstein, Shlita, cites an incident that occurred in the city of Slutzk, Belarus, during the *Ridbaz's* tenure as *Rav* (prior to his emigration to *Eretz Yisrael*, where he became *Rav* of Tzefas). The butcher in Slutzk was an honorable, G-d-fearing man. He was respected by all, and, as a result, he did quite well financially. The Jews of Slutzk were not all Orthodox. Sadly, a contingent of secular Jews had long reneged on such time-honored laws as *kashrus* and *Shabbos*. In fact, for the most part, these men were heretics who denied the very existence of the Creator. One day, one of the community's distinguished physicians – a *maskil*, secular Jew, who believed in very little and observed even less – visited the butcher shop. He certainly was not there to purchase kosher meat. The butcher told him that he would be happy to serve him at another time. He was presently leaving the store to go learn in the *shul*.

"How do you allow yourself to leave on a Thursday which is probably the most lucrative day of the week?" The butcher answered that he had made enough money that day. "What about the people who count on you?" "I am not worried about them, since they will come tomorrow," the butcher answered. "Furthermore," he said, "I am more concerned with my portion in *Olam Habba*, the World-to-Come, than the few extra rubles that I would earn in this world." When the doctor heard this, he asked, "Since I do not believe in *Olam Habba*, can I sell you my portion?" "Sure," the butcher replied. "How much do you want for it?" "One ruble – that is all I think it is worth," the heretic said. The butcher agreed to the sale and immediately handed over a ruble. The deal was forgotten, as the two men went about their individual lives.

Years passed, and the doctor passed away. One morning, shortly after the doctor had left this world, a woman presented herself at the butcher store and introduced herself as the doctor's widow. "I need your help," the woman said. "My husband passed on to his eternal rest. The last

couple of nights he has been appearing to me in a dream with the same request every night; 'Buy back the *Olam Habba* that I sold.' Apparently, he is about to be sent to *Gehinnom*, purgatory. He claimed that, as a physician, he had helped many people and even saved lives. Surely, that should count for some merit." The response was that, indeed, he had some merit, but alas, he had sold his *Olam Habba* for one ruble. There was nowhere for him to go other than purgatory. After much pleading, his *neshamah* was given permission to contact his widow, so that she could "retrieve" the *Olam Habba* he had sold.

The butcher was called to the *Rav*. After listening to the woman, he said, "Veritably, when I purchased your husband's *Olam Habba*, I did not think that the portion was worth more than a ruble. Now that I hear what he has experienced in Heaven, I realize that he had many more merits than I thought. Thus, his *Olam Habba* is worth much more than a ruble. I will not sell it back unless I receive a premium on my purchase price." When two Jews present their case to a bona fide *Rav*, he will convene a *bais din* to adjudicate and resolve all issues. The *Ridbaz* instructed both parties to return later that day to present their cases.

The three judges listened, then adjourned to a room to discuss the case. Half an hour later, they returned. The *Lutzker Rav*, who was the *rosh*, head, of the *bais din*, spoke, "The final judgment is broken into three parts. First, one cannot sell his *Olam Habba*, because it is not his to sell. *Olam Habba* is part of a person. He performs a *mitzvah*; the *mitzvah* illuminates his soul and becomes a part of him. It is not an external saleable object. It is he himself! Second, one who is prepared to sell his *Olam Habba* loses it. Such a person removes himself from those worthy of a portion in the World to Come. He has forfeited his chance. He has demonstrated a disbelief that his *neshamah* will enter a better world. Third, we cannot ignore that as a result of this entire fiasco, the community of Slutzk's *emunah*, faith, in *Olam Habba*, was seriously elevated and strengthened. This alone is reason for the *neshamah* to warrant *Gan Eden*. Indeed, in this transaction, both the butcher and the doctor share an equal partnership.

Rav Levenstein returns to the original question: Why quarantine Miriam and have the entire nation wait for her? The humiliation does not fit the transgression. He explains that one who views quarantine as a punishment is in error. Isolating the *metzora* from the community is not a punishment, but rather, a *kaparah*, atonement, that will expiate his sin. Furthermore, during Miriam's seven-day isolation, the nation's awareness of what *lashon hora* can lead to – since everyone is vulnerable, even the greatest and holiest – would generate an incredible *kiddush Shem Shomayim*, sanctification of Hashem's Name, that would serve as a *z'chus*, merit, and *kaparah* for Miriam.