

"And Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe... and when the cloud was removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam (was) leprous (as white) as snow." (12:1,10)

Why was Miriam punished specifically with *tzaraas*, leprosy? Is there a definite relationship between her punishment and her sin? *Horav Boruch Sorotzkin z.l.* offers a profound response, based upon a novel interpretation of the meaning of sin and its effect.

Sin can be viewed from two distinct perspectives. First, sin is a transgression of the Divine imperative. When the king issues an edict, one is obligated to adhere to it to the fullest extent. No excuses compensate for such an infraction. Second, sin may be compared to a disease. Just as there are physical ailments and disease, so, too, are there spiritual diseases. Hashem, the master doctor, has ordained certain sins as spiritual illnesses which harm the *neshamah*, soul, of a Jew. Just as there are distinctions among physical illnesses, similarly there are differences among the spiritual illnesses. Some diseases are infectious and highly contagious, while others are not. Obviously, the treatment for a spiritual malady varies in accordance with the severity of its symptoms, endangerment to the individual who is stricken, and its communicability to others.

Horav Sorotzkin suggests that *lashon hora*, slander, is a highly contagious spiritual disease. This disorder affects anyone who participates in a group in which one member begins to speak disparagingly of others. As soon as one person makes an uncomplimentary remark about another, the other members of his group feel "compelled" to add their own insight into the "victims" character.

The punishment/medicine should be in accordance with the sin/sickness. The spiritual disease of *lashon hora* is, in effect, similar to the physical disease of leprosy in that they are both highly "infectious." As the leper must be secluded from his environment, so that his disease does not spread, so, too, must one distance himself from the slanderer. When Miriam made uncomplimentary remarks regarding Moshe, she showed symptoms of the virulent disease, *lashon hora*. Consequently, she was reproved with *tzaraas*, underlining the effect of her disparaging remarks.