



לקוטי שיחות  
PROJECT  
LIKKUTEI  
SICHOS

# Likkutei Sichos

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Volume 11 | Beshalach | Sicha 2

Miriam the Prophetess, Aharon's Sister

A note on the translation: Great effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while at the same time striving for readability. However, the translation carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists. Feedback is always appreciated!

1. Our *parsha* describes Miriam leading the women in song and dance: “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aharon took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women came out after her with tambourines and with dancing.”<sup>1</sup> In his commentary, Rashi quotes the words “Miriam the prophetess took,” and explains: “When did she prophesy? When she was **Aharon’s sister** alone, before Moshe was born. She said, ‘My mother will give birth to a son who will redeem Israel’ as we find in tractate Sotah.<sup>2</sup> Another interpretation: Aharon’s sister: Because he exhibited self-sacrifice for her when she contracted *tzara’as*, Miriam is referred to as his sister.”<sup>3</sup>

Seemingly, Rashi is addressing an obvious question arising from this *posuk*, which Rashi himself asks in his commentary on the Talmud in Sotah: “Why is Miriam described as the brother of Aharon, and not as the brother of Moshe?” Rashi explains that the words “Aharon’s sister” are not meant in order to identify Miriam, but rather to inform us of the timing of her prophecy. The *posuk* places the terms “prophetess, Aharon’s sister” together, to indicate that she prophesied when she was **only** the sister of Aharon, before the birth of Moshe.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this explanation, the following difficulties arise:

- Why does Rashi quote the words “Miriam the prophetess took,” when the problematic words prompting his commentary are “Aharon’s sister”? Rashi should have cited the words “Aharon’s sister,” and not “Miriam the prophetess took”, as a lead-in to the question that Rashi is (seemingly) addressing: Why is Miriam described as the brother of Aharon, and not as the brother of Moshe?
- Rashi’s self-stated goal is to explain the simple meaning (*pshat*) of the Torah’s text. What compelled Rashi to tell us the **content** of Miriam’s prophecy? He could have simply written, “When did she prophesy? When she was Aharon’s sister.” The message of her prophecy is not relevant to address the difficulty in *pshat*, and thus seems out of place in Rashi’s commentary.
- Conversely, what is Rashi’s source in *pshat* that Miriam prophesied that her mother would give birth to a son who would redeem Israel? Rashi’s methodology is to base his commentary in the simple meaning of the text. The content of Miriam’s prophecy is not evident in *pshat*, and so seems out of place.

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<sup>1</sup> Shemos 15:20

<sup>2</sup> T.B. Sotah 12b, T.B. Megillah 14a, Mechilta on this *posuk*.

<sup>3</sup> Rashi, Shemos 15:20

<sup>4</sup> Rashi, T.B. Sotah 12b, *d.h. shehayso*

- Rashi's practice is **not** to indicate the sources upon which his commentary is based. When he **does** note his sources, he does so in order to add clarity to his commentary. Yet when he provides a source, the additional clarity we derive from his source is not crucial in understanding the *pshat* -- we are able to obtain a good grasp of the *pshat* without referring to the source. (If knowledge of the source would be crucial to understanding the *pshat*, Rashi would spell it out, so even a beginner would comprehend.) When Rashi does note his source, it is for the benefit of the adept student, who is able to identify a difficulty in Rashi's commentary. He will then look up the source given in Rashi, and thereby resolve the difficulty.

If the rabbinic source quoted by Rashi is found in **several** places, and Rashi references a **single** source (rather than simply stating "...as we find in the Talmud"), then Rashi's means to direct the reader to that source specifically, to obtain additional clarity.<sup>5</sup>

This analysis raises the following quandary: What difficulty in *pshat* was Rashi trying to resolve by indicating his source in tractate Sotah? The rabbinic teaching presented by Rashi appears in tractate Megillah as well, yet Rashi only references tractate Sotah, despite the fact that tractate Megillah appears before tractate Sotah in the Talmud. By referring us to Sotah exclusively, Rashi indicates that we can only achieve clarity in our understanding, based solely on the source in Sotah, to the exclusion of the other source in Megillah. What difficulty does Rashi allude to in providing this source, and why is a resolution only to be found in Sotah and not Megillah?

- Why does Rashi quote the words "Aharon's sister" in his second interpretation? He already quoted those words in his first interpretation, and repeating those words seems unnecessary. Rashi could have stated instead, "According to another interpretation: It is because he exhibited self-sacrifice for her..." Repeating "Aharon's sister" seems to serve no purpose.
- We have discussed several times (in previous *sichos*) Rashi's methodology in cases in which he brings two interpretations. When he precedes these interpretations by stating explicitly that there are two interpretations, Rashi indicates thereby that both interpretations are on equal footing. When he does

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<sup>5</sup> In a footnote, the Rebbe writes that Rashi's intention could also be to **negate** the rabbinic statement appearing in the other location(s).

not make such an introductory statement, Rashi indicates that (a) each of the interpretations has a unique difficulty not shared by the other; and (b) the first interpretation is primary. Nonetheless, the first interpretation does not suffice, and a second interpretation is needed. In our *posuk*, what difficulty is found in each of the two interpretations?

2. To resolve the above questions, we must clarify the textual difficulties that motivated Rashi's commentary:
  - Miriam is described in the *posuk* as **the** prophetess (*ha'neviah*). The Torah uses the definite article "**the**" when referring to something that has already been established, implying that Miriam has prophesied previously. Where do we find a previous prophecy by Miriam?
  - A more fundamental difficulty relates to the words that Rashi quotes from the *posuk* at the beginning of his commentary: "Miriam the prophetess took." On occasion, the Torah will add a description of a person mentioned in its narrative. It is understood that the purpose of that description could be for one of two purposes: (a) To **identify** that person, for without adding a description, we would not recognize the person mentioned; (b) To deepen our **understanding** of the incident described.

In our *posuk*, when the Torah adds the description "the prophetess," it is clear that the Torah is not using this description to **identify** Miriam, as we have not previously been aware that Miriam is a prophetess. Additionally, the Torah immediately identifies Miriam as "Aharon's sister," obviating the need for any additional identification of Miriam. Thus, we must conclude that Miriam is described as a prophetess to deepen our **understanding**, implying a necessary connection between her being a prophetess and the incident described -- taking a tambourine and leading the women in song and dance. As will be explained, this conclusion appears to be problematic.

How is the role of a prophet defined? We have previously learned in *parshas Vayeira*: "And now, return the man's wife because he is a **prophet**..."<sup>6</sup> Rashi comments: "Because he is a prophet -- and he **knows** that you have not touched her..." This demonstrates that the uniqueness of prophets is their knowledge of secret matters. Rashi, in *parshas Vayeitzei*, adds to this point: "For the

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<sup>6</sup> Bereishis 20:7

matriarchs were **prophets** and they **knew...**<sup>7</sup> They were aware of what would transpire in the future. Rashi notes an additional function in the role of a prophet in *parshas Va'era*: "The term prophecy refers to the speech of a person who publicly proclaims and utters to the people words of **reproof...**"<sup>8</sup> From the above sources, it is clear that the definition of a prophet is a person who knows secret matters, who knows the future, and who chastises the people.

This begs the question: What is the connection between Miriam taking the tambourine to lead the women in song and dance, and the fact that she was a prophetess? Miriam's motivation to lead the women in song was the natural emotion she felt in her soul when she witnessed the miracle; it was not motivated by her knowledge of secrets or of the future, nor by her desire to chastise the people. Rashi himself supports this understanding of Miriam's motivation, in his description of Moshe's song at the sea: "Then, when Moshe saw the miracle, **it arose in his heart** to sing... **his heart told him** to sing, and so he sung... as so to regarding Yehoshua... and so, too, regarding the song of the well, which also begins 'Then they sang'..."<sup>9</sup> From this it is clearly understood that Miriam, too, when she saw the miracle, was inspired to sing by a similar heart-felt emotion. That being the case, how is Miriam being a **prophetess** relevant **here**?

3. Rashi solves this difficulty as follows: Miriam's prophetic ability is, in fact, **not** related to the incident described in our *parsha* in which she leads the women in song and dance. Rather, the Torah describes her as a prophetess in connection with the phrase "Aharon's sister," which follows immediately upon her being described as a prophetess.

This is how Rashi's commentary begins:

**Miriam the prophetess took.** When did she prophecy? When she was Aharon's sister before Moshe was born...

Rashi quotes the words "Aharon's sister" in the course of his commentary, but they are not Rashi's words of commentary, they are the Torah's words. We should read them as if they were printed in the larger, bold letters normally employed when Rashi quotes the *posuk* at the beginning of each of his

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<sup>7</sup> Rashi, Bereishis 29:34

<sup>8</sup> Rashi, Shemos 7:1

<sup>9</sup> Rashi, Shemos 15:1

comments. As he does in several places in his commentary,<sup>10</sup> Rashi inserted words of commentary between the words of the *posuk*. The intent of this *posuk*, Rashi informs us, is to teach us that Miriam previously prophesied when she was **only** the sister of Aharon, before Moshe was born.

The Torah alerts us to the timing of Miriam's previous prophecy, in order to resolve the following difficulty: In the previous verses, immediately preceding Miriam's song and the Song at the Sea, the Torah states that, "They believed in Hashem and in Moshe his servant."<sup>11</sup> These words indicate how *batei*<sup>12</sup> all of Bnei Yisroel were to Moshe at that time. Much earlier, the Jewish people saw that Hashem appointed Moshe as "*Elokim* over Pharaoh,"<sup>13</sup> in a regime in which "no man may raise his hand or his foot"<sup>14</sup> without the permission of Pharaoh's **vicero**y. This begs the question: How did Miriam undertake such a great endeavour as leading all the women in song and dance, without first obtaining Moshe's permission?

That is why the Torah adds the title "prophetess" when describing Miriam. Miriam's prophetic ability was well-known: she was a high-ranking prophetess, to the extent that she even prophesied regarding the impending birth of Moshe when she was still only "Aharon's sister," before Moshe was born. It is Miriam's prophetic superiority that enabled her to lead the women in song, taking the lead in Moshe's presence, as will be elaborated.

Why is Miriam described as "the prophetess, Aharon's sister"? Seemingly, the Torah should more appropriately have described her as "the prophetess, daughter of Amram," who was Moshe's father (and in that capacity, **superior** to Moshe). Since the Torah is trying to highlight Miriam's greatness, why does the Torah emphasize that she is the sister of Aharon, whose prophetic abilities were **inferior** to Moshe's? We must, therefore, say that the emphasis on Miriam being described as "Aharon's sister" is not to **compare** her level to that of Aharon, but rather to highlight the **content** of her prophecy, which relates to the time before Moshe's birth. Thus, Rashi emphasizes that her prophecy took place "before Moshe's birth", to allude to the **content** of her prophecy -- that Moshe would soon be born. For if the intention of the Torah was simply to indicate that Miriam

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<sup>10</sup> See Rashi on Bereishis 4:17

<sup>11</sup> Shemos 14:31

<sup>12</sup> Nullification of self, selflessness

<sup>13</sup> Shemos 7:1

<sup>14</sup> Bereishis 41:44

prophesied previously, the Torah should have referred to Miriam as “the prophetess of earlier times”.

The following points underscore the superiority of Miriam’s prophetic ability (as well as Miriam’s import in comparison with Moshe): (a) Miriam had foreknowledge of, and prophesied about, the birth of Moshe, the foremost leader of Israel, and all Israel were *batef* to him; (b) Miriam prophesied regarding a matter that did not relate to herself directly (rather, it related to her parents, Amram and Yocheved)<sup>15</sup>; (c) Miriam prophesied that her mother would give birth. In spite of her parents both being alive, the prophecy came through her and not to them directly. These three points demonstrate that Miriam’s prophetic ability was exceptionally great.

This is the intention of the Torah describing Miriam as “a prophetess, Aharon’s sister”: Not only was Miriam a prophetess, she prophesied prior to, and regarding Moshe’s birth, demonstrating the greatness of her prophetic ability. That is why she was able to, “...take the tambourine in her hand... and Miriam called out to them...” “and all the women came out after her...”<sup>16</sup>

4. Still, it seems that not all the issues have been resolved. As discussed above, the Torah’s intent is to inform us that Miriam’s prophetic ability was comparable to that of Moshe, and that is why the Torah refers to Miriam as “Aharon’s sister.” Would it not then be preferable for the Torah to compare Miriam to Moshe directly, and refer to her as “the prophetess, Moshe’s sister”? Since her prophetic ability is not connected with Miriam leading the women in song, we would understand that the Torah’s description of her as a prophetess is connected to the following phrase, “Moshe’s sister.” The term “sister” implies parity. We would understand, then, that Miriam was on Moshe’s level of prophecy. Rashi subscribes to the term “sister” (or “brother”) indicating parity, as in *posuk* “Shimon and Levi are brothers,”<sup>17</sup> on which Rashi comments, “they were of one mind.”

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<sup>15</sup> The Rebbe quotes in a footnote a halacha in Rambam M.T. Hil. Yesodei HaTorah 7:7 “There is a possibility that a prophet will experience prophecy for his own sake alone, i.e. to broaden his perspective and to increase his knowledge... it is also possible that he will be sent to one of the nations of the world...” (It would seem from the Rebbe’s presentation that a prophet who is sent to prophesy to others is of greater stature than one who experiences prophecy for his own sake.)

<sup>16</sup> Shemos 15:20-21

<sup>17</sup> Bereishis 49:5

One might object to the comparison between the prophetic ability Moshe and Miriam, based on the *posuk*, “No other prophet ever arose in Israel like Moshe.”<sup>18</sup> The Torah itself immediately allays that objection, as the uniqueness of Moshe’s prophetic ability is limited to the fact that he was the only one, “whom Hashem knew face to face.”<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding Moshe’s uniqueness, Moshe himself declares that there will be other prophets of his stature: “Hashem your G-d will establish a prophet **like me** from your midst, from your brothers...”<sup>20</sup>

The following answer might be offered, albeit a weak one: The reason the Torah chose to describe her as “Aharon’s sister” rather than “Moshe’s sister” is because calling her Moshe’s sister is insufficient. The Torah wants to emphasize that she prophesied **before** Moshe’s birth, as expressed in the words “Aharon’s sister.” In this regard, she was even superior to Moshe himself, and her preeminent prophetic ability thus justifies Miriam leading the women in song without having to request permission from Moshe.

This answer, however, is deficient, firstly because in our *parsha* Miriam is not engaged in prophecy, so her prophetic ability is immaterial. But the main weakness with this answer is that, after all, the **entire** Jewish people sang. Miriam’s only innovation was for the women to sing as well. Yet the women themselves partook of the miracle at the sea. There was no need to describe Miriam as “Aharon’s sister” in order to elevate her status and obviate the need for her to ask for permission. Accordingly, the Torah really should have referred to Miriam as “Moshe’s sister.” A reason is needed to explain why the Torah refers to Miriam as “Aharon’s sister.”

That is why Rashi offers a second interpretation: “Another interpretation: Aharon’s sister: Because he had self-sacrifice for her when she contracted *tzara’as*, Miriam is referred to as his sister.” This means that when talking about Miriam, people actually referred to her as Aharon’s sister. Since people referred to her that way, the Torah also refers to her as Aharon’s sister.

Rashi begins his second interpretation with the words, “Another interpretation: Aharon’s sister” in order to emphasize that this explanation comes only to explain why Miriam is referred to as Aharon’s sister and not Moshe’s sister. It does not come to negate the other solutions provided by the first interpretation.

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<sup>18</sup> Bamidbar 34:10

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Devarim 18:15



However, this second interpretation itself has several difficulties! Our *parsha* describes the events at the time of the splitting of the sea. Yet Miriam is called Aharon's sister (and not Moshe's sister) based on events that take place much later, when Miriam contracts *tzara'as* during the journey in the desert! Moreover, and this is primary difficulty with Rashi's second interpretation -- the intent of our *posuk*, as discussed previously, is to relate Miriam's superiority. According to this second interpretation, by referring to her as Aharon's sister, we are reminded that she had contracted *tzara'as*, which is a shortcoming rather than a virtue. Thus, Rashi gives prominence to his first interpretation.

Rashi goes on to address the issue of Miriam's age at the time of her first prophecy. On the face of it, Miriam could not have prophesied before Moshe's birth, for she would have been very young, based on the straight-forward understanding of the text. To resolve this, Rashi indicates that the source of his first interpretation is in tractate Sotah. In tractate Sotah, (and not in tractate Megillah<sup>21</sup>), immediately preceding the discussion of our verse, the Talmud explains the verse, "The maiden [Miriam] went, and called the child's mother."<sup>22</sup> The Talmud comments: "The teaches us that Miriam went with alacrity, like a maiden."<sup>23</sup> From this we understand that in spite of her tender years, Miriam had the character of one who is of age ("a maiden"), and so she was fitting to receive prophecy.

5. From the "wine of Torah"<sup>24</sup> in Rashi's commentary: The name Miriam represents the *sefira* of *malchus*. There are two ways in which the *sefira* of *malchus* is characterized. *Malchus* is rooted in Hashem's essence, higher than the other *sefiros*; and *malchus* "has nothing of its own" (like the moon, to which *malchus* is compared), in that *malchus* is *batel* to the *sefiros* above it, and only has what it receives from them. This enables us to perceive in *malchus* the power of Hashem's essence, found in the light drawn down to *malchus*, (in spite of that power being imperceptible in the *sefiros* above *malchus*). We will see that Miriam is emblematic of the *sefira* of *malchus*, as well as how Rashi alludes to this in his two interpretations.

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<sup>21</sup> While Rashi's first interpretation is also found in tractate Megillah, the discussion of Miriam's alacrity, which resolves the issue of Miriam's age, only appears in tractate Sotah. This resolves the earlier question as to why Rashi only mentions the source in Sotah, and omits the source in Megillah.

<sup>22</sup> Shemos 2:8

<sup>23</sup> Sotah 12b

<sup>24</sup> I.e. the teachings of Chassidus

Rashi's first interpretation stresses Miriam's virtues. She was a high-ranking prophetess, to the extent that she even prophesied regarding the impending birth of Moshe. Rashi's second interpretation explains that Miriam was referred to as Aharon's sister. This implies that she was *batel* and deferential toward him. Through Aharon's self-sacrifice on behalf of his sister, he achieved atonement for her defamatory remarks. As explained above, even according to Rashi's second interpretation, by use of the terminology "Miriam the prophetess, **sister**...", the Torah stresses her virtues.

How does Miriam personify the *sefira* of *malchus*? Miriam's virtues described in Rashi's first interpretation are parallel to the superiority of the *sefira* of *malchus*; and Miriam's *bitul* and deference toward Aharon described in Rashi's second interpretation is parallel to *malchus* receiving from the six *sefiros* of *z"ra* preceding *malchus*.<sup>25</sup>

This analysis provides a unique lesson to Jewish women and girls. Although Jewish women possess many virtues that men lack, to the extent that in the period following the future redemption, "woman will encircle man,"<sup>26</sup> they are advised to take the following rabbinic teaching to heart: "Who is a fitting wife? She who fulfills her husband's will."<sup>27</sup> Specifically by adhering to this teaching, they will be able to reveal their inherent virtues.

This lesson does not apply only to those manifest virtues acquired from their husbands; it applies also to their own inherent virtues, as Rashi alludes to in his commentary above. Rashi explains that Miriam was known as Aharon's sister because he displayed self-sacrifice for her. Miriam and Aharon shared a common trait, which was the cause for his self-sacrifice. Aharon is described as, "a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, and a lover of people, whom he drew close to Torah."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Miriam is identified with Pu'ah, who would "coo and speak and croon to infants in the manner employed by women to soothe a crying child."<sup>29</sup> Their common trait prompted Aharon to exhibit self-sacrifice for Miriam, and so she was known as "Aharon's sister."

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<sup>25</sup> The Zohar refers to Aharon as *shoshvina d'matronisa*, the "usher" who leads the bride to the wedding canopy. Aharon represents the six *sefiros* of *z"ra*, and his main task is to elevate the Jewish people, representing *malchus*, who receive from him. In our context, Miriam, represents *malchus*, in that she is *batel* to Aharon, and through him, receives atonement.

<sup>26</sup> Yirmiyahu 31:21 (Implying superiority of women over men in the Messianic era)

<sup>27</sup> Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba ch. 9

<sup>28</sup> Mishnah Avos 1:12, see also Avos d'Rabbi Nosson 12:3

<sup>29</sup> Rashi on Shemos 1:15

This suggests that even regarding inherently feminine virtues, expressed by Rashi as “in the manner employed by women to soothe...”, consistent with the nature of women who draw others close,<sup>30</sup> a woman still draws upon her husband. Miriam is referred to as “Aharon’s sister,” and was popularly known by her relation to Aharon.

Conversely, after a woman draws upon her husband, receiving and integrating what her husband brings to their relationship, all of a woman’s inherent virtues are revealed, in a manner surpassing those of her husband, so much so that her superior qualities influence him. This will ultimately be revealed in the time of the future redemption, when “woman will encircle man” in a revealed way.

-From the *sichos* of Shabbos *Parshas Beshalach* and *Yud Shevat 5767*

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<sup>30</sup> See Rashi on Vayira 19:3 “She (a mother) draws him (her child) close by speaking to him.”