



## When Illness Refocuses our Relationships: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Be-ha'alotehah*

### Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

"*El na refah na lah...* Please God heal her." These could be the words of any one of us faced with the illness of someone we love. When we witness the fragility of life, when we realize that those close to us are only mortal, our hearts cry out for help. Often at such a moment, as our minds begin to race with thoughts of the future, we find ourselves at a loss for words. Past arguments and disagreements that once seemed irreconcilable slip away as we are reminded of what is most important. The problems of the past may re-emerge, but in that first moment of understanding, they are eclipsed by a much larger truth—the power of our love and connection.

As the Israelites travel through the wilderness, they constantly challenge Moses' authority and ability. At the end of this week's *parsha* (in Numbers, chapter 12), criticism of Moses comes from an unexpected source – Miriam and Aaron. They ask: "Is it only through Moses that God speaks? Has God not also spoken through us?" God hears their accusations and is enraged. They are chastised for their impudence and God affirms Moses' unique status as a prophet and leader. Miriam is punished, struck suddenly with a disfiguring skin disease. The siblings' fighting stops, and Moses utters a five-word prayer calling upon God to heal his sister.

The text leaves many questions unanswered. What motivated Miriam and Aaron to criticize their brother? Why was Miriam punished and not Aaron? What exactly was the illness that afflicted Miriam? Most commentators attempt to determine the reasons behind the siblings' behavior and God's response to it.

These are the same questions that arise out of our own experience of illness. We ask: Why is this happening? Why is God punishing me? What could I have done differently to prevent this from happening? There are no easy answers to these questions and each of us must try to make our own meaning out of the suffering we encounter.

Illness, tragedy and loss are difficult teachers. They shatter our lives and the world no longer seems to make sense. As we begin to rebuild, we find our perspective changed. We take stock of what is most important to us. The faces of friends and family appear to us more clearly. We recall moments of our lives with both pride and regret. We are reminded of what is most dear to us and we learn to treasure each moment more carefully.

*“El na refah na lah... God, please heal her.”* A brief, almost wordless cry, of a brother for his sister... a child for her parents... a spouse for his beloved. The painful words and deeds of the past fade away in the face of an illness and the essential aspects of our lives become more apparent. In these moments of pain, may we find strength to let go of past wounds, to recall the blessings in our lives, and to treasure the people that we love.

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