

# Miriam

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Miriam and Aaron complain to Moses about his wife, because he had married an "Isha Cushit." What is a Cushit? We all know that modern Hebrew a Cushi is someone from Africa, usually black. And in our still racial world, many people would consider this a negative word, implying inferiority. But the truth is that in the Bible the term cushi is used several times of Israel itself. The prophet Amos for example has God saying that the Israelites are like "children of Cushim" to God in a positive way. That is certainly not derogatory.

The major commentators were concerned about the meaning of the word and its context.

What was the complaint? Was it that Moses had married a black woman? Was it racial? Nowhere does the Torah indicate that some races are intrinsically superior or inferior. Inferiority is based entirely on a person's behavior. If he or she is pagan and has no moral values. So, if they are complaining because she was a non-Jewish Midianite, why didn't they complain that she was Midianite? And why now years after the marriage with two nearly grown up children?

In the context of the Torah, cushi here, means special. As the midrash says Moses was so busy looking after the people he had little time for his children and his wife. He was sleeping alone in his Tent to better concentrate on God and the needs of the people. Miriam's complaint was that Moshe was setting a bad example abandoning his beautiful, lovely, special wife for the sake of the community.

God's response was anger at Miriam. Moses after all was doing God's work and that required exceptional concentration and dedication to God and the people. Miriam and Aaron were right to be concerned about others. But not if it undermined Moshe's position. And sadly, we know that the result was that Moses's sons did not follow in his footsteps. Sometimes one has to make sacrifices for the greater good and Moses was such a devoted servant, he put God and the people first.