SINS OF HEAD, HEART AND SOUL
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In olden and golden rabbinic days the Rabbi used to stand before his congregation (there were no her congregations in those ancient days) and begin his drash, his sermon with an obscure biblical reference or quotation. This homoletical technique, known in Hebrew and a *pitichta,* meaning opening was in fact a game that the Rabbi would play with his congregation. Knowing as they all did the sedra, the Torah portion for the week, the Rabbi would challenge his congregation to connect his obscure biblical quote with the lesson or moral of that's weeks parsha.

Among the most learned of congregants the Rabbis pulpit puzzlement, was a moment of true where's waldoism, could they make the connections the rabbi was about to make. Could they follow this as yet un-illuminated path to the Rabbi's conclusion, and could they do it before the Rabbi gave them any hints.

I believe actually that it was in this same era that what we on this side of the pulpit, call the congregational murmur was first invented. The congregational murmur is that sound that a Rabbi longs to hear when he and nowadays she strikes a familiar cord with the congregation, so much so that the Jews in the pews can't but help murmuring to each other about the profundity of the great rabbi. Or at least that is how we on this side perceive the murmur. In reality it may be that you are saying to one another, here he goes again, or something to that effect. But from our side the congregational murmur is always perceived to be a positive thing. Unless of course it occurs before the Rabbis begins his or her sermon, then, well we know we are in trouble.

And so in honor and memory of those great Rabbis who came before me, and in no obligation on your part to murmur in any way, I present to you my own *petichta* verse for this Shabbat:

> "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Kushite woman." (Numbers 12:1)

Was that a murmur I heard???? Now to solve this pulpit puzzle you have to know the context of this Shabbat. Traditionally the context would be dictated by the pasha of the week, and this weeks Torah portion is Vayachi, the last section in the book of Genesis, when Jacob dies and blesses his grandson's Ephramim and Manasheh. But the context of a Shabbas was not always dictated by the parsha, the events of the day, the world outside the synagogue might also be considered as having pulpit puzzle potential.

We can image the great Rabbis of the Talmudic era speaking of the conquests of Rome the, legions of soldiers gathering the desert fields to preparing to do battle. In times of the Inquisition, Rabbis must have remarked about the story of Purim and its biblical parallels with the events taking place in the not so Golden Age of Spain.

Imagine for a moment even how a Rabbi might have begun his sermon in the villages of Poland, the shtetles of Eastern Europe as signs saying Jews be gone and far worse were plastered on the walls of the synagogue. Would he (again they were he's back then) have referenced the story of Hanukah, or yet again Purim?

So what do we make of Miriam's and Aaron's remarks about Moses, the great a revered leader of the Jewish people. Miriam and Aaron spoke not only for and of them selves but as leaders of the community, they clearly represented a constituency as well. Their remarks cut even deeper because they were spoken by the heads of the community,

the representatives of the people. Aaron the leader of the House of Prayer and Miriam, in her role, as leader of House and Home. Representing those two groups, dare I say they represented a majority, they were majority leaders.

NOW I HEAR A MURMUR!

Indeed, the remarks of Aaron and Miriam, closely shadow those of Trent Lott two weeks ago, when he proclaimed of Strom Thurman, that the nation would have been better off had we elected him president on his segregation ticket. In fact one might ask Senator Thurman if he remembers the look on the people's faces when Miriam and Aaron said what they said, I am told he was there.

Aaron and Miriam, criticized Moses for two reprehensible acts in there view. (1) that eh ha taken as a wife a Cushite woman, which historians have claimed was both from another people, the people of Cush, and also black. Judaism has always focused on the 'other people' aspect of his betrothal, something of an intermarriage, down playing the racial implications, but both are present in the text. (2) They were angry at Moses because they felt that such an over and public act was taking advantage of his relationship with God, as though no matter what he could do God would protect him and would not be angry with him.

Rather the contrary was just the case. God had no qualms with Moses' actions, but was incised by the words of Miriam and Aaron. So much so that we read a few lines later in the text." And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the Tent; and, behold, Miriam had become leprous, white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous." (Numbers 12:9-10)

The Torah finds it to be ironic and fitting that the punishment meted out to Miriam is that for criticizing Moses for marrying a black woman her skin is turned white as snow. And for Aaron, at first reading it would appear that he escapes punishment, but in fact later on we learn that his punishment is even more sever. Where before he considered himself an equal of Moses and co-leader of the people. He realizes that he must give up his status, and though he remains in the House of Worship, he is no longer the leader of the people he once was.

And so the parallels with the events of our day today. Senator Lott who made a career and a name for himself as espousing in private and semi public the abhorrent values and racial bigotry that he mistakenly uttered on the world stage two weeks ago. For his offense the punishment is not divine retribution (thought who is to say what will come), but perhaps the more painful sort of punishment, the public rebuking and chastisement of a man whose life is lived in public. Thus far however Senator Lott's punishment matches that of Aaron. Today he announced that he would step down form his position of leadership in the Republican party. And while I know it was painful for him, and for his staff. Like Aaron, his affliction is only internal shame, a sense of guilt perhaps. In our system he is being punished for what he let slip, not for the ruinous beliefs that were behind the momentary lapse of political sense. Lott was forced out because his lapse was an embarrassment, not because those embarrassed necessarily objected to his views, only that eh made them so public.

It is not the punishment of Aaron that I seek in this matter. Rather the punishment of Miriam that should be Senator Lott's fate as well. Let him live for a while as a black man in our nation today. Let him hear on TV his nation's highest leaders proclaim that

we would have been better off if we kept the races segregated, if we had nto integrated schools, and business, the military, the voting booth. Let Senator Lott live for a while with the conspicuous spots of his own skin. Let that be his inescapable punishment, let that be his lot. And then maybe he will not only see the error of his words, but the error of his ways as well.

An interesting thing happens just a few lines later in the Torah portion. Moses for the first time prays. Hearing of Miriam's affliction, he cries out to God, El Na Rifanah La, please God Heal Her. It is the simplest and most heartfelt of prayers and it is the basis for the Mishbeyrach the prayer of healing we say with tears every week.

I pray for Senator Lott as well. That he find healing from his affliction, that he learn to look beyond his outer exterior, the image he project to the nation, and examine very closely the image that he projects back upon himself, that he examine his soul. When will we finally be rid of scourge of racism in our nation? When will we realize for good that what divides us is not skin color, but ignorance and fear.

"And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days; and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again." We cannot move forward with men like Senator Lott in positions of leadership, that is for sure, but nor can we move forward with men and woman in our nation who harbors racist sentiments, but hid them from public view. For the sin which we have committed which is public and known by all and for the sin which we have committed in private and known only by ourselves, we seek forgiveness. So should say Senator Lott and so should say everyone of us.