

In this week's parasha, Beha'alotecha, we experience what we might call today an acutely uncomfortable intersection of gender dynamics and ethnic or racial dynamics. In Numbers 12:1, Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses, regarding the Cushite woman he had married. Cushi in ancient Hebrew means "Ethiopian" or "black".

We don't know what Miriam and Aaron's complaint was – they go on to say, "Has Hashem spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?" Both the Talmud and Commentator Rashi actually interpret this as a complaint on behalf of Moses's wife. The subtext is that Moses was too busy doing holy prophetic work to spend time with his wife, and Miriam and Aaron are advocating for her, saying, "We're prophets too, but we don't neglect our families."

But there is still that loaded racial term, "Cushi". What are we to do with that? Some commentators, speaking to what does appear to be the plain meaning of the text, suggest in fact that Miriam and Aaron were complaining about the ethnicity of Moshe's wife.

In any case, Miriam is punished for this with being stricken in verse 10 with "snow-white scales" of leprosy. Aaron is not punished. I am not the first to find it fascinating that after speaking offensively about the color of her sister in law, Miriam -and only Miriam - turned white.

We know, historically, that part of the process by which various ethnic communities have come to be considered "White" in the United States has been through their complicity, either active or passive, in oppressive dark-skinned people. Light-skinned Jews are no exception. Rabbi Sandra Lawson taught this week that Miriam was in fact afflicted with whiteness. Miriam's punishment, her scaly white-skin, might be for us a useful reminder of how white supremacy afflicts our community and each of us, unless we are actively fighting against it.

But all of this commentary centers Miriam. Moshe's Cushite wife remains silent throughout the story, and I have not read any traditional commentator who even conjectures about how she felt or what she said in response to Miriam and Aaron's words. And that means she has been silenced for generations.

We claim Moshe, Miriam and Aaron and our spiritual ancestors. So too is Moshe's silent Cushite wife. We are spiritually descended from peoples of all colors, and from people who were intolerant of people of other colors. Our task is not to justify Miriam and Aaron's motives or actions, but to get better and better at asking – how does Moshe's silent wife feel? Because Moshe's silent wife is in every community. And until we make room to hear her voice, we are afflicted with the same "Whiteness" as Miriam.