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בס"ד

## Parashat Beha'alotekha Part III Numbers 11

### 1. The People's Complaints

The second major portion of the book of Numbers begins with chapter 11, which resumes the narrative thread from Exodus with some interspersed legislation. Beginning with this chapter through chapter 25, the narrative includes various instances of the Israelites' grievances and rebellions, acts that reflect disloyalty to the covenant and challenges to G-d's will. No such confrontations are recorded between chapter 26 and the conclusion of the book in chapter 36.

Our section's opening verses set the tone. "The people were complaining bitterly in Hashem's ears, Hashem heard and His anger flared. Hashem's fire broke out against them" (Num. 11:1). Contrary to all the other accounts of disobedience in the Torah, we are not told what they complained about. The blazing fire began devouring at the edge of the camp. It was obvious that if something was not quickly done the fire was going to spread into the camp proper. The people cry out to Moses. This indicates a degree of repentance on their part, albeit superficial. Moses prays to G-d and the fire is extinguished. The place is named Taberah (a derivative, if not a nuance, of "fire" or "burning") such that the lesson may be recalled and internalized. This episode is drawn in such general terms that many view it as an introductory paradigm for much of what follows, a כָּלל וּפְרָט ("general followed by particular"): The people complain, G-d gets angry and metes out punishment, the people cry out asking Moses to intercede, he prays and G-d relents.

It should be noted that Taberah is not mentioned in the Numbers 33 itinerary. Perhaps in that account it was subsumed in Kibroth-hattaavah, the next place-name in our chapter, since no traveling was recorded

between these locations. In Deuteronomy 9:22 Taberah and Kibroth-hattaavah are referred to individually in the same verse, although not in succession as presented here but with Massah in between. There, Moses had no need to cite them in chronological order.

The Kibroth-hattaavah narrative (Num. 11:4 ff.) vividly illustrates a number of important particulars associated with rebellious behavior. A group originally not part of Israel that was then living within the nation, the חֵרֵב־הָאָרֶץ,\* "craved a craving" and in short order the Israelites were influenced to join in, returning to their complaining. The passage points out that complaints can be contagious. In this grievance the Israelites expressed an insatiable passion for meat.

Clan by clan, publicly, all were weeping, bemoaning their lot (Num. 11:4b, 10). In addition to desiring meat they were nostalgic for the large assortment of foods available in Egypt, the free fish, the variety of fruits and vegetables and seasoning products. They were now dissatisfied with the monotonous, albeit miraculous, manna (Num. 11:4b-6).

No mention is made of their previous slavery, the essential factor in making "free" food available (in that masters have a vested interest in their slaves' nourishment). Neither is mention made of G-d's great benefactions on their behalf. They ignore the remarkable nature of the manna that they were then receiving (vv. 7-9). It was clean and reliable, alighting nightly upon the dew, and given to various types of preparation. It had a pleasant taste and an attractive appearance. Most important of all, they ignored the fact that it was provided directly by divine providence. The covenant was being scorned by petty

materialistic desires. Ingratitude prevailed, strongly supported by highly selective memory.

The Israelites had meat available. We read elsewhere in the Torah that they exited Egypt with cattle and flocks (Exod. 12:38) and that they expressed concern for the welfare of their livestock (ibid. 17:3). Earlier in Numbers we read about the redemption of the animals of the firstborn with those of the Levites (Num. 3:45), of altar dedicatory sacrifices (Num. 7) and of the Passover offering (Num. 9), and soon we will read about provision of water for the Israelites' animals (Num. 20:4). Hence, we may assume that meat was available when one was willing to part with personal livestock. But the Israelites wanted meat without having to deplete personal inventories.

In this narrative the Torah provides lessons in human nature, group behavior and psychological reality as concerns the extents to which rationalization may reach. There also is a lesson concerning the difficulty of disabusing people from erroneous perspectives. As G-d subsequently reveals to Moses (v. 20), although the people did not here state it, at this point they are sorry they exited Egypt and He is angry.

## 2. Moses' Reactions

In addition to being frustrated and exasperated, Moses is depressed (v. 10b). The people had just departed from Sinai and had already engaged in major backsliding. And the issue does not even concern a life-threatening situation but a desire for diet delights.

Moses is now convinced that he cannot handle the nation under the circumstances that prevail and that only disaster was in store for him. He had personal theological questions: "Why did I not find favor in Your eyes that You placed the burden of this whole people upon me?" (He ironically cited G-d's words of Exodus 33:17 with which G-d informed him that he had, indeed, found favor in His eyes.) "Did I conceive all this people, did I give birth to it?...From where can I obtain meat to give to this whole people?...I cannot carry this whole people alone...If this is how you deal with me [leaving me in charge alone], kill me, please, kill, if I have found favor in Your eyes so that I should not see the terrible outcome that will befall me" (vv. 11-15).\*\* True prophets maintain their intellectual

integrity even when interacting with the highest authority.

What is the answer to Moses' questions, why did G-d allow him to reach such a dejected stage? Perhaps He knew that Moses could do the job if he persevered or took certain steps. To some extent, this is a replay of the dialogue at the burning bush. There, it was clear that Moses thought much less of his ability than G-d knew was the case. Hence, while respecting the realm of human free will, G-d tried to persuade him, but to no avail. Finally, at the end of the dialogue at the burning bush, after G-d had answered all of Moses' questions and he still did not agree, He got angry and overpowered Moses in order to have him accept the mission (and provided him Aaron as a spokesperson). At the point of our narrative, however, after Moses had experienced all that G-d wrought and yet perceived the situation as he did, he clearly reached the end of his endurance; G-d does not challenge him further, but intervenes on his behalf.

G-d instructs Moses to gather seventy worthy elders, have them stand ready with him at the Tent of Meeting, and He will impart to them from the prophetic inspiration that resides upon him. They will then be able to share in the leadership burdens with him (vv. 16-17).

This group had very different responsibilities from those of the judges that Moses had previously appointed and to whom he delegated considerable authority (Exod. 18; Deut. 1). The latter assisted Moses in important areas, essentially in managing the legal justice system and administering everyday affairs. But they were not deeply involved in the spheres of transmitting and implementing the national vision and its goals, promoting commitment to them and nurturing the necessary discipline in the people. In short, Moses sensed that he was carrying the burden alone in the crucial matters of the spirit that relate directly to one's relationship with G-d.

Continuing in the dialogue, G-d instructs Moses to inform the nation that because they questioned His might and felt that they were better off in Egypt, He will provide them meat. They should be sanctified for the occasion, for they will be viewing a manifestation of His almighty power. But that meat will be their fare

for a full month, “until it comes out of their noses” and becomes loathsome to them, in consequence of their behavior (vv. 18-20). He will use the episode to express His care and concern for the nation but also to teach them a lesson about commitment and trust in Him as well as about the nature of materialistic desires.

Moses questions how a nation of 600,000 men can be provided meat for a month. “If the sheep and cattle will be slaughtered will it be sufficient for them? If all the fish will be gathered...” (vv. 21-22). The reader cannot help but wonder how Moses could have such doubts after viewing G-d’s wondrous doings in the recent past.

Some Tannaim refused to interpret Moses’ question in its literal sense and strained to provide it a different meaning.

- Rabbi Simeon: “Is it proper for all the sheep and cattle to be slaughtered for them given that eventually You will see fit to destroy them anyway?”
- Rabbi Gamliel son of Rabbi Judah the Prince: Whatever You give them would not be enough, for they will continuously ask for something else.
- Rabbi Aqiba, however, took it as it appears and considered the question to be a serious transgression. He deemed it a greater violation, in and of itself, than Moses’ later transgression of “Listen you rebels, shall we bring you forth water from this rock?” (Num. 20:10). But since this was said in private, just between him and G-d, there was no retribution (*t. Sotah* 6:4).

From G-d’s response to Moses, which concludes the prophetic session, we note a tone that indicates He did not take Moses’ questioning as an infraction, and not only because it was said in private. He answered: “Is Hashem’s hand short? You will now see if My words will materialize for you or not” (v. 23). Perhaps Moses’ skepticism was, in a manner of speaking, an expression of awe and admiration for the great miracle that had just been intimated to him to be imminent. He was exclaiming, Wow, can that really be done? And G-d goes along with him.

Alternatively, perhaps G-d allows everybody a degree of latitude in assimilating His extraordinary promises,

acknowledging the human dimension in even the greatest of individuals, recognizing that people require an adjustment period. Moses’ question is similar to that of Abraham, when he laughed upon being told by G-d that he will have a son from Sarah, thinking to himself, “Can a hundred-year-old man sire a child and Sarah, a ninety-year-old woman give birth?” In accordance with his momentary skepticism he promptly uttered a prayer on behalf of Ishmael (Gen. 17:15-18). Not only did G-d not reprimand him, but, on the contrary, He repeated and reinforced His pledge, persuading him (Gen. 17:19-21).

Sarah also laughed when she heard the announcement and expressed incredulity to herself, a reaction for which G-d mildly reprimanded her (to Abraham) with *הֲיִפְלֵא מִהּ דְּבָר* – “Is anything too wondrous for Hashem?” (Gen. 18:14), an assertion with a meaning identical to the response G-d gave Moses in our context. Sarah received criticism since she undoubtedly had already heard the promise from Abraham and should have internalized it. And when G-d asked Jeremiah to redeem his cousin Hanamel’s field, with the siege mounds already raised against the city to capture it, on the threshold of the nation going into exile, the prophet, after duly fulfilling the command, questions G-d. In this case it was not the immediate reaction we are being made privy to. In his introductory words Jeremiah acknowledges G-d’s great might, he states *אִי יִפְלֵא מִמֶּנּוּ כֹּל דְּבָר* (“Nothing is too wondrous for You”), employing the identical words G-d said to Abraham in regard to Sarah, and then proceeds to his question (Jer. 32:6 ff).

### 3. The New Order

After transmitting G-d’s instructions to the people to get ready for the next day, Moses selected the seventy elders and assembled them at the Tent of Meeting. (Based on the context, this appears to be the Tent of Meeting outside the camp that Moses had established when the Tabernacle project had been on hold [Exod. 33:7-11.]) G-d apports from Moses’ spirit unto the elders and they have a one-time prophetic experience (Num. 11:24-25). Having that encounter with the divine provides them new perspectives and transforms them permanently; they are now endowed with the leadership ability to share national responsibility with Moses. From this point on there is no indication of

Moses ever complaining again regarding his mission. He knew that G-d acknowledged his plight and he now had “partners” who understood and participated with him in carrying the burden of the nation.

Eldad and Medad, who apparently had been designated for leadership roles – some understand “they were among those in the inscriptions” (v. 26) to mean that Moses had registered them as part of the selected group – but who, for some reason, had remained in the camp, also received the emanation. When Moses was informed that they were prophesying in the camp, his faithful attendant Joshua was present and suggested to Moses that he should restrain them. He may have thought that prophesying at the Tent of Meeting within the designated channels would fit into Moses’ leadership structure; “independent” prophesying, on the other hand, may undermine Moses’ overall leadership role. Moses responded: “Are you jealous on my behalf? Would that all Hashem’s people be prophets, that Hashem would place His spirit upon them” (vv. 26-29). Here, Moses articulated his understanding of the most idealistic goal for the people of G-d – to be in direct communion with Him. That episode concluded, Moses and the elders gather themselves into the camp (v. 30).

Sure enough, a wind brought a vast quantity of quails from the sea to the camp, the people gathered great amounts and ate. While “the meat was still between their teeth, before it was eliminated,” G-d’s anger struck. The place was called Kibroth-hattaavah because there they buried *הַמְתַּאֲוִיִּם* (“those who were cravers”), perhaps referring to those that started expressing their craving passion (vv. 31-34). The chapter concludes with the note that the nation moved on to Hazeroth (v. 35).

#### 4. Challenges and Chastisements

Numbers 11 begins a section that recounts various episodes that occurred during Israel’s years in the wilderness. With legislation and other matters interspersed, this portion of Numbers, through chapter 25, contains accounts of ten instances of Israel’s sinful behavior. These teach of the dire consequences of living without adequate faith and trust in G-d. The ten instances are as follows:

- i. Complaints at Taberah: A fire ravages the outskirts of the encampment (Num. 11:1-3).
- ii. Complaints at Kibroth-hattaavah: The people are yearning for meat and questioning why they left Egypt. They are struck with a severe blow (11:4-35).
- iii. Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses’ Cushite wife and challenge his uniqueness in prophecy. Miriam became leprous and Moses prayed for her healing (12:1-15).
- iv. The scouts episode: This was a major national manifestation of lack of faith to proceed to the promised land. The evil scouts die and G-d decrees that the nation is to remain in the wilderness forty years (chs. 13–14)
- v. The Sabbath violator, who is put to death (15:32-36).
- vi. The rebellion of Korah, Dathan, Abiram and the 250 chieftains. They all die (chs. 16–17).
- vii. Complaints against Moses and Aaron: The people accused them, saying “You killed Hashem’s people.” A plague ensued, contained when Aaron performed expiation rites with incense, but 14,700 died (17:6-15).
- viii. Complaint concerning water at Meribah: Moses and Aaron sin and G-d decrees that they are not to enter the land (20:2-13).
- ix. The people, impatient and bored with the manna, speak against G-d and Moses: “Why did you take us out of Egypt?” Fiery serpents cause many deaths; the plague is contained with the copper serpent procedure (21:4-9).
- x. Straying with the Moabite women and serving Peor: 24,000 die in a plague, contained when Phinehas kills a prominent perpetrator with his consort (ch. 25). G-d commands Israel to assail Midian for their immorality and trickery.

When G-d pronounced the decree that the Israelites would not enter the promised land until forty years have passed, He stated that “they challenged Me these ten times” (Num. 14:22). Some assume “ten” merely means “many,” while others take it literally. The Talmud (*b. Arak. 15a*) enumerates ten instances, but partly aggadically. The Mishnah (*m. Abot 5:4*) states: “With ten trials did our ancestors challenge *Hamaqom* [a reference to G-d] in the wilderness, as it states ‘they challenged Me these ten times’” (Num. 14:22). Despite the absolute tone of the Mishnah as referring

to the whole wilderness experience, many have explained it to refer only to cases that occurred up to the point of the scouts, as the source-verse quoted is from that context. In his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, the Rambam lists the ten in chronological order as follows:

- i. Complaint at the Sea of Reeds, before the splitting of the sea (Exod. 14:11-12).
- ii. Complaint for water at Marah (Exod. 15:24).
- iii. Complaint for food followed by the quails (Exod. 16:2)
- iv. Individuals retaining manna until morning (Exod. 16:20).
- v. Individuals going out to gather manna on the Sabbath (Exod. 16:27).
- vi. Complaint for water at Rephidim (Exod. 17:2-3).
- vii. The golden calf (Exod. 32)
- viii. Complaint at Taberah (Num. 11:1-3).
- ix. Complaint for meat at Kibroth-hattaavah (Num. 11:4-35).
- x. Transgression associated with the scouts (Num. 13-14).

The blasphemer episode (Lev. 24:10-16) is not included since it was not a challenge from the Israelites, but essentially an outsider intruding into the camp. The complaint of Miriam and Aaron against Moses is also not included, perhaps because the transgression was against Moses and cannot be termed as a case of challenging G-d.

That G-d's declaration of ten challenges is exactly at the tenth case supports the view that the number is intended literally and closely integrates the Exodus-Numbers narrative continuum.

It is noteworthy that violations following revelation and establishment of the covenant (beginning with the golden calf) resulted in severe chastisement. Prior to revelation, although elemental religious norms were in place, the nation could more easily be forgiven its lapses.

## Endnotes

\* The term *asafsuf* – not attested elsewhere in Scripture – appears to be derived from the word אָסַף,

meaning “gather,” formed into a specific noun for the purpose by sound duplication. It may refer to those newly “gathered” into the nation. Its coinage may be akin to that of the *‘ereb rab* (“the mixed multitude” [Exod. 12:38]), who exited Egypt with Israel, a phrase also formed with alliterative syllables. It should be noted that the ה-ס-א stem is key in our passage and those that follow, associated with the problems being narrated and their resolutions. It is attested in Num. 11:4, 16, 22, 24, 30, 32 (twice); 12:14, 15. Also see 11:25, although from a different root. At any rate, some commentators deem it possible that this first instance of widespread national disobedience subsequent to the reconciliation after the golden calf episode is being attributed to exposure to those people lacking Israel's history and heritage. Although it is praiseworthy and required for the people of the covenant to be receptive to outsiders, it requires safeguards to ensure sincerity.

\*\* The Hebrew word that is here translated “the terrible outcome that will befall me” is בְּרָעָתִי. Interestingly, *Midrash Tanhuma (Beshallah 16)* lists this word among the cases of *tiqune sofrim* (scribal emendations). These are instances in which it is claimed that the scribes, or early sages, altered a scriptural word or phrase, presumably (in most cases) when they feared that the original would be considered lacking respect for G-d. In some cases it may be that they were concerned that the original word might create problems in properly understanding a concept. The implication here is that the original word Moses uttered was בְּרָעָתְךָ, that his fear was not for what might befall him personally, but rather that his inadequate leadership would lead to a terrible outcome for G-d (what would be a bold statement indeed). Rashi's comments on this verse popularized the notion of there being a scribal emendation concerning this word but our editions of his commentary have him citing בְּרָעָתָם (“the terrible outcome for them”) as the original text, obviously not compelling grounds for a scribal emendation. In his commentary on Job 32:3, however, Rashi refers to our verse and cites בְּרָעָתְךָ (“the terrible outcome for You”) as the word that scribal emendation altered.