

1 Journey Through the Desert

It had been a night of the most spectacular miracles. The sea split open to allow the great multitudes of the Jewish people to cross to safety, and then the waters closed over the heads of their Egyptian pursuers and destroyed them. At long last, the Jewish people were free. Hashem had smashed the chains of their bondage in order to bring them to Mount Sinai and give them the Torah. Now nothing stood in their way. It was full speed ahead to Sinai.

As dawn broke over the Yam Suf and its surroundings, there was an excited stirring among the Jewish people. The intense spirituality of their unforgettable encounter with the Master of the Universe still electrified the air. The cloud pillars that had protected them from the Egyptian fusillades, those glowing ramparts which represented the Divine Presence, returned to take up their positions at the opposite ends of the multitude. The sea was calm. The shoreline glittered with mounds of golden ornaments and jewels, remnants of the

opulent Egyptian army, which the sea had washed up on the shore for the Jewish people.

Moshe moved among the people, exhorting them to begin the journey to Sinai. "Hurry! We must move quickly. Hashem awaits us at Mount Sinai. There is no time to waste."¹

But the people did not respond so readily to his call; they were not eager to leave the shores of the Yam Suf and head into the desert. Some were simply bedazzled by the spiritual aura of the place and wanted to linger there as long as possible.² Others were intent on collecting the vast piles of Egyptian booty that lined the shores of the sea in a panorama of ownerless wealth beyond their wildest dreams.³ Yet others had not yet severed their emotional ties to Egypt, the ancestral home of the Jewish people for over two centuries; they could not bring themselves to take the irrevocable step of turning their backs on Egypt and striking out into the desert.⁴

As the day wore on, however, the cloud pillars, beacon and protective shield of the Jewish people, detached themselves from the encampment and slowly moved away from the sea and out into the desert. The message was clear. Hashem wanted the Jewish people to leave all other considerations behind and embark on the great journey to Mount Sinai.⁵

"Come, my people," Moshe exhorted those who still hesitated. "The signs are clear. It is time to begin the journey."⁶

The people nodded and turned their hopeful faces toward the desert.

For the next three days, they traveled through a desolate wasteland known to us as the Shur Desert, the word *shur* meaning wall; by turning their backs on Egypt and venturing into the desert, they entered a wall of protection from the outside world. The word *shur*

1. *Ibn Ezra; Ralbag*. See *Abarbanel to Shemos 15:22*.

2. *Zohar 60a; Tur Al HaTorah; Ralbag to Shemos 15:22*.

3. See *Mechilta, Rashi; Tur, Rabbeinu Bachya to Shemos 15:22; Tanchuma Yashan Beshalach*.

This behavior would not go unnoticed. The Jews would soon lack drinking water in Marah as punishment for tarrying at the Yam Suf and not hastening toward Sinai to accept the Torah (*Kli Yakar*).

4. *Akeidah to Shemos 15:22*.

Some suggest that there were still among them idol worshipers who could not forego their habitual practice of worshipping idols and wanted to return to Egypt (*Mechilta*).

5. *Zohar 60a*.

6. *Mechilta; Tur Al HaTorah to Shemos 15:22*.

can also mean vision, indicating that Hashem always kept the Jewish people in His sight, so to speak.⁷

Unfortunately, the Jewish people were not alone in the desert. Danger lurked just beyond the outskirts of the enormous multitude. The neighboring nations, many of them allies and satellites of the Egyptian monarchy, were fully informed about the latest development in the Egyptian crisis. They knew about the catastrophic plagues that had devastated Egyptian society. They knew about the mass exodus of millions of former slaves, the dramatic pursuit by the cream of the Egyptian military and the shattering climax in the heart of the sea. They knew about all of this, and they burned with a desire for retribution. The Jewish people could not be allowed to escape to safety without so much as a scratch.

Thirsting for Jewish blood, these nations sent commandos and irregulars to stalk the encampment and harass the Jewish people at every opportunity, to wait in ambush and attack anyone who ventured beyond the protective shield of the cloud pillars.⁸

These marauders posed a real danger to the Jewish people, especially to those who carried with them “the idol of Michah” and were not worthy of miraculous protection.⁹ Nonetheless, Hashem sent massive snakes and scorpions into the desert around the perimeter of the encampment to seek out and destroy any marauders who

7. *Shemos Rabbah* 24:4; *Radal*; *Rashash*; *Maharzav*; *Yefei To'ar*.

Although named “Kuv,” it was called “Shur” because Shur is an acronym for the dangers found in the desert: *Saraf*, *V'akrav*, *Raav* — serpents, scorpions and hunger (*Yefei To'ar*).

See *Zohar* 60a for another interpretation.

Some suggest that within this desert there were two cities. One was called Aisom, the other Shur (*Ibn Ezra*).

Some suggest it was a total of four days with Shabbos included, but they did not travel on that day. Others disagree, stating that since they had not received the laws of Shabbos and *techumin* (the limits on the distance one may travel on Shabbos) till the following week, they did travel on Shabbos.

Some suggest that it took them only one day, but it was indeed a three-day journey that lasted only one day. It was inconceivable that the Jews would be able to survive for three days without water, as we will see shortly (*Saadiyah Gaon*; *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *Midrash Ohr Afeilah*).

Some suggest that the reference to “three days” in the Torah refers to three camp stops they made on their journey (*Chizkuni*). Perhaps this view can resolve the differences of opinion regarding how many days it took to reach Marah. This would indeed explain the Torah’s term of three days and why they were able to survive without water (see *Lekach Tov*).

8. There are various opinions as to when this took place. Some are of the opinion that this generalized set of events took place over the forty-year period in which the Jewish people were in the desert. Others are of the opinion that it in fact took place at this very time.

9. *Mechilta*; *Shemos Rabbah* 24:1; *Avos D'Rav Nassan* 34.

lurked there. Not a single member of the Jewish people, not even the most undeserving, was harmed.¹⁰

The Place of Bitter Waters As they trudged through the desert for three days, the Jewish people were preoccupied with their journey.¹¹ Hashem expected them to take this opportunity to reinforce the faith that had blossomed in their hearts at the Yam Suf. As they walked through the desolation of the wilderness, suffering thirst and weariness, they would come to the realization that their fate and their destiny lay solely in His hands and they would appreciate all the more the wondrous miracles He would perform for them. Hashem wanted them to prove themselves deserving of further miracles and worthy of receiving the Torah.¹²

But the Jewish people were too preoccupied. They talked about the past and the future. They busied themselves with this and with that, but they did not devote any time to the study of those parts of the Torah that were already in their possession. They starved themselves of the spiritual nourishment of Torah, and so their faith in Hashem melted under the desert sun. Their morale dwindled along with their water supply and soon they were complaining of thirst.¹³

Some go so far as to suggest that despite the great miracles they witnessed, many Jews wanted to return to Egypt to worship idols now that they were free and no longer slaves (*Mechilta*).

Some suggest that the Jews were being judged as a group and not as individuals; thus they were deserving of these miracles even though the idol of Michah was with them (*Avos D'Rav Nassan*).

10. See *Mechilta*; *Meam Loez*; *Shemos Rabbah* 24:1; *Radal*.

11. On Rosh Chodesh Iyar they left Marah and arrived at Eilim. From there they traveled to Alush, arriving there on the 15th of Iyar. See *Ibn Ezra* to *Shemos* 15:27 who indicates that they were in Marah for just one day.

12. *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *Akeidah*; *Malbim* to *Shemos* 15:22.

13. *Mechilta*; *Targum Yonasan* to *Shemos* 15:22; *Bava Kamma* 82a. See *Midrash Ohr Afeilal* and *Kli Yakar* to *Shemos* 15:22; *R' Efraim Al HaTorah*. See *Maaseh Hashem*.

Some suggest that this "test" was all part of Hashem's master plan for training the Jews in how to deal with suffering in order to bring them even closer to Him (*Abarbanel*).

Based on this, an ordinance was made by Ezra to read from the Torah on Monday, Thursday and Shabbos. This would prevent any neglect in Torah learning over a three-day period. This view suggests that the Jews did travel for three days since they left the Yam Suf.

Some question the ordinance based on this incident alone, since the Jews did not go through three consecutive days on the road without Shabbos intervening. In Egypt the Jews surely learned Torah, and thus there is no reason to assume they did not learn — at the very least — on Shabbos. This is assuming that the Jews did not travel on Shabbos, as some suggest.

On 25 Nissan they arrived in Marah and pitched camp. There was no drinkable water in Marah, at least none that anyone could discover. They searched high and low and even dug fresh wells, but there was no water to be found.¹⁴ Actually, there was a spring of brackish water, but it was bitter to the taste. The constant blowing of the north wind had sapped the water of its natural sweetness and left it undrinkable.¹⁵

The encampment was in an uproar. Children wailed, and mothers wrung their hands. Men wandered desperately from cluster to cluster, hoping to hear about any solutions that might have been found. A mob began to form.

Three men stood together in the shade of a tent. One of them, an older man named Kumiel, was slightly stooped, and he kept stroking his gray beard. The other two, who were named Peliav and Achias, were in their early 20's, and they hung on every word Kumiel was saying.

"We have to be patient, my young friends," said Kumiel. "Moshe has brought us this far. He will intercede with Hashem for us and take care of this problem as well."

"So what are you saying, that we shouldn't worry?" said Peliav.

"What am I supposed to do about my babies?" asked Achias. "Babies are so fragile. They can die of thirst so easily. We must get water!"

"You should definitely be worried," said Kumiel. "I'm worried. My children aren't babies anymore, but they also need water. And so do I. And so does my wife. A person cannot live without water. But at the same time, we cannot lose our heads. We have to keep looking for water. And we have to pray. Everything will work out. You'll see."

A shadow fell across the tent as another man joined them.

14. *Peirushim U'Pesakim*, R' Avigdor Tzarfani, to *Shemos* 15:22.

15. *Mechilta (Netziv)*; *Seder Olam*; *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *Alshich*; *Yalkut Reuveni*.

This was to the detriment of the Jews in that there would be reason to give them the benefit of the doubt for their complaints if they did not have any water, but according to this view, they had water to keep themselves alive; it just wasn't satisfying. (See *Mechilta*; *Tanchuma Yashan*; *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *R' Avraham Ben HaRambam*.)

Moshe himself speculated about the purpose of the bitter water. He rationalized that it would have been more understandable if there were no water at all than to have water that was undrinkable (*Shemos Rabbah*, *Ki Sisa*).

At the time it was not yet called Marah. It was given the name Marah, which means bitter, because of this episode.

“What’s this I hear?” said the newcomer. “We have to be patient? We have to pray? The problem is with Moshe, I tell you.”

“There you go again, Nagdor,” said Kumiel. “Why do you have to be so negative?”

“Negative? My throat is so parched I can barely talk, and it’s all Moshe’s fault. You call that being negative? I call that being realistic.”

“Listen here, Nagdor, how can you blame Moshe?” said Peliav. “Does he know where to dig the wells? Does he have water hidden away that he hasn’t told us about?”

“That’s right, Nagdor,” Achiash added. “How about showing a little respect. Moshe really took the Egyptians apart, didn’t he? And he split the sea for us, didn’t he? Or have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” said Nagdor.

“So how can you blame Moshe for what’s happening now?” said Achiash. “What is he supposed to do about it?”

Nagdor leaned forward and spoke from between clenched teeth. “He has no idea where he’s going, I tell you. Look, if Hashem brought us through the sea and led us into the desert, He must have had water and food prepared for us. So why haven’t we found it? Because we’re lost, I tell you! Moshe has taken a wrong turn somewhere, and we’re lost in the desert!”¹⁶

Kumiel put his hand on Nagdor’s arm. “Calm down, young fellow,” he said with the wisdom of age. “Just be patient for a little while longer. Everything will work out.”

As the men were talking, they could hear a rumbling sound drawing nearer. The rumbling grew louder by the minute until they could make out the sound of angry voices and the sound of sandals tramping on sand and pebbles. From a distance, the mob came into view in a cloud of dust. A mass of men shouting and brandishing their staffs filled to overflowing the walkways between the rows of tents.

Peliav gasped. “It’s a mob. And they’re headed to Moshe’s tent.”

“Quick, let’s get behind the tent,” said Kumiel.

“What for?” said Nagdor. “Let’s follow and see what happens.”

“We don’t want to associate with them. I can see Erev Rav among them. They’re only going to get everyone into trouble.”

“What’s wrong with the Erev Rav?” said Nagdor. “They’re not Jewish? So what if they were once Egyptians? They converted, and

16. See *Rashi; Abarbanel*.

now they're Jewish. Why are you discriminating? They're as thirsty as the rest of us, and they're not afraid to speak out and do something about it. They've got spirit and courage, I tell you. We could borrow a page from their book."

"Well, you can stay here and watch," said Peliav. "Kumiel, Achias and I are not interested. Behave yourself, Nagdor."

The mob drew closer, and the angry shouts pounded against Nagdor like a wave. Suddenly, he felt a hand grab him. It was a tall man with the dark skin and the colorful garb of an Egyptian. His name was Toltep. Two other Egyptian-looking men stood behind him.

"Nagdor, my good friend, how are you?" said Toltep. He pointed to his friends. "You know Dernak and Bubmose, don't you? We're on the way to Moshe's tent. Come join us. We can use all the support we can get."

"You think it's such a good idea?" asked Nagdor, suddenly having second thoughts.

"I think it's a great idea," said Toltep. "Aren't you thirsty? Don't you want to do something about it? Come with us. You're not going to accomplish anything standing here."¹⁷

And so the mob continued on to Moshe's tent, growing in size and anger as it swept through the encampment. This was the third time they tested Hashem in the desert. Altogether, they would do so ten times, each time triggering a crisis.¹⁸

The mob, seething with anger, gathered around Moshe's tent. "Give us water, Moshe!" they shouted. "Water! Water! Water!"

Moshe raised his hands for silence. He thought about the water that was too bitter to drink and considered the possibility of throwing honey and sweet figs into it to make it drinkable. But he didn't know if that was what he should really do.¹⁹ As he stood there, he lifted his eyes to Heaven and prayed to Hashem for an answer. How could he provide water for the thirsty people?

Hashem did not immediately answer his plea. Instead, He first castigated the people for their impetuous behavior and their lack of fortitude and faith.²⁰ Moshe conveyed this rebuke to the people, and

17. *Mechilta (Netziv); Zayis Raanan; Rokeach; Ohr HaChaim; Lekach Tov; R' Avraham Ben HaRambam; Malbim.* See *Abarbanel; HaKesav VeHaKabbalah.*

18. See *Arachin* 15a.

19. *Tanchuma Beshalach* 24.

20. *Shemos Rabbah* 43:2.

the effect was immediately evident. The air seemed to go out of the mob as they shrank back in confusion. Nagdor pulled away from Toltep and his friends Dernak and Bubmose and moved to the side. He closed his eyes and concentrated his thoughts on the remorse he was feeling, and he prayed for a speedy resolution to the problem.²¹

Once again, Moshe cried out to Hashem on behalf of the Jewish people, and this time, Hashem immediately directed him to get a branch from a bitter tree.²² The type of tree this was has not been identified with any certainty. It may have been a willow, an olive tree, a pomegranate tree, a fig tree, a cedar, ivy or perhaps even oleander. But whatever it may have been, it was truly amazing that a tree of any kind would be growing in the barren wastes of the desert.²³

Moshe engraved the holy Name of Hashem on the branch, and then he tossed it into a large well whose waters had been found to be bitter.

"Draw water from this well," Moshe declared to the people. "It is drinkable now. Give gratitude to Hashem for the miracle He has performed for you, and slake your thirst."²⁴

The crowd that had been a volatile mob just a short while before now fidgeted nervously. The branch had not changed the appearance of the water; it still retained that brackish look.

Toltep, the former Egyptian, stepped forward. He peered doubtfully at the water. Then he took a deep breath and scooped up a handful, but he did not bring it to his mouth. He wrinkled his nose and poured it back.

"On second thought," he said, "I'm not going to take that stuff into my mouth. It looks just as bitter as it was before. And what's more, that magic branch Moshe tossed into it may have made it even

21. *Mechilta*.

22. *Mechilta*; *Yalkut* 256.

23. *Mechilta*; *Shemos Rabbah* 23:3; *Yalkut Reuveni*.

According to the opinions that suggest the Jews did not have any water whatsoever, Hashem first revealed a water source and then a tree that would sweeten it.

Those who suggest it was a willow point out that it is common for the willow to grow near a source of water (*Tosafos Al HaTorah*).

The species *hirduf* or oleander that grows on the seashore has the appearance of a rose-like flower. It is a bitter tree or shrub that is poisonous for animals, when eaten. (See *Etz Yosef to Tanchuma* based on the *Aruch's* interpretation. See *Toras Moshe* of R' Aryeh Kaplan.)

24. *Mechilta*; *Targum Yonasan to Shemos* 15:25; see *Chovos HaLevavos, Bitachon* Ch. 4; see *Zohar* 60b.

Some suggest that Moshe used his staff and placed it in the water. Others suggest that Hashem revealed the Tree of Life that was hidden by the Satan and it was

more dangerous. It might cause illness. How are we supposed to drink this?"

"In the Name of Hashem," said Moshe, "I assure you that you needn't worry. The water is safe to drink. Hashem is your Healer. The water He has provided for you will not make you ill."

Nagdor stepped forward. "I will be the first to taste it."

He filled a cup and took a long drink. The people watched his face anxiously and were rewarded by an expression of pleasure.

"Delicious!" he exclaimed when his cup was empty. "I've never tasted sweeter water. Here, I want to fill my jug and take it to my family."

The thirsty crowd surged forward, and Nagdor just managed to fill his jug before the crowd forced him away from the well.

The sweet waters flowed and flowed until all the people had drunk their fill and a peaceful calm returned to the Jewish encampment. Gone were the anxious eyes and the worry lines. Gone was the angry grumbling, replaced by the happy sounds of children at play and the murmur of pleasant conversation.²⁵

The miracle of the sweet water of Marah, the people realized, had opened new frontiers in the annals of the Jewish march to nationhood. They had found a bitter tree growing where no vegetation could possibly survive. One of its bitter branches had sweetened the bitter waters.²⁶

There was a profound lesson of faith to be learned from this, a lesson far greater than many they had learned in the past. A bitter ingredient can transform a bitter product and make it sweet. Similarly, the ways of Hashem that may sometimes appear incomprehensible and bitter tasting can sweeten the bitter circumstances of life in the most miraculous ways.²⁷ As long as we have faith in Him, learn His Torah and place our trust in His all-powerful

its natural sweetness from Gan Eden that sweetened the water. Anyone drinking from this water was healed from all possible illnesses (*Tikkunei Zohar* 21a; see *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *R' Efraim Al HaTorah*; *Yalkut Reuveni*; see *Torah Shleimah* 15:261). Others suggest that this branch was from the *Etz HaDaas*. The very tree that brought death into the world would now sustain the Jewish people (*Chemdas Yamim*).
25. See *Meam Loez*; *Torah Shleimah*.

Some suggest that the Jews were examined like a *sotah*. The very fact that the water turned sweet suggested that Hashem had pardoned them. (See *Zohar Nasso* 124b.)

26. *Shemos Rabbah* 23; *Yefei To'ar*; *Tur*; *Ramban*.

This would be similar to someone being poisoned by a snakebite where the very remedy to heal it would be the venom itself (*Meam Loez*).

27. *Targum Yonasan*; *Mechilta*; *Maaseh Hashem*.

Hashem could have made a miracle and sweetened it without the aid of a tree or

hands, nothing will stand in the way of our success. Thus began the conditioning of the Jewish people to prepare them for the acceptance of the Torah. The future held many hardships and ordeals in store for them, and only by strengthening their faith would they survive as a people.²⁸

There was also an even greater lesson in the events at Marah. The people had been concerned about their health, worried that the waters might be harmful to them. Now they understood that neither food, water, pure air or medicine are the true causes of healing. Sickness and health are in the hands of the Almighty. Obey the word of Hashem, said Moshe to the people, and He will shield you from all maladies and evil decrees and cure those who are already ill. In the merit of faith and Torah study, you will be protected against eighty-three illnesses common to Egypt. Otherwise, if you are lacking in faith and deficient in your observance, if you are guilty of a near rebellion as had occurred at Marah, He will expose you, Heaven forbid, to illness and injury. For, at the root of all things, He is the Doctor of All Doctors.²⁹

Furthermore, if the people would be conscientious in their faith, study and observance, they would also be guaranteed a high level of spiritual health and well-being and entry into the next world. They would avoid spiritual illness in this world and the necessity to be spiritually cleansed before being allowed into the next world.³⁰

anything else (*Chizkuni; Bechor Shor*).

There were a number of miracles here: the fact that water isn't readily available in a desert; that they found a tree in the first place; that this tree provided sweet water. This was a lesson in faith meant to teach the Jewish people that prayer, Torah and believing in Hashem are the ingredients to overcome any and all obstacles. (See *Ramban*.)

Others compare the miracle of Marah with the concept of "*tzaddik v'rah lo* — the suffering of the righteous" and expound on how a bitter life can make one's life in Gan Eden sweet (*Alshich*).

See *Moshav Zekeinim* and *Alshich* on the connection between the *parah adumah* (red heifer) and this concept.

28. *Abarbanel*; see *Tanchuma Yashan* 18 in *Beshalach*.

There is a question as to why the Jews did not receive the "Well of Miriam," which provided water in the desert, at this point. It seems to have been an opportune time to benefit from the Well which came through her merit. One view suggests that the Well came through the merit of Miriam while the manna would come through the merit of Moshe. It would have been disrespectful for Miriam's merit to precede Moshe's merit (*Tosafos*).

29. See *Rashi*; *Rabbeinu Bachya*; *Targum Yonasan*; *Tur*. See *Malbim's* interpretation. See *Akeidah* for his interpretation of the symbolism of Hashem acting as a doctor.

30. *Mahari Kra* 15:26. See *Netziv* to *Mechilta*.

A Time to Study

As peace and calm returned to the Jewish encampment at Marah, the thoughts of the people turned to the great events that awaited them at Mount Sinai. But first they would need preparation. There would have to be safeguards against a recurrence of the lack of faith, indeed the near mutiny, that had resulted from the bitter waters, and what could be more effective than a solid dose of Torah and mitzvos? Furthermore, they needed to be given certain mitzvos to ensure that their financial dealings with each other would remain amiable and harmonious.³¹

In order to accomplish these purposes, Hashem gave them a preview of the Torah at Marah. They had already been given the “*Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach*,” the seven universal mitzvos that even gentiles are commanded to observe. Hashem also gave them at least three more mitzvos — Shabbos observance, honoring parents (*kibbud av va’em*) and basic civil and business law (*dinim*). According to some opinions, He also gave them circumcision (*milah*), the forbidden thigh vein (*gid hanasheh*) and the red heifer (*parah adumah*).³²

Hashem wanted the Jewish people to become familiar with his positive commandments (*mitzvos aseï*), to be ethical and moral in their conduct of business and commerce, to have high standards of personal integrity, and to go beyond the letter of the law (*lifnim mishuras hadin*). The time they would spend learning and studying these laws would raise their spiritual level and improve their relationships with each other.³³

31. *Mechilta; Rashi; Midrash HaGadol; Targum Yonasan to Shemos 15:25*. It was in the merit of accepting these laws that the Jews would be worthy of eating the manna and drinking from the Well in the desert for forty years (*Shemos Rabbah 25:7*). See *Ramban* who explains that these laws included proper ethics and moral behavior for people to abide by so that peace and serenity would remain within the camp.

The letter of the words the Torah uses — “לִשְׁמֹרֶת” — can be rearranged to spell שְׁמֹרֶת, a reference to the Jews learning about living in peace with one another (*Tosafos Al HaTorah*).

32. See *Sanhedrin 56b; Yalkut in Beshalach 256 and 257*. There were eleven mitzvos in total (*Yalkut Shimoni*). See *Seder Olam and Sanhedrin 56b* who maintain that they received ten mitzvos. See *Tosafos* there who questions the count.

Some commentaries question whether the count included the various laws of Pesach and *tefillin* which have already been mentioned in the Torah.

See the *Gra*, who writes that Moshe did not tell them about Shabbos till they reached Alush. Thus, the first Shabbos they observed wasn’t until the following week.

See *Yerushalmi Beitzah 2:1* and *Tosafos to Shabbos 87b s.v. Atchumin*.

33. *Mechilta; Ibn Ezra; Lekach Tov*.

Some suggest that although they were taught many laws here at Marah, these laws were not established until *Kabbalas HaTorah* (the Giving of the Torah) or later when the Mishkan was raised (*Tosafos*).

In addition, Hashem imparted to them very valuable information about the natural environment. He taught them the intricacies of horticulture so that they would know which plants were edible and which were not. He pointed out to them the various trees, flowers, herbs and seeds that had medicinal value and those that were poisonous.³⁴

In essence, Hashem was teaching them that they should seek guidance in all matters from the Torah, its mitzvos and ideals, and from the knowledge it contained regarding all matters. Regardless of the appearance of a natural world that runs under its own steam, a person's progress through the world is determined by the faith in his heart, the Torah and *tefillah* on his lips, and the mitzvos with which he fills his hands.³⁵

**Twelve Springs,
Seventy Palm Trees** Six days after the Jewish people arrived at Marah they were once again on the move. On Rosh Chodesh Iyar, they journeyed to Eilim and encamped in the oasis they found there.³⁶

After the tribulations at Marah, the sight of the lush oasis was a feast for the eyes. Groves of tall and stately date palm trees swayed in the gentle breeze, and bounteous sweet water cascaded from the gurgling springs.

The oasis at Eilim was a miracle but not a mirage. From the time of creation, Eilim had been no more than a parched and barren stretch of sand awaiting the day it would bloom in the desert and provide healthful food and drink for the millions of people in the Jewish encampment. And indeed, just before the Jewish people arrived, Eilim was miraculously transformed.³⁷

How many springs were there in Eilim and how many palm trees? We know there were twelve springs representing the twelve tribes and seventy date palm trees, each of a different species, representing the seventy elders, but what exactly does this mean?³⁸

34. *Rabbeinu Bachya*.

35. *Abarbanel; Alshich*.

36. *Yemos Olam to Seder Olam* Ch. 5; *Abarbanel*. This was a Sunday; they would remain there for eleven days. Others suggest they would remain there for twenty days (*Ibn Ezra*). See *Mechilta*.

37. *Mechilta to Shemos* 15:27; see *Netziv; Sifsei Chachamim; Ibn Ezra; Ramban; Sifsei Kohen*.

38. Each spring was specifically designed to accord with the specific nature of each tribe (*Sifsei Kohen*).

According to some opinions, this is the precise number, twelve and seventy. If so, this was a remarkable miracle within a miracle. Not only did the barren wasteland suddenly produce trees and springs, but also, only twelve springs and seventy date palms sustained the entire people.³⁹

According to others, however, twelve springs and seventy date palms were too few to provide ample water and food for several million people. Instead, they suggest that there were twelve springs for each of the twelve tribes, for a total of 144, and seventy palm trees for each of the seventy elders, for a total of 4,900 date palms. This higher number could certainly have provided ample food and drink for all the people.⁴⁰

In Eilim, the people continued to study the laws and precepts they had learned and reviewed at Marah. They lacked nothing. In fact, Hashem was teaching them an important lesson. As long as they would devote themselves to learning the Torah and fulfilling its commands, the yoke of daily cares would be removed from them. Hashem would provide for all their needs and leave them free to study and learn.⁴¹

Crisis at Alush **E**leven days after they encamped at Eilim, the Jewish people set out into the desert once again, ever aware of the great events that awaited them at Mount Sinai. The excitement and anticipation were great. The sojourn at Eilim had been exceedingly pleasant and comfortable, with food and water in such plentiful supply. Nonetheless, to their credit, they were eager to be on their way.

39. *Zayis Raanan to Mechilta*.

Imagine what the Jews must have felt like, in retrospect, seeing that a little patience and eventual travel from Marah would have brought them this great abundance of food and drink. It is a lesson in faith and trust in Hashem that just because one suffers in the present, it does not mean that the following day Hashem cannot produce great sustenance in the blink of an eye (*Chofetz Chaim*). This concept can be understood with the verse mentioned in *Shacharis*, “*U’vetuvo mechadesh bechol yom tamid maaseh Bereishis* — And in his goodness renews daily, perpetually, the work of creation.”

40. Some suggest that the seventy palm trees represented the Jewish nation at the time Yaakov went down to Egypt. The family total at that time was seventy (*Zohar Chadash*). See *Rabbeinu Bachya* and *Toldos Yitzchok* for other opinions suggesting that there were seventy different palm trees for each tribe. These trees were seventy different species of date palms. They were each different in appearance and taste (*Sefer HaBahir* 53).

41. *Chizkuni; Sifsei Kohen; Netziv* *ibid*.

This would be the only time throughout the next forty years that the Jewish people would find fruit in the desert (*Abarbanel*).

Although they knew that as they traveled through the desolation of the desert their supplies of food and water would inevitably dwindle, they were not concerned. They had learned their lesson, and they were confident that Hashem would provide for them, regardless of where their encampment was located.⁴² After they left, Eilim returned to its original state. The trees and springs disappeared, and it was once again nothing more than a barren wasteland.

On 15 Adar they arrived at Alush.⁴³ The encampment at Alush would witness one of the most eventful and significant episodes in Jewish history. It would begin with a temporary deterioration of the fragile character of the young nation, the fourth time they tested Hashem in the desert. It would culminate with one of the most

42. See *Seder Olam* 5; *Sifsei Kohan*.

43. See *Shabbos* 87b as to whether this was on Shabbos or Sunday, and if they received the manna on Sunday or Monday.

See *Mechilta*, *Ibn Ezra* and *Rabbeinu Bachya* who say that it was on Shabbos that they arrived in Alush. But *Seder Olam* and *Lekach Tov* say that it was on Sunday. The events were as follows: According to the *Mechilta*, Rosh Chodesh Nissan was on Thursday and Rosh Chodesh Iyar was on Shabbos, making their arrival in Alush on Shabbos as well. According to *Seder Olam* everything was pushed up a day, with Rosh Chodesh Nissan on Friday, Rosh Chodesh Iyar and the 15th on Sunday. Incidentally, *Rashi's* view is that the 16th of Iyar was on a Sunday.

One premise of the disagreement concerns when the laws of Shabbos were given and what laws regarding Shabbos the Jews were required to practice. How could they have arrived in Alush on Shabbos? Some suggest that they were not given the laws of Shabbos until the 16th of Iyar, a Sunday or Monday. Thus, in Marah they had not yet received them and the first Shabbos they observed was either the 21st or 22nd of Iyar. Others suggest that they were given the laws of Shabbos in Marah but were not required to keep the laws of *techumin*. Others suggest that Moshe had already been given the laws, but did not relay them to the Jews yet. See *Tosafos Al HaTorah*; *Tosafos to Shabbos* 87b; see *Gra* and *Yavetz* to *Seder Olam*; *Yerushalmi Beitzah* 2:1; *Pirkei D'Rav Eliezer* 18; *Tosafos to Pesachim* 117b; *Bereishis Rabbasi* 13; *Devarim Rabbah* 3:1; *Radal*; *Rashash*; *Midrash Tehillim* 92; *Mechilta to Shemos* 16:28; *HaKesav VeHaKabbalah*. All these sources deal with the question of when the Jews received the mitzvah of Shabbos, what part of the laws they received and how long after Moshe received the instructions from Hashem did he relay them to the Jews. Some suggest that they kept Shabbos as soon as they left Egypt. Others posit that the Jews kept two Shabbosos before *Matan Torah* — the 21st of Iyar and the 28th. On the 15th of Iyar they were in Marah, on the 16th they received the manna, and the 21st was when they collected the manna on Shabbos.

The Torah writes that they arrived at a destination in the Sin Desert between Eilim and Sinai. Although the Torah does not state here that they arrived in Alush, they nevertheless did. From Eilim they traveled to the Sin Desert, and from there they traveled to Dafka and then to Alush. See *Ramban* to *Shemos* 16:1; *Seder Olam* 5; *Rokeach*; *Bamidbar* 33:11-14.

For the purposes of this book both approaches will be used; however, *Lekach Tov* makes it clear that we follow the view of *Seder Olam* and not the *Mechilta*.

The word "Alush" comes from the word "lushi," which means knead. In the merit of Avraham preparing bread for the three angels the Jews received the manna (*Bereishis Rabbah* 48:12).

miraculous occurrences ever, an event that would forever define the loving relationship between Hashem and His chosen people.⁴⁴

In Alush, the food supplies of the Jewish people finally ran out. They had left Egypt, thirty-one days earlier, with sacks of plain bread wafers (*matzos*) and livestock on the hoof, enough for sixty-one meals per person. The food had miraculously remained fresh until the very end. At two meals per day, there was food for thirty days. On the thirty-first day, there was food for only one more meal. By midday, all the food was gone. There were no emergency reserves of bread. The livestock were depleted. What would the millions of people eat that evening? Where would they find food in the depths of the barren desert? No one had the answers to these questions.⁴⁵

Immediately, the level of their faith plummeted once again. Dissension spread through the encampment like wildfire. An angry mob formed around the tents of Moshe and Aharon. The mob was a cross-section of the people, the old and the young, the leaders and the common people, the righteous and the not so righteous. The Erev Rav especially was heavily represented.⁴⁶ At Marah, the mob had directed its wrath at Moshe alone. This time, Aharon was a target also.⁴⁷

"Moshe! Aharon!" they shouted. "Come out and stand before the people. Don't hide in your tents. Face up to your responsibilities."

Inside their tents, Moshe and Aharon could hear the angry rumbling of the crowd, and they stepped out to confront them.

Shouts of protest were coming from all sides, one after the other. Moshe and Aharon waited silently for the people to vent their anger and frustration.

Achiash and Peliav pushed their way to the front of the crowd. Achiash clambered onto a rock so that he was elevated above the

44. *Arachin* 15b.

45. *Shemos Rabbah* 25:4; *Maharzarav*; *Yefei To'ar*; *Targum Yonasan*; *Mechilta*; *Lekach Tov*; *Rashi*; *Sifsei Chachamim* to *Shemos* 16:1-2. See *Maaseh Hashem*; *Sifsei Kohan*; *Ibn Ezra*; *Abarbanel* to *Shemos* 16:2. Some commentaries note the calculation as 30 days. Others note the total meals as 62. See *Riva* and *Maharal* for their tally as to how we get the number 61.

See *Maharal* who states that the Jews had what to eat for the coming night but not for the next morning.

See *Abarbanel* who suggests that they ran out of food because it began to spoil.

46. *Ibn Ezra*; *Rokeach*; *Ohr HaChaim*; *Malbim* to *Shemos* 16:2; *Rashi*; *Sifsei Kohan* to *Shemos* 16:7.

See *Zohar Bereishis* 28b that the Erev Rav were descendants of Amalek. See *Meshech Chochmah*.

47. *Mechilta*; *Ibn Ezra* to *Shemos* 16:2.

rest. "The people are on the verge of starvation," he shouted. "How long will you, Moshe and Aharon, wait before you do something about it? What are my babies supposed to eat tonight? We have no more food left."

Peliav climbed up to stand beside his friend. "And don't you accuse us of complaining against Hashem. No, we are faithful Jews. We are complaining against you, against the two of you, Moshe and Aharon. You have cooked up some kind of secret scheme between you.⁴⁸ You brought us here to this place knowing full well that there is nothing here for us to eat and that our food supplies are exhausted. What is your scheme? Why are you doing this to us? Why are you bringing starvation on innocent people?"⁴⁹

A short distance away, the three friends from the Erev Rav had found a rock of their own from which to harangue the crowd.

"My friends, look at me," shouted Dernak. "From my skin and my clothing you can readily tell that I used to be an Egyptian, but I decided to join the Jewish people. I gave up my fatherland, my people and my birthright to join the community of Hashem. But what are our rewards, yours as emancipated Jewish slaves and ours as converts to your faith? Starvation! That is our reward! Now, I ask you, wouldn't it have been better to remain in Egypt? At least, you would have had full stomachs. And if the Egyptian taskmasters would have threatened your lives, who wouldn't prefer a quick and merciful death by the sword over a slow and agonizing death by starvation?⁵⁰ Do you know what it means to die of hunger, to feel the pain of your innards being hollowed out and your belly swelling? Moshe and Aharon, what have you done to your people? You have taken them out of the frying pan into the fire!"

"It's true," shouted Nagdor, who had joined his friends on the rock. "I would rather have died a well-fed slave than starve as a free man."⁵¹

The shouts rang out from all over the crowd.

"Hear! Hear!"

"No starvation without representation!"

"We want food!"

"Bread before freedom!"

48. See *Minchah Belulah*.

49. See *Ramban; Abarbanel; Ohr HaChaim; Netziv*.

50. See *Mechilta; Rashi; Bechor Shor to Shemos 16:3*.

51. See *Mechilta; Rashi; Bechor Shor to Shemos 16:3*.

Toltep joined his friend Dernak on the rock. He held his hands up for attention. "Think back to the good old days in Egypt, my friends. We had plenty of meat, fish and fruit. True, the work was hard, and the hours were long, but those who were enterprising could always find some scraps of quality food. And look where we are now, stuck in the middle of this ridiculous desert, millions of us, and not a morsel of bread among us. What's going on, Moshe and Aharon? Is this some cruel joke? We were so much better off in Egypt."⁵²

Peliav called for attention. "Now wait a minute, Toltep, my friend. You have a rosy view of what life was like in Egypt. Let's not forget that you were on the other side most of the time, if you know what I mean. You only joined our people near the end. So how would you know what it was like for us? Speaking for myself and for most of us here, we didn't have the opportunity to eat the meat, fish and fruit you mentioned. I never got anything more than dry bread, but I'll tell you something, a piece of dry bread sounds very good to me right now."

"Hear, hear!" came the shouts from all around.

Peliav held up his hands. "I'm not finished. Listen to me. In Egypt, I worked as a cook, would you believe it? My masters ordered me to prepare roast meat, usually ram or venison, and they never allowed me to put a morsel into my mouth. I had to stand there and smell the mouth-watering aromas of the roasting meat, knowing that I would never have the pleasure of tasting it. Believe me, it was painful. But still! Still! I would rather be back there in Egypt, standing in front of that untouchable roasting pot and eating my piece of dry bread, than die of hunger and starvation here in the desert."⁵³ I, for one, am ready to turn around and go back."⁵⁴

Among the Erev Rav, Bubmose now sought his turn to speak. "You are all talking about food. And I agree that food, or rather the lack of it, is a critical issue." He looked around with a lewd leer on his face. "But let's face it. There are other issues, if you

52. See *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4; *Tur Al HaTorah*; *Ralbag*; *Abarbanel*.

53. *Shemos Rabbah* 16:4; *Zeh Yenachmeni*; see *Abarbanel*.

Some suggest that the Jewish people consciously did not eat what the Egyptians were eating because the Jewish people were stringent about not mingling and uniting with them in any way. This was similar to keeping their traditional names and dress codes. The Jewish complaint here was that in Egypt they would be rewarded for abstaining from eating meat and so it was tolerable. Here there was no meat to be found and no reward as a consequence (*Chasam Sofer*).

54. *Yalkut Reuveni*.

know what I mean. In Egypt, we could enjoy all sorts of other pleasures, if you know what I mean. But here in the desert, the rules are so strict. No parties. No revelry. How is a person supposed to enjoy himself?"⁵⁵

Nagdor gave Bubmose an odd look. "I don't think this is the time to bring up those issues, Bubmose, my friend. We have to remain focused. We're talking about food here. We're talking about starving babies. We're talking about survival. We're talking about life and death, I tell you! You all remember the plague of darkness. During those three terrible days, many of our Jewish people perished, in particular those who wanted to remain in Egypt. I admit it. I was one of them. I would not have been surprised if I had died during the great darkness, but I was spared. Standing here now, in this terrible predicament, I see that I was right to want to remain in Egypt. It would have been better to die in the darkness than to starve to death here in the desert."⁵⁶

Peliav was nodding vigorously. "Nagdor is a little extreme in his views, I think. But I have to agree with him that a quick death would have been preferable to starvation in the desert. You know, I am a firstborn. I think I would have preferred to die in the plague of the firstborn than to die of starvation here in the desert."⁵⁷

Kumiell tugged at Peliav's sleeve. "Help me get up there," he said.

Peliav grabbed him by one arm and Achiash by the other, and together they lifted him onto the rock.

"My friends, I feel there are some points that have to be made," said Kumiell. He stroked his gray beard as he collected his thoughts. "With all due respect, Moshe and Aharon, our quarrel is not with Hashem but with the two of you. We have complete faith in Hashem. We haven't forgotten all the miracles He performed for us to break us free from Pharaoh and the Egyptians. And don't think we've forgotten so quickly the miracles at Marah. No, our problem is with the two of you.⁵⁸ We feel that somewhere you've made a wrong turn when you negotiated with Pharaoh. You've gone off the

55. *Riva* 16:3.

56. See *Mechilta; Lekach Tov; Ohr HaChaim*. Had we stayed in Egypt, only the wicked would have died and that would have been the end of it. Now in the desert everyone will die, including the sages and righteous (*Netziv*).

57. *Maaseh Hashem*.

58. *Abarbanel*.

track of your mission. Hashem sent you to free us, but why did you have to take us into the desert? You could have worked out to have us remain as free people in Egypt. Or else, you could have led us toward Canaan through habitable places where life can survive. It doesn't make sense that we should have to spend a month in the desolation of a desert, with no wells, no rainfall and no food.⁵⁹ If Hashem had wanted us to die, He could have killed us in Egypt."⁶⁰

"I agree!" shouted Toltep. "Why take us through the desert? Why couldn't you have taken us through Philistia? That's the quickest way to Canaan, and there is plenty to eat and drink there. We blame you, Moshe and Aharon, for our predicament. You chose to take us into the desert, and because of you, we are all going to die right here in — "⁶¹

Shouts of anger and frustration drowned out the rest of Toltep's harangue. People began to push and shove, more to vent their anger than because they had anywhere to go.

Achiash jumped off the rock and ran to the back of the crowd where he had glimpsed his wife Beruchah holding their young children and anxiously watching the proceedings. He grabbed his young sons and daughters and pushed through the crowd until he stood in front of Moshe and Aharon.

"Take my children!" he screamed. "You feed them. You give them water. Their lives are in your hands. I cannot help them. You brought us here. You find the solution."⁶²

Yet underneath all the angry complaints there was also a strain of helpless pleading. Many people were not intent on assailing Moshe and Aharon. They just stretched out their hands to them, like hungry children beckoning to their parents, pleading for a morsel of food. These people were not a threat about to turn to violence. But others were.⁶³

The complaints and the accusations were morphing into ominous mumbled threats. Here and there, demonstrators reached down and

59. *Ramban*; see *R' Avraham Ben HaRamban*; *Abarbanel*; *Alshich*; *Maaseh Hashem*.

60. *Sforno*.

61. *Ramban*; see *R' Avraham Ben HaRamban*; *Abarbanel*; *Alshich*; *Maaseh Hashem*.

62. See *Sifri*, *Devarim* 2.

63. *Tsafos Al HaTorah*. Some suggest that the reason the Jewish people were not punished for their attack against Moshe and Aharon was because in some ways they were right. Although they were guilty of their lack of faith in Hashem Who had proven time and time again that He answers their prayers, nevertheless "on paper" their arguments were valid in that they were a congregation of 600 myriads of people in the middle of a desert with no food in sight (*Abarbanel*).

picked up rocks and sharp stones. Crazed by the prospect of imminent starvation in the desert, the mob turned ugly and menacing. Moshe and Aharon stood before them bravely, listening to their complaints without responding, letting the crowd vent its anger. But the situation was rapidly deteriorating. At any moment, the first stone was likely to be hurled through the air, and if that should happen, pandemonium would break loose.⁶⁴

Something had to happen. And right away.

64. *Mechilta* to *Shemos* 16:10.