

Let

*The story of the Jewish people's
journey through the wilderness,
from the first encampment
to the Korach rebellion*

My Nation

*A compilation
of Talmudic
and Midrashic
sources*

Wander

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The Journey Begins

The Jewish people had been encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai for nearly a full year after the giving of the Torah when they received their first call to break camp and set out into the wilderness. On the eve of 20 Iyar, ten days short of a year, Hashem informed Moshe that they would be breaking camp the next morning.¹ By this time, the population of the Jewish people had increased by six hundred thousand, as each adult couple had been blessed with a son during that year.²

During the year of encampment at the foot of the mountain, the people had been informed of more and more mitzvos. By the time Moshe finished teaching and reviewing a mitzvah with them, they were given another one to learn and integrate into their lives. This then was the routine during this first year after the Torah was given. It was a constant process of learning and integration, and all along the Jewish people's hearts were aflame with the dream of

1. Rokeach, *Bamidbar* 10:13.

2. *Shabbos* 89b.

their new homeland, the birthplace of their ancestors, that awaited them at the end of their journey through the wilderness.

On the morning of 20 Iyar, Moshe announced to the people that the first leg of their journey was to begin that very day.³ If all went well, they would enter the land of Canaan in a matter of days. The people were beside themselves with joy. This was the moment for which they had waited so long. They packed up and set off from Mount Sinai in the direction of the Paran wilderness.⁴ They walked at such a rapid pace that they were able to cover in one day a distance that would normally take three days.⁵

The *Aron Kodesh* at the head of the procession responded to their speed and helped them maintain this rapid pace. It moved with even greater speed in order to stay ahead of the people and to prepare the campsite where they would finally come to rest. It surged ahead of the procession by three days.⁶

“Stop!” Moshe called out to the *Aron Kodesh*. “You’re getting too far ahead of the people. Let us catch up with you before you go any farther.”⁷

Why were the people walking with such haste? Why didn’t they pace themselves to conserve energy and prevent fatigue? Their excitement about the prospect of entering the Promised Land was certainly a major factor in their rush to travel, perhaps the major factor. But there was also something else.

3. Rashi, Ibn Ezra on *Bamidbar* 10:11; *Seder Olam* 8. This was part of the Jewish people’s forty-two encampments, the first in the wilderness (*Tzeror haMor; Lekach Tov*).

4. See Rashi, *Gur Aryeh*, Ramban on *Bamidbar* 10:12. See Tosafos, *Shabbos* 89b.

5. Rashi, *Midrash haBiur* on *Bamidbar* 10:33. At the end, an eleven-day journey took just three days. See Rashi, *Devarim* 1:2. See also Rashbam, Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya there.

6. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 10:33. See also Seforno, Rashbam, Rabbeinu Bachya there.

7. Rashi, *Nachalas Yaakov, Sha’arei Aharon* on *Bamidbar* 10:35; *Tanchuma, Vayakhel* 7. Moshe didn’t realize that Hashem had sent the *Aron Kodesh* ahead to benefit the Jews. Some suggest Moshe told the *Aron Kodesh* to halt because the Jewish people had been without it, i.e., without Torah, for three days (Maharsha, *Shabbos* 116a).

The people who had stood at Mount Sinai and seen the revelation of the Shechinah on the mountaintop were instantly elevated to an extremely high level of spirituality, but at the same time, they were unaccustomed to the stringent demands of living by the dictates of the Torah. As they learned one mitzvah after another, they became worried that they would not be able to manage with such an abundance of mitzvos. One small part of them longed to leave the environs of Mount Sinai, because in their mind, this was the place where mitzvos were given. Once they left, they assumed, no more mitzvos would be given.

And so, when the command to travel was issued, they practically fled into the wilderness, leaving Mount Sinai behind both physically and spiritually. Hashem did not look kindly upon this motive. He viewed it as a child fleeing the schoolhouse when the day is done. The attitude that this reflected did not bode well for the future of the Jewish people, and indeed, before too long, they ran into serious trouble. The first eruptions would occur at a place that ultimately would be known as Kivros haTa'avah—the very next site of the encampment after its yearlong sojourn at Sinai.⁸

The Eirev Rav Complains⁹

As long as the Jewish people were at the foot of the holy mountain, with the Mishkan fully assembled in their midst and their days occupied with learning

8. See *Midrash haCheifetz*, Ramban, *Minchah Belulah*, *Sifsei Kohen Bamidbar*, *Pnei David* on *Bamidbar* 10:33; *Shabbos* 116a with *Tosafos* and *Maharsha*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 729. See *Chasam Sofer* for the long-term significance of this event.

9. The Jewish nation in the wilderness was on a level beyond our comprehension. Even at the Jews' lowest level of spirituality, the Torah merely *likens* them to complainers rather than declaring them actual complainers. In most instances, their very stature was the root of their apparent misconduct. They so yearned to bond with Hashem that they complained, argued and questioned whenever He seemed to have forsaken them. Yet despite their honorable intentions, they should have voiced their concerns more humbly and less antagonistically. See *Eichah Rabbah* 1:3, 2:8–9; *Yalkut Shimoni* 732.

Torah, they were completely enveloped in holiness. They felt very close to Hashem, and their thoughts were all spiritual. They were not overly concerned with good food and creature comforts—although they still felt overwhelmed by all the new mitzvos. But once they broke camp and set out to travel, their spiritual level plummeted, and their material desires assumed much greater importance.¹⁰ After three days of travel—three days without the benefit of concentrated Torah study—some of the old habits they had developed during the dark days in Egypt emerged again.¹¹

When they rested on 22 Iyar,¹² they looked at their new surroundings with a critical eye.¹³ From a material point of view, they found their situation wanting. The suspicion was born in their minds that perhaps Hashem had withdrawn from them somewhat. They became agitated and vented their frustration on Moshe in an inappropriate manner. They complained, they argued, and they questioned his decisions. If they had concerns, they should have communicated them to Moshe in a humble and respectful manner. But they didn't.¹⁴

Once again, it was the Eirev Rav that brought the people down.¹⁵ These people were essentially lowly and wicked, and they had no great interest in spiritual growth. With too much time to think and plot while they were traveling,¹⁶ they decided to turn their backs on the *Aron Kodesh*¹⁷—both literally and metaphorically—and set their minds to challenging Hashem and turning the

10. See *Chasam Sofer, Bamidbar* 10:33, 11:1. See also *Yeshayahu* 1:28.

11. Maharsha, *Shabbos* 116a; *Meshivas Nefesh, Tzeror haMor, Midrash haCheifetz* on *Bamidbar* 11:1.

12. Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bamidbar* 11:1.

13. Rashi, *Maskil l'David* on *Devarim* 1:2; *Midrash haGadol, Bamidbar* 10:33. See Ramban, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 11:3.

14. See *Eichah Rabbah* 1:3, 2:8–9; *Yalkut Shimoni* 732.

15. Abarbanel, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:1 with *Be'er Yitzchak*.

16. *Meshivas Nefesh, Bamidbar* 11:1.

17. *Tzeror haMor, ibid.*

people away from Him.¹⁸ They knew they could not openly voice their inner thoughts, so they took a more insidious approach.¹⁹

They sat on the ground like mourners and put their heads in their hands.²⁰

“Woe is us,” one of the Eirev Rav groaned. “How awful is our plight. How can we be expected to endure such torture? Three days of uninterrupted travel!²¹ Three days of agony and fatigue! Three days of pain and suffering! Why are we made to endure such torture?²² Are we not human beings? We feel like slaves mistreated by a cruel master who yearn to be set free.”²³

“Yes, this is just too much suffering,” added another under his breath so that only those nearby could hear him. “We were willing to endure a certain amount of suffering in order to receive the Torah. But we already have the Torah, so why must we continue to suffer in this miserable wilderness? Enough is enough!”²⁴

This was actually quite a clever strategy. It can be likened to one of the king’s subjects who was sitting in the marketplace and grumbling to himself about government policies that troubled him.

“Be quiet!” a passerby said to him. “Agents of the king may hear you.”

“And would that be such a terrible thing?” said the man.

18. Rashi, *ibid*.

19. Rabbeinu Bachya, Ralbag, *Tzeror haMor*, Alshich, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *HaKesav veHaKabbalah* on *Bamidbar* 11:1; Radak, *Tehillim* 78:19; *Tanchuma*, *Yisro* 3. According to *Sifsei Kohen*, while the Jews confined their displeasure to their thoughts, the Eirev Rav spoke up.

20. *Tzeror haMor*, Alshich on *Bamidbar* 11:1.

21. Rashi, *ibid*. See also Rashi, *Mishlei* 10:8.

22. Ramban, Rashbam, Seforno on *Bamidbar* 11:1. Others mourned the thought of going to war with Canaan in the next few days (*Da’as Zekeinim*, *Pa’aneiach Raza*). *Toldos Yitzchak* holds that they were upset because they hadn’t reached Eretz Yisrael fast enough.

23. Alshich, *Bamidbar* 11:1.

24. *Chasam Sofer*, *Bamidbar* 10:33.

"I can't very well stand up and complain about the king. But I don't particularly mind if he finds out that I've been grumbling to myself."²⁵

Hashem did indeed take note of the dissatisfied grumbling of the Eirev Rav, and it angered Him.²⁶ "How dare they complain? How dare they utter such slanderous,²⁷ blasphemous words?²⁸ I helped them travel quickly so that they could enter the Promised Land as soon as possible.²⁹ I performed miracles for them, and this is how they show their gratitude?"³⁰

A stream of divine fire shot out from the Altar³¹ and snaked out toward the end of the encampment behind which the Eirev Rav were situated.³² The fire engulfed the complainers.³³ It entered their bodies and consumed their innards.³⁴ They had distanced themselves from the Torah, which is compared to fire, and measure for measure, a divine fire had destroyed them.³⁵

Some of the elders of the Sanhedrin were also stricken by this divine fire.³⁶ According to some opinions, they bore responsibility for the behavior of the Eirev Rav, since they had failed to

25. *Sifrei, Beha'alo-secha; Yalkut Shimoni* 732.

26. Ralbag, *Bamidbar* 11:1.

27. *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 53.

28. Malbim, *Bamidbar* 11:1. Abarbanel attributes their blasphemy to their belief that Hashem didn't know what they were thinking or saying to each other.

29. Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:1, *Devarim* 1:2.

30. Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya, Seforno, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bamidbar* 11:1. See also *Sifsei Kohen* there.

31. Radal, *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 53.

32. *Targum Yonasan*, Rashi, *Ha'amek Davar*, *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 11:1.

33. Rashi, *ibid.*

34. Abarbanel, *ibid.*

35. *Yalkut Shimoni* 732; Alshich, *Bamidbar* 11:1. Twelve times Hashem sent fire: six for good and six for bad. This was one of the latter (*Sifrei*).

36. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:1. According to Abarbanel, the fire consumed the princes of each tribe, necessitating a new group of twelve to spy out Eretz Yisrael.

lead them onto the path of righteousness.³⁷ Others suggest that Hashem took this opportunity to punish them for an earlier transgression.

During the giving of the Torah, some of the elders strove to receive a level of prophecy and perceive aspects of the Shechinah of which they were unworthy. This insubordination should have earned them the penalty of immediate death, but Hashem did not want to dampen the great joy that suffused the Jewish people at that time. Instead, He postponed the reckoning and avenged their sin now by consuming them with the selfsame divine fire.³⁸

As the stream of fire arched across the encampment, the people recoiled in horror. Panic-stricken, they fled in every direction, trying to escape the blistering tongues of flame.

"Flee for your lives!" shouted an old man. "Run and hide. You are all in danger."

"Someone find Moshe!" cried a heavyset man over his shoulder as he fled into the camp of Yehudah. "Tell him to put out this fire before we're all burned to death!"

"It's useless," said a thin fellow leaning against his tent. "This is a divine fire, and Moshe has no control over it. Once it's loose in the camp, there's no telling what it's going to do. I'm staying right here, because there's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide."

"Where are my children?" shrieked a woman. "They were out in the pathways playing with friends. I need them with me. I want my children!"

"I'm going to Moshe anyway," said the heavyset man. "Maybe he's powerless to stop the divine fire on his own, but he can surely

37. See *Sifrei*, Rashi, *Midrash haBiur*, *Sha'arei Aharon* on *Bamidbar* 11:1; *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:16.

38. *Sifrei*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 732. See *Tanchuma Yashan*, *Beha'alo-secha*; *Tehillim* 106:18; *Let My Nation Serve Me*, pp. 188–189. According to *Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:21 and *Tanchuma*, *Beha'alo-secha* 14, these elders died with Chur in opposing the golden calf. See *Let My Nation Serve Me*, p. 309. According to *Tzeror haMor*, having feasted their eyes on the fiery Shechinah, they were now consumed by it.

pray to Hashem and ask Him to protect us from it.”³⁹

When the heavysset man reached Moshe’s tent, he found himself part of a swelling crowd that already numbered in the thousands.⁴⁰ The people were screaming and clamoring for help. No voices could be heard over the din. Moshe came out of his tent and raised his hand. Instantly, the shouting became muted.

“Please save us,” pleaded the heavysset man. “If we must die, let us perish like sheep being slaughtered or even in a plague, but please do not let us be consumed by a divine fire.”⁴¹

“If we’ve angered Hashem,” said another man, “please plead with Him to have mercy on us. After all, if the king’s son angered his father, would not the king’s best friend plead with the king on the son’s behalf?”⁴²

“Do not fear, my beloved people,” said Moshe. “I will pray for you.”

Right then and there, Moshe raised his hands to the heavens and prayed for the safety of the Jewish people. A miracle occurred, and the fire suddenly sank into the ground⁴³ as if Moshe had trampled it underfoot.⁴⁴ The fire then traveled through the ground and returned to the Altar.⁴⁵ Had it been retracted through the air, it would have wreaked havoc and destruction in its path. In this way, however, the safety of the people was protected.⁴⁶ But there was also a warning to the people in the strange manner of

39. *Sifsei Kohen, Bechor Shor, Emek haNetziv on Bamidbar 11:1–2.*

40. Alshich, *Emek haNetziv on Bamidbar 11:2.* This was unlike the complaints that included only some of the Jews. As always, the tribe of Levi did not participate (Maharsha, *Shabbos 116a*).

41. *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 53* with Radal.

42. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar 11:2.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Yalkut Shimoni 732.* Or as though it had been smothered by a woolen blanket. *Tanchuma, Vayishlach 2.*

45. *Yalkut Shimoni 732.* See *Minchah Belulah, Bamidbar 11:2.*

46. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar 11:2.* See also Abarbanel there.

the fire's withdrawal: If they failed to repent, the fires inside the earth would emerge and consume them.⁴⁷

The incident was over, but it was important that it not be forgotten. Therefore, the area⁴⁸ which had been scorched by the fire was named Tav'eirah, which means conflagration.⁴⁹

A Torrent of Complaints

This particular incident was indeed over, but the worst was yet to come.⁵⁰ The initial, general complaints of the Eirev Rav had ignited a feeling of discontent among the people, thereby planting the seeds of a greater rebellion.⁵¹ The people took note of the fiery deaths both of the Sanhedrin⁵² and among the Eirev Rav, and they were disconcerted. Was this the fate that awaited them as well at some point in the future? Would the slightest transgression lead to destruction? And what about the suffering members of the Eirev Rav — were they not human beings too? Did they not deserve sympathy and compassion?⁵³

47. See *Sifrei, Lekach Tov*, Seforno, *Toldos Yitzchak*, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bamidbar* 11:2.

48. Ramban, *Chizkuni* on *Bamidbar* 11:3. Ramban suggests that this was part of the greater encampment of Kivros haTa'avah. According to Malbim, Tav'eirah was actually a place on the road toward Kivros haTa'avah.

49. Ramban, Ralbag, Abarbanel on *Bamidbar* 11:3.

50. *Akeidas Yitzchak* and *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 11:3 note that the people hadn't learned their lesson.

51. Rabbeinu Bachya, Ramban, *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 10:35, 11:1; *Sifrei, Bamidbar* 10. The commentaries debate whether this complaint was included in the Eirev Rav's original one. I have followed Rashi, who separates the two.

According to *Nachalas Yaakov*, the complaints sprang from the people's initial craving for meat, which had begun during their three-day trek from Mount Sinai. By the time they reached Kivros haTa'avah, their displeasure had peaked. See *Minchah Belulah, Bamidbar* 11:1.

52. *Toras Moshe, Bamidbar* 11:1.

53. See Rashi, *Kli Yakar*, Seforno on *Bamidbar* 11:4. The subsequent complaints regarding meat were only a pretext for complaining about having left Egypt. See Rashbam, *Ohr haChaim* on *Bamidbar* 11:18. What were once silent concerns would now be publicized.

The Eirev Rav saw their opening,⁵⁴ and they took advantage of it. Again, they began to grumble and complain about their misery and their unfortunate plight,⁵⁵ and numerous Jewish people moved closer to hear what they had to say. They listened with a sympathetic ear, and offered encouragement.

As some of the Jews listened to the Eirev Rav, the wellsprings of their tears opened, and they wept like young children for the unfortunate members of the Eirev Rav who were suffering so abjectly.⁵⁶ And as they wept with empathy and compassion, they felt a sudden surge of material desires—and then wept even more for their own misery.⁵⁷

“We have nothing to eat,” wailed a short, thin man. “This *mahn* is such a spiritual food. I tell you right here and now, I’m just tired of it. I mean, it was all right, I suppose, while we were at Sinai. We were all so spiritual there, so I suppose it was fitting that we should eat this type of food. But we’re human beings, aren’t we? We’re not angels, and we need some real food, something that will satisfy our hunger and fill us up. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I want a good piece of roasted meat.”⁵⁸

“Where can we get meat?” said a stocky man with a blond beard.

“What’s the problem?” said a bald man with a high-pitched voice. “We all took our livestock with us out of Egypt. We have plenty of meat. I can’t wait to sink my teeth into a thick piece. My

54. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:4.

55. *Tzeror haMor*, *ibid.*

56. *Sifsei Chachamim*, *Bamidbar* 11:21 notes that the children themselves didn’t complain, since they were too young to remember the delicacies of Egypt.

57. See *Sifrei*, *Targum Yonasan*, Rav Saadiah Gaon, Rabbeinu Bachya, *Chizkuni* on *Bamidbar* 11:4; *Bechor Shor*, *Bamidbar* 11:20. According to Rashi, *Tehillim* 78:31, and *Sifrei* and Rokeach on *Bamidbar* 11:4, the complainers were the elders. According to *Sifsei Kohen*, they craved both food and forbidden relationships.

58. *Chasam Sofer*, *Bamidbar* 11:4.

mouth is watering just thinking about it.”⁵⁹

“That’s easy for you to say,” said a man with the swarthy skin of an Egyptian. He was obviously a member of the Eirev Rav. “You know full well that we Egyptian converts do not have any livestock. Our livestock died in the plagues before we converted. We have no meat, my friends.”⁶⁰

“No problem,” said the bald man. “We’ve got meat enough for everyone. You’re invited to join us for our roast.”

“That’s very kind of you,” the man answered, “but it doesn’t solve the problem. You’ll invite us once or twice, and then it’ll be back to status quo. We need a steady supply of meat.”⁶¹

“So do you have any ideas?” said the short, thin man.

“Well,” said the swarthy Egyptian, “we get water miraculously in the merit of Miriam. We get *mahn* miraculously in the merit of Moshe. So perhaps someone with a good supply of merit will step forward and arrange for us to get some meat.”⁶²

“I agree,” said the stocky man. “We have to think ahead. We’ll be entering Canaan soon, and we’ll have to fight a war. We must have a reliable source of meat for the people.”⁶³

Hundreds of people responded with loud cheers and plaudits.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute!” shouted a Levite who happened to be passing by. “What’s going on here? Are you people out of your minds? Why are you listening to these rabble-rousers? You’ll only bring harm on yourselves. Be satisfied and enjoy what you have now, and don’t worry about tomorrow. You may find that you have nothing to worry about.”⁶⁴

“Enjoy what you have,” mocked the man with the blond

59. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *ibid*.

60. See *Sifsei Kohen*, *Panim Yafos* on *ibid*.

61. See Ramban, *Panim Yafos* on *ibid*.

62. *Chasam Sofer*, *ibid*.

63. Tur, *ibid*.

64. See *Sifrei*, Rashi, *Sifsei Kohen* on *ibid*.

beard. “What’s to enjoy—the *mahn*? We’re tired of it. We want meat—good red meat. We want to stuff ourselves with delicious, fatty meat to our heart’s content. No rations. No limitations. We want an endless supply of meat.”⁶⁵

The man from the Eirev Rav held up his hands for silence. A faraway look came into his eyes and he smiled. “Do you people want to know why I’m smiling?” he asked. “I’m thinking about the good old days in Egypt. I’m thinking about the fish we used to eat in Egypt. I don’t know about you Jews, what with them refusing even to give you straw and all that, but we Egyptians had all the fish we could want. We had fresh fish every day, and was it delicious.”⁶⁶

“We had fish too,” said the bald man. “Maybe not as often and as abundantly as you Egyptians did, but we did have our share of fish. My Egyptian master, for one, used to give us fish once in a while just to keep up our strength.”⁶⁷

“Yes, yes,” said another man, “we used to get plenty of fish too. Whenever the banks of the Nile overflowed, the water poured into the irrigation ditches, and lots of fish were trapped there. When we went out to work in the fields we would see the fish, and all we had to do was take them and eat them.⁶⁸ And sometimes, when we drew water, we would find fish in the jugs.⁶⁹ Oh yes, my mouth waters when I think about those fish, and they were all for free. How much more delicious can you get than free?”⁷⁰

65. Rabbeinu Yonah, *Avos* 5:4; *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Bamidbar* 11:4; *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 11:18.

66. *Sifrei*, Rashi, Ramban, *Tosefos Rav Ephraim* on *Bamidbar* 11:4–5. Rav Chaim Paltiel suggests that they wanted meat that tasted like fish.

67. Ramban, *Bamidbar* 11:5. See *Devarim Rabbah* 1:11.

68. See *Chizkuni*, *Pa’aneiach Raza*, Abarbanel, *Toldos Yitzchak* on *Bamidbar* 11:5. See also *Midrash Tehillim* 81.

69. *Yoma* 75a.

70. Ibn Ezra, *Bamidbar* 11:5. In actuality, nothing is or was free. However, these fish were relatively free in terms of their spiritual and physical cost. For the

“Well, I wasn’t as fortunate as you fellows,” said the blond-bearded man. “I didn’t get much fresh fish, but my master did used to give me the fish that wasn’t fresh enough for him and his family but was not quite rotten yet. I’m telling you, considering what I usually had to eat, those fish were a heavenly treat. Those fish tasted better than the *mahn* we have to eat now.”⁷¹

“Yes, they were really something,” said the swarthy provocateur. And let’s not forget the appetizers and the side dishes, my friends—the pride of our Egyptian cuisine. Who can forget the succulent cucumbers, watermelon, leeks, onions and garlic?”⁷²

“You’re right,” sighed the short, thin man. “If only we had some delicious fresh fruit and vegetables. I’m getting tired of this *mahn*. First of all, we can never be sure if it’s coming the next day or not. When we go to sleep, our tents are empty of food. I’d rather go to sleep knowing that I’m well-stocked with food for my family.⁷³ And besides, the *mahn* is getting quite tiresome. I can’t stand eating the same thing every day, day in and day out.”⁷⁴

“What are you talking about?” said the Levite. “We get the *mahn* every day. We’ve never missed a day, so you know you can rely on it. You don’t have to prepare it,⁷⁵ and it doesn’t spoil as long as you eat it before the next day. And it tastes like whatever you want it to taste. You want it to taste like an omelet, that’s what it tastes like. You want it to taste like a steak, that’s what it

Eirev Rav, who were never slaves in Egypt, the fish were free of both spiritual and physical effort. See *Bechor Shor*.

71. See Rabbeinu Bachya, *Toldos Yitzchak, Minchah Belulah, HaKesav v'ehaKabbalah, Ma'aseh Hashem on Bamidbar 11:5*.

72. See *Otzar haRishonim, Ha'amek Davar, Eitz Yosef on Bamidbar 11:5; Yoma 75a. Tzeror haMor* demonstrates how biting this seemingly innocent complaint was.

73. Tur, Ramban, *Tosefos Rav Ephraim, Tzeror haMor, Bechor Shor on Bamidbar 11:5–6*.

74. See Rabbeinu Bachya, *Lekach Tov, Tur, Abarbanel, Rav Tzadok haKohen, Akeidas Yitzchak, Malbim on Bamidbar 11:6*.

75. *Sifsei Kohen, Bamidbar 11:4*.

tastes like. So why are you complaining? What can be better than *mahn*?"⁷⁶

"Well, first of all, my dear Levite," said the swarthy Egyptian, "we in the Eirev Rav don't get a regular ration of *mahn*, and when we do get a chance to eat it, it has only a bland, honey-like taste.⁷⁷ So for us the *mahn* is not an option. But even for those who get *mahn* every day, it's not all it's cracked up to be. For one thing, it doesn't taste like cucumbers, watermelon, leeks, onions or garlic. And besides—"

"Stop right there," interrupted the Levite. "It can't taste like those foods, my friend. Those foods are not conducive to Torah study. And they're not good for nursing women either."

"So what?" the Egyptian challenged. "Let the nursing mothers worry about that if they're so concerned with their health. No one tells them to think about those foods when they're eating the *mahn*. They've got plenty of other food to think about. Why should I be deprived of the taste of such delicious fruits and vegetables just because some nursing mothers can't control their appetites?"

"That's not very considerate of you," said the Levite.

"Let them worry about themselves," snapped the man. "And as for those foods not being conducive to Torah study, that's my problem, and I should have the freedom to make the decision on my own. Why are these foods being forcibly denied me? Where is freedom of choice? Where is free will?"

"You're supposed to be able to study Torah at any time," said the Levite. "If you eat those foods, they will interfere."⁷⁸

The Egyptian sneered. "You wouldn't understand," he said. "We are hungry. Do you understand that? Hungry! We don't want

76. Ramban, Ralbag on *Bamidbar* 11:4. See also *Sifsei Kohen*; *Tanchuma*, *Beha'alo-secha* 16; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4.

77. *Sifsei Kohen*, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 11:4.

78. *Sifrei*, Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bamidbar* 11:5; *Yoma* 75a.

this spiritual food with its delicate spiritual tastes, even if it resembles real foods. We want the real thing. We want to eat a good piece of meat so that the juices will run down our cheeks and we'll lick our lips with delight. We crave enjoyment, real gastronomic enjoyment where you see the food you taste and it explodes onto your taste buds. That's what we want!"⁷⁹

"That's right," said the man with the beard. "We want real variety. Right now, the exact same *mahn* sits on our plates both morning and night, on weekdays and Shabbos.⁸⁰ It never changes. And that's not good for your health. A person's body needs variety.⁸¹ Besides, would it be so terrible if we could get at least one of the foods that we've been denied? Is that asking too much?"⁸²

"You can eat meat from the sacrificial offerings," said the Levite.

"Hah!" said the Egyptian. "There you go again. Enough with this spiritual business. We want some food that is just plain good eating. No sacrificial portions. No spiritual *mahn*. Just some good old-fashioned home cooking.⁸³ And one more thing, my Levite friend. There are all kinds of other things that our eating depends on, all these restrictions that the Torah imposed upon us. We have to make blessings over our food. And if we fail to perform the mitzvos we've been commanded to fulfill, we'll lose our food supply. Eating in Egypt was free. Absolutely free. We didn't have to do anything or say anything. It was pure eating pleasure."⁸⁴

"So listen to what you are saying," said the Levite. "You prefer to be physically unrestrained and spiritually enslaved, as

79. *Midrash Aggadah, Lekach Tov* on *Bamidbar* 11:6.

80. *Tzeror haMor, Bamidbar* 11:6; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4.

81. *Toldos Yitzchak, Bamidbar* 11:6.

82. *Rabbeinu Meyuchas, ibid.*

83. *Tzeror haMor, Meshech Chochmah* on *Bamidbar* 11:4. See *Let My Nation Serve Me*, p. 75.

84. *Sifrei, Rashi, Rabbeinu Bachya, Panim Yafos* on *Bamidbar* 11:4–6. *Zohar, Behar* 108a.

you were in Egypt, than to be spiritually free and physically restrained, as you are now.”

“You can twist it any way you like,” said the swarthy man. “It is what it is.”⁸⁵

“And there’s something else,” said the bald man. “This *mahn* never produces any waste. I feel as if I’ve developed an obstruction and that one of these days I’ll just swell up and explode. Who can survive for such a long time without natural bodily functions?”⁸⁶

The crowd had grown very large during this exchange, and the people burst into tears as they rued their situation. As they wept, another malcontent raised his hands for attention.

“Fellow Jews,” he called out, “if it were not enough to be so restricted in what we can eat, we’ve now been further limited by the Torah. Now we cannot marry many of the relatives whom we were permitted to marry before we received the Torah. We no longer have the full choice of spouses, as we once did. We are really hemmed in, my friends.”⁸⁷

Hearing these words, the people burst into new paroxysms of crying, their shrieks and wails blending together into a huge howl of misery.

“You are such fools!” shouted the Levite. “You’ve demeaned this wonderful food that Hashem has provided us—a food that is

85. *Minchah Belulah*, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bamidbar* 11:1.

86. *Sifrei*, *Bamidbar* 11:6; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4, 16:24.

87. *Tanchuma*, *Beha’alosecha* 16; *Yoma* 75a; *Kli Yakar*, *Lekach Tov* on *Bamidbar* 11:4.

Why did the Jewish people complain only now rather than after receiving these laws a year ago? Most commentaries suggest that the Jews simply hadn’t wanted to dampen the joyous revelation at Mount Sinai (Riva, *Pa’aneiach Raza*). Alternatively, they received the laws regarding forbidden relationships only now (Mizrachi), or they were too preoccupied to deal with it until now (*Maskil l’David*).

Lev Eliyahu finds it incomprehensible that the Jewish people would weep over restrictions regarding relationships. Rather, the Jews wept over having to separate from their now-forbidden partners after so many years together.

perfect in its elegant shape, radiant color and satisfying texture, a food that provides you with every nutrient you can possibly need to maintain perfect health. Hashem has fed you the food of angels, and you hunger for the coarse food of mortal men.⁸⁸ Why are you crying? Why are you acting as though you are mourning the deceased?⁸⁹ Because you're lacking meat and fish? Because you want onions and garlic? Because you want to marry certain relatives? Don't you have enough women to marry? What a tragedy!"

"We want Hashem to give us the food we demand!" someone retorted.

"You are walking on dangerous ground," said the Levite. "You're challenging Hashem. You're daring Him to give you these foods, as if He cannot do it.⁹⁰ You are questioning His ability, and that is inexcusable blasphemy and rebelliousness."⁹¹

Many people who had edged over to the crowd with great timidity to listen to the exchanges were now inflamed with anger and frustration. The crowd grew by the minute until it turned into a seething mob. Families, friends and neighbors gathered in the pathways of the encampment to air their grievances and misgivings,⁹² whether it was about the *mahn*, the fish, the meat, the fruit and vegetables or the forbidden relationships.⁹³ The frustration fed upon itself, and tempers flared.

"Let's go talk to Moshe!" someone shouted, and the entire mob surged toward their leader's tent.⁹⁴

88. Rabbeinu Bachya, Abarbanel on *Bamidbar* 11:7-9. The aforementioned vegetables were unhealthy for nursing mothers, bad for intellectual development, and difficult to digest. Yet the Jews preferred them over the perfection the *mahn* offered. See Rabbeinu Bachya, *Emek haNetziv*.

89. Ibn Ezra, *Tzeror haMor*, Abarbanel on *Bamidbar* 11:10.

90. *Moshav Zekeinim*, Ralbag on *Bamidbar* 11:4.

91. Abarbanel, *Bamidbar* 11:4-6.

92. Rashi, *Bechor Shor* on *Bamidbar* 11:10.

93. *Yoma* 75a; Rashi, *Targum Yonasan*, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bamidbar* 11:10.

94. *Midrash haBiur*, *Sifrei* on *Bamidbar* 11:10; Radak, *Tehillim* 78:19.

Moshe Listens and Responds

Moshe cast his gaze over the mob, and he knew that there would be trouble. But being a great and humble leader whose heart was filled with love for

his people, his only thought was for their safety and welfare.

He listened patiently as the people shouted out their complaints,⁹⁵ and he thought about what he could possibly do to help them. In a way, he blamed himself for their unhappiness. He thought that he might have failed them as their leader, and he suspected that they might be looking for a new one.⁹⁶

He shuddered at the thought of the peril in which they had placed themselves.⁹⁷ He knew prophetically that they had aroused Hashem's burning wrath, and he thought that it was because they had succumbed to their physical desires when Hashem had expected them to be on a higher spiritual level. He didn't realize that the rebellion inherent in their complaints was the main cause of the divine wrath. Regardless, Moshe realized that time was short. If he didn't do something quickly, the people would face a great calamity.⁹⁸

Moshe decided to deflect the divine wrath by shifting the focus of the incident from the people to himself.

"Hashem, why have You done this to me?" he prayed. "Why have You made me the leader of this difficult people? I didn't

Considering the Jews' disregard for everything Hashem had done for them, it's hard to believe they received the Torah just a year previously. Complaining is one thing, but their apparent hatred of spirituality—of Torah and mitzvos—is unfathomable. The introduction to *Shav Shematesa* explains this phenomenon in a positive light: The Torah commands us to do certain things, but the Jews wanted to do them out of love for Hashem, not out of obligation.

95. *Emek haNetziv, Bamidbar* 11:10.

96. *Tzeror haMor, Bamidbar* 11:10. Some suggest that they accused Moshe of adultery (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 2:864).

97. *Toldos Yitzchak, Minchah Belulah, Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bamidbar* 11:10.

98. *Sifrei, Abarbanel, Ha'amek Davar, Malbim* on *Bamidbar* 11:10. See also *Toldos Yitzchak, Minchah Belulah, Akeidas Yitzchak* there.

want to do this, but at the burning bush, You compelled me to accept this role despite my great reluctance.⁹⁹ You insisted that I take the people out of Egypt, and after they sinned with the Eigel, You instructed me to take them to the Promised Land.¹⁰⁰

“Why, Hashem, must I continue to endure their unreasonable grievances? If I do not give them what they want, they are likely to stone me.¹⁰¹ They have *mahn* to eat, and yet they storm my tent and demand that I give them meat. How can I give them meat? They complain and they weep bitter tears, and they resent me when I do not fulfill their wishes.¹⁰²

“Why should I have to suffer? Have I given birth to them that I should have to carry them in my bosom, as a nursing mother carries her baby, all the way to the land of Canaan?¹⁰³ How am I to provide meat for such a multitude?¹⁰⁴

“Why should I have to carry the burden of the entire nation by myself?¹⁰⁵ Before the divine fires destroyed the Sanhedrin at Tav’eirah I at least had some assistance, but now I am left alone.¹⁰⁶ I’m not saying that if I had assistance I would be able to provide the people with the meat they desire;¹⁰⁷ I just need help handling their complaints and grievances. I cannot calm and appease such

99. Seforno, *Bamidbar* 11:11. See also *Midrash Aggadah*.

100. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:12.

101. *Ibid.*

102. Seforno, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on *Bamidbar* 11:12, 13.

103. According to Abarbanel, *Bamidbar* 11:12, Moshe questioned his responsibility to “carry the nation” as a mother carries her baby, since he wasn’t destined to carry them all the way to Eretz Yisrael. See *Ha’amek Davar*.

104. See *Chizkuni*, Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 11:12. From the terms Moshe used, it is evident that a leader must lead with the same compassion that a mother has toward her infant. See Zohar, *Beha’alosecha* 2:21; Rambam, *Sanhedrin* 25:1–2.

105. Seforno, *Ohr haChaim* on *Bamidbar* 11:11, 14.

106. *Lekach Tov*, *Chizkuni*, *Minchah Belulah*, *Da’as Zekeinim* on *Bamidbar* 11:14; *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:16.

107. Ramban, *Bamidbar* 11:14.

a multitude of people all by myself. I need people to help me provide the Children of Israel with hope and encouragement and to show them the error of their ways.¹⁰⁸

“I take the blame upon myself. The *mahn* came to the people in my merit, but they’ve rejected it for the sake of a few pieces of fatty meat. It was my responsibility to make them more spiritual, yet they chose the physical.¹⁰⁹

“I cannot go on like this. If the burden continues to be mine alone, then I beseech You to kill me right now. I’d rather die than continue to be a failed leader of the Jewish nation.¹¹⁰ And besides, if You don’t kill me now they will surely kill me sooner than later.¹¹¹ I’d rather die by Your hand than by the hand of an angry mob.¹¹²

“I see that a terrible destruction awaits the Jewish people in the future.¹¹³ The vision makes my heart pound so violently that I cannot even speak.¹¹⁴ If You intend to punish them, Hashem, then I implore You to take my life from me right now, and let my death atone for their sins,¹¹⁵ because I cannot bear to stand by and see calamity befall Your beloved people.”¹¹⁶

108. See Ramban, Seforno, *Minchah Belulah*, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Ma’aseh Hashem on Bamidbar* 11:14.

109. Zohar, *Beha’alosecha* 156a; *Tzeror haMor*, Rabbeinu Bachya on *Bamidbar* 11:11.

110. See Rav Saadiah Gaon, Ramban, *HaKesav veHaKabbalah* on *Bamidbar* 11:15. Moshe would come to a similar conclusion at the end of his life, when he finally yielded to Hashem’s refusal to allow him to enter Eretz Yisrael. See also *Devarim Rabbah* 9:9, 11:5 with *Tiferes Tzion*; *Tanchuma*, *Va’eschanan* 6; *Midrash HaGadol*, *Devarim* 33:5.

111. *Midrash Tehillim* 23:3; *Midrash haCheifetz*, Rabbeinu Bachya on *Bamidbar* 11:15.

112. Rabbeinu Bachya, *Bechor Shor* on *Bamidbar* 11:15.

113. Rashi, *ibid*.

114. Rashi, *Chizkuni* on *ibid*.

115. *Minchah Belulah*, *ibid*. Alternatively, Moshe worried that should he fall victim to the Jews’ wrath, divine retribution would be severe. Therefore, to protect his people, Moshe asked that Hashem kill him before they did (*Ohr haChaim*).

116. Rashi, *Midrash haBiur* on *Bamidbar* 11:15.

The Seventy Elders

“Moshe, I will grant your request,” said Hashem. “It would be better if you would lead the nation all by yourself, because I have endowed you with all the ability you need to be their leader, along with the greatest powers of prophecy. But if you feel that it is too much for you to bear emotionally, then I will allow you to have the assistants you have requested.¹¹⁷ But they will be there only to assist you, and you will have to be the one who makes the arrangements in selecting them.¹¹⁸

“Assemble seventy men¹¹⁹ of integrity who are wise, righteous, powerful and humble. They must be familiar with astronomy and the occult.¹²⁰ They shall be elders who have experience in authority and leadership. In fact, you shall choose from among the very people who policed the Jews in Egypt.”¹²¹

The men that fit these criteria were the hundreds of Jewish officers (*shotrim*) who supervised the slave labor in Egypt. It had been the responsibility of each Jewish officer to see that his group completed its work, producing no less than six hundred bricks

117. See *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:16. According to Abarbanel, in exchange for the burden of leading the Jews by himself, Moshe insisted that Hashem forgive their sins. Hashem, however, decided to give Moshe assistants instead.

118. Maharam, *Bamidbar* 11:11.

119. *Bamidbar* 11:16. The commentaries emphasize the significance of the number seventy. Seventy Jews entered Egypt, corresponding to the seventy nations and languages. Hashem has seventy names. And there are seventy Torah-delineated holy days every year: fifty-two Sabbaths, seven days of Pesach, eight of Sukkos, and one each of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Shavuot. See Tur; Alshich.

120. *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 736; *Sifrei*, *Midrash haGadol* on *Bamidbar* 11:16. See *Devarim* 1:13. These men were to resemble both Hashem and Moshe in terms of their attributes. See *Sanhedrin* 36b; Rambam, *Sanhedrin* 2:1; *Da'as Zekeinim*, *Bamidbar* 11:16; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:23; *Tanchuma*, *Beha'alo secha* 16. According to *Tosefos Rav Ephraim*, Moshe sought people versed in all seventy languages, but he found that only Aharon, his two sons and he himself had that knowledge.

121. Tur, *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 11:16.

each day. If any laborer slacked off, the *shoter* was instructed to flog him until he resumed his work. If by the end of the day the quota was still not filled, the officer was to identify and report those responsible for the shortfall. These unfortunate men would then be punished by the Egyptian overseer.

The Jewish officers, however, did not cooperate with the Egyptian overseers. They treated the Hebrew laborers in their groups kindly, and they never informed on any slave who did not fulfill his quota. The overseers were infuriated.

“If you don’t tell us who is responsible for the shortfall,” they would say, “you will have to bear the whipping in their stead.”

Still, the *shotrim* refused to comply. “We will gladly take the punishment,” they replied, “but we will not inform on our Jewish brothers.”

True to their word, the Egyptian overseers beat the *shotrim* severely, but they maintained their silence. In the end, Hashem rewarded them. Their compassion as well as their willingness to bear the burdens of responsibility for their people qualified them to serve on the Sanhedrin¹²² and to share the leadership role with Moshe. With the latter as the head of this group of elders, the Sanhedrin would have its full complement of seventy-one members.¹²³

“Moshe, once you choose the seventy elders,” Hashem continued, “they are to join you at the Ohel Mo’ed. My holy spirit will descend¹²⁴ upon you, and I will draw from your spirit of prophecy

122. See *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:16; *Tanchuma*, *Beha’alosecha* 13; *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 736. See *Shemos* 5:14; *Let My Nation Go*, pp. 45–46.

“Sanhedrin” is a contraction of the words Sinai and *hadar* (beauty), for the members of the Sanhedrin were to know the Torah given at Mount Sinai and possess beautiful character traits (*Pesikta Rabbasi*, *Yalkut Reuveni* on *Bamidbar* 11:16).

123. Moshe could no longer reconsider and lead the Jewish people single-handedly (*Ohr haChaim*).

124. See Rashi, Rav Saadiah Gaon on *Bamidbar* 11:17.

and infuse them with it.¹²⁵ But your powers of prophecy will not be diminished, just as the flame of a candle is not diminished when another candle is lit from it.¹²⁶

“They will not rise to your level of prophecy. When I speak to you, they will not be able to hear My voice.¹²⁷ Only you will hear it.¹²⁸ You will then convey My words to them, and they will disseminate the message to the rest of the people. When the people see that the spirit of prophecy rests upon the elders and that they are welcome in the Ohel Mo’ed, they will treat them with reverence and respect and heed their every word.”¹²⁹

“But how do I know,” said Moshe, “that the elders will be willing to accept this grave responsibility upon themselves?”

“It is up to you,” Hashem replied. “You must persuade them and reassure them. You must tell them that they are fortunate to have been chosen to serve as the leaders of My people.¹³⁰ But you must be honest and forthright with them. You must tell them that the people are rebellious and strong-willed and that they have to be guided with patience and understanding.”¹³¹

125. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:17. See *Targum Unkelos*, Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya, and *Ohr haChaim* regarding the elders’ prophetic limitations in relation to Moshe. Rather than receiving *nevuah* straight from Hashem, the elders prophesied through Moshe, who affected their level of prophecy. (In contrast, Yehoshua was “given” levels of Moshe’s prophecy upon accepting the leadership of the Jewish people [*Emek haNetziv*]. See Tur; *Ohr haChaim*; *Chizkuni*.) Despite the partnership between Moshe and the elders, the latter’s level of prophecy would remain significantly inferior to his. Rabbeinu Bachya, Ralbag, *Bechor Shor*, Alshich on *Bamidbar* 11:17.

126. *Sifrei*, Rashi, Ibn Ezra on *Bamidbar* 11:17.

127. Ramban, *Bamidbar* 11:16.

128. According to Ibn Ezra and Rabbeinu Bachya, the elders heard Hashem’s prophecy to Moshe as well.

129. Ramban, *Bamidbar* 11:16; *Sifrei*, Rashi, Seforno, *Otzar haRishonim* on *Bamidbar* 11:17. See also Abarbanel.

130. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:16.

131. See Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:17.

Meat on Demand

Having addressed Moshe's personal concerns, Hashem now gave Moshe instructions regarding the people's hunger for meat.¹³²

"Moshe, I have heard the complaints of the people," Hashem said, "and I have decided to grant them their desires. Tell them to prepare to eat meat tomorrow.¹³³ But tell them as well that they have transgressed and that they are at risk of being punished severely for it.¹³⁴ If they repent before tomorrow they will be forgiven, but if they do not they will be punished."¹³⁵

"What exactly was their transgression?" asked Moshe.

"Their craving for physical pleasures was certainly shameful, but I would view that with leniency.¹³⁶ But why did they have to cry even before they were given an answer to their request? If they had asked for meat and been denied and then cried with frustration, like a child who is denied what he wants, that would have been bad enough. But they cried before they even asked you to provide meat for them.¹³⁷ That means that they were sorry they left Egypt. They were crying because of the situation in which they found themselves. The meat was just a pretext. In effect, they were saying they would rather be slaves in Egypt than free people with the Shechinah in their midst. That is blasphemous.¹³⁸

132. True, the Jews complained about forbidden relationships and other foods, but because their primary complaint pertained to meat, Hashem addressed that issue specifically. See Ramban, Alshich on *Bamidbar* 11:18.

133. *Ha'amek Davar*, *ibid.*

134. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *ibid.*

135. Alshich, *Ohr haChaim* on *ibid.* Hashem pointed out that once they received meat the following day, it would be too late to repent, and they would be forced to eat the meat and die.

136. See Malbim, *Bamidbar* 11:18.

137. Alshich, *Bamidbar* 11:20.

138. See Rashbam, *Bechor Shor*, *Ohr haChaim*, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 11:18. Their rebellion was comparable to the evil of Sodom (*Midrash Aggadah*).

“So I will give them what they want. I will give them plenty of meat. Not for one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor even ten or twenty days.¹³⁹ Beginning tomorrow, 23 Iyar, they will have an unlimited supply of meat for a month, enough to last them until 22 Sivan.”¹⁴⁰

“There are six hundred thousand grown men in the nation,” said Moshe, “and You say You will give them enough meat to eat for a month? Could all the livestock in the world and all the fish in the sea provide enough food to satisfy the bottomless appetites of these gluttonous people?”¹⁴¹

“You ask where I will find so much meat?”¹⁴² said Hashem. “Where did I find all the frogs and lice that overran Egypt?”

“They were miraculous,” said Moshe.

“So has My hand become shorter now that I cannot perform the miracles needed to give them what they want?”¹⁴³

It would seem that Moshe manifested a certain element of hesitation about Hashem’s promise to give the Jewish people their heart’s desire. And yet we find no mention in the Torah of Moshe’s being rebuked for this shortcoming. On the other hand, thirty-eight years later, the Torah sharply rebukes Moshe for another shortcoming. At that time, Hashem told Moshe to bring forth water from a rock by speaking to it, but Moshe struck it instead. Why would the Torah take him to task at that time but not for his earlier lack of confidence in Hashem’s promise? Because that incident happened in full view of the public, and therefore caused a *chillul Hashem*. Here, however, the conversation took

139. *Bamidbar* 11:20; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4.

140. *Chizkuni*, *Bamidbar* 11:18, 20; *Ta’anis* 29a.

141. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:22.

142. According to Rashbam and *Ha’amek Davar* on *Bamidbar* 11:21, 23, Moshe thought Hashem would have to either reduce the Jewish people or perform a miracle.

143. *Midrash Tehillim* 23; *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 735. See *Sifsei Kohen*, *Bamidbar* 11:23.

place in private, and Moshe's question did not cause a desecration of Hashem's Name.¹⁴⁴

According to another view, it is inconceivable that Moshe, of whom Hashem said, "He is trusted in My entire house," should express the slightest shadow of a doubt about anything Hashem told him. Moshe knew that there was absolutely no limit to what Hashem could do, and he certainly would not have doubted His ability to provide meat for the people. Rather, Moshe was simply asking for clarification so that he could understand how the fulfillment of this promise would be accomplished.¹⁴⁵

Many elements of Hashem's promise puzzled Moshe, and he was asking for a clearer picture so that he could be prepared to respond properly. First of all, Aharon, Elazar and Isamar were the only people qualified to slaughter animals according to the laws of the Torah. Could these three people slaughter enough animals to feed at least six hundred thousand people?¹⁴⁶ Was Moshe himself, even with the assistance of the seventy elders, capable of distributing so many tons of meat to all the people in a single day?¹⁴⁷ And how would they have enough meat for a month? Would a single day's supply miraculously last them for a month? Did Hashem intend to perform a miracle to satisfy their inappropriate desire for fresh meat?¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, considering that the people's complaints were only a pretext for a deeper malaise, how would feeding their appetites resolve their underlying dissatisfaction? When they first came out of Egypt, they had plenty of meat, and yet they had not hesitated to complain. And now they had complained not only

144. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:22; *Tanchuma*, *Chukas* 10; *Tosefta Sotah* 6:4.

145. See Rashi and supercommentaries on *Bamidbar* 11:22.

146. See *Tzeror haMor*, *Pa'aneiach Raza*, *Toldos Yitzchak*, *Pnei David* on *Bamidbar* 11:21–22. See also *Vayikra* 17:2–4 with Ramban; Rashi, *Devarim* 12:21.

147. *Chizkuni*, *Da'as Zekeinim*, Rav Chaim Paltiel, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on *Bamidbar* 11:21–22.

148. See Ibn Ezra, Ramban on *Bamidbar* 11:21–22.

about their desire for meat but about their lack of other foods. If they were provided with fatty meat, they would demand lean meat. If they were provided with meat from cows, they would demand meat from sheep and goats or perhaps even wild game. If they were provided with all kinds of meat, they would demand fish and poultry. And then they would demand melons and who knows what else. All the food in the world could not satisfy people who are determined to complain about one thing or another.¹⁴⁹

Moshe also couldn't understand the purpose of feeding the people meat and then killing them.¹⁵⁰ Cattle are fattened before they are slaughtered in order to provide more meat for the table. But who would feed a donkey a bushel of barley and then cut off its head? What would have been accomplished by fattening up the donkey if it was going to die immediately? So what was Hashem's intent when He said he would feed them and then kill them?¹⁵¹

These were the thoughts troubling Moshe, and he pleaded with Hashem not to provide the Jews with the meat so that they would not suffer the retribution that came with it. Instead, he wanted the opportunity to appeal to the hearts of the Jewish people. Given time, he could change their way of thinking and persuade them to withdraw their inappropriate demands. Given time, he could save them from imminent death.¹⁵²

Hashem assured Moshe that there would be no need for special miracles and that the shortage of qualified slaughterers would not be a factor. The meat would arrive in the form of fowl, which did not require ritual slaughter according to Torah law.¹⁵³

149. See *Sifrei*, Seforno, *Pa'aneiach Raza*, *Ohr haChaim*, *Kli Yakar*, *Sifsei Kohen*, *Pnei David* on *Bamidbar* 11:21–22; Rashi, *Midrash Aggadah* on *Bamidbar* 11:23; *Tosefta Sotah* 6:4.

150. See note 135.

151. *Sifrei*, Rashi, *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 11:22; *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 736.

152. *Sifrei*, *Midrash Aggadah* on *Bamidbar* 11:23.

153. See *Tzeror haMor*, *Pa'aneiach Raza*, *Toldos Yitzchak* on *Bamidbar* 11:21–22. See also *Chullin* 16b–17a, 27b.

Distribution would not be an issue either, as the fowl would fall over the entire encampment.

As to Moshe's request for the opportunity to change the minds of the people, Hashem did not acquiesce to it. First of all, it was far from assured that Moshe could succeed. But even if he could, it was too late for a reprieve. The people had publicly questioned Hashem's ability to provide them with meat in the wilderness. Therefore, even if they were persuaded to acknowledge that their demands were inappropriate and to withdraw them, there would always remain a lingering doubt in their minds. Could Hashem indeed have managed to provide them with the meat they had wanted? It would be better that numerous people perished for their transgressions while Hashem demonstrated His infinite abilities to the people than for blasphemous thought to take root in the minds of the Jewish people.¹⁵⁴

Nonetheless, Hashem told Moshe to try to change the minds of the people. It was important that he see for himself how futile it would be.¹⁵⁵

Moshe emerged from the Ohel Mo'ed with a heavy heart.¹⁵⁶

"My dear, beloved people," he said to the assembled crowds that awaited him, "you're walking on dangerous ground. Why should you complain? You've taken plenty of animals with you out of Egypt. If you want meat, eat them. If you want fish, take from the streams emanating from Miriam's Well. Why do you challenge Hashem? Why do you doubt His infinite ability to do anything He wishes to do? Hasn't He brought forth water from a rock to quench your thirst? Hasn't He rained down on you *mahn* from Heaven? How can you doubt His ability to give you what

154. See *Sifrei*, Rashi, *Pa'aneich Raza*, Rav Saadiah Gaon on *Bamidbar* 11:22-24; *Tosefta Sotah* 6:4.

155. *Sifrei*, *Bamidbar* 11:22; *Midrash Aggadah*, *Bamidbar* 11:23.

156. *Ibn Ezra*, *Bamidbar* 11:23.

you want?¹⁵⁷ If you don't want to bring divine wrath down upon your heads, repent right now and withdraw your demands."¹⁵⁸

The people were confused. Their frustration still gnawed at them, but Moshe's words gave them pause. Were they risking too much with their demand for meat? Should they back down? Once again, the Eirev Rav led the people astray.

"We know all about the rock," shouted the same swarthy man from the Eirev Rav, "and we know about the *mahn* from Heaven. Oh yes, we know it too well. We are sick of it, yet Hashem continues to give us nothing else to satisfy our hunger. If He can give us meat right here in the barren wilderness, He should do so right now. Otherwise, we cannot be sure that He is capable of it."

"That's right," shouted another man. "We want our meat, and we want it right now."

"Give us meat, Moshe," someone else called out. "What's the problem? Why all the talking? Just give us the meat. Is it too hard?"¹⁵⁹

Gathering the Elders

Moshe shook his head in disappointment. It was indeed futile. The people were too crazed with their emotions and frustrations. He could not reason with them. They were not prepared to listen. So now he turned his attention to the next task that awaited him. He had to choose the seventy elders who would join him on the new Sanhedrin.¹⁶⁰

157. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *ibid*.

158. *Lekach Tov*, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 11:24.

159. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *ibid*.

160. Rashi, *Minchah Belulah*, *Lekach Tov* on *Bamidbar* 11:23–24. Most leaders won't share their authority and power with anyone. Yet Moshe had no qualms sharing with the Sanhedrin, because he recognized Hashem as the only power and the source of all goodness. He alone sustains the Jews. As such, Moshe knew he was merely a conduit between Hashem and His people (*Tzeror haMor*).

The selection process presented serious problems. First of all, there were hundreds of eligible candidates, men who had served as *shotrim* in Egypt. How would he narrow the field down to seventy men? Then there was the problem of the twelve tribes. The tribes were very sensitive to any signs of favoritism. Moshe knew that he had to be evenhanded in his selection of the elders so that all the tribes would be represented equally on the Sanhedrin. Unfortunately, however, the number seventy was not divisible by twelve. He could not choose six men from each tribe, because there would be two more than he needed. Nor could he choose five men from each tribe, because that would leave him with ten fewer men than he needed.

Moshe asked Betzalel¹⁶¹ to help him find a solution.

"I think your best solution," said Betzalel, "is a lottery. We will take seventy-two pieces of paper. We will write the word *elder* on seventy of them and leave the other two blank. Then we will put all the papers into a box. Each tribe will send the six candidates you have chosen from among them. These six will each draw one piece of paper from the box. Seventy will find "elder" written on their paper and two will come up with blank papers. In this way, divine providence will decide who receives the blank papers, and we'll avoid recriminations."¹⁶²

"That's an excellent idea," said Moshe.

It was indeed an excellent idea, and it would have worked perfectly had all seventy-two candidates attended the drawing of the lots. But as it turned out, only seventy were in attendance.

161. This rendering follows the opinions that Betzalel was still alive. According to other views, Moshe thought of the solution on his own.

162. See Rashi, *Midrash haBiur*, *Midrash haGadol* on *Bamidbar* 11:26; *Sanhedrin* 17a.

Some suggest that six were chosen from eleven tribes and four were chosen from Levi, thus totaling seventy. See *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 736, for a list of the seventy. See *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 1:4 for a slightly different version of the lottery.

Two of the designated candidates did not come to the Ohel Mo'ed for the drawing.¹⁶³

Who were they and why did they fail to appear at the drawing? They are identified in the Torah as Eldad and Meidad. Some suggest that Eldad's full name was actually Elidad ben Kislion from the tribe of Binyamin, while Meidad was actually Kemuel ben Shiftan from the tribe of Ephraim.¹⁶⁴ Others say that they were the sons of Elitzafan ben Parnach, who married Yocheved when she was divorced from Amram. She would later go back to Amram and become the mother of Moshe.¹⁶⁵

These two men were humble and righteous, and they did not feel they were worthy of such a great honor as becoming members of the Sanhedrin.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, they were concerned that if they were chosen, the two other candidates who would be left off the Sanhedrin would feel humiliated. By staying away from the drawing, and in effect abdicating their candidacy, they insured that all seventy candidates who appeared at the drawing would become members of the Sanhedrin, and that no one would be humiliated.¹⁶⁷

Their total selflessness actually made them supremely qualified

163. *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 737.*

164. *Tanchuma, Beha'alo secha 12. See Bamidbar 34:21, 24.*

165. *Targum Yonasan, Bamidbar 11:26.* At that point in history, the Torah had not yet been given, and the prohibition of *machzir gerushaso* (remarrying your ex-wife after she married another man in between) did not apply. This would make them Moshe's half-brothers. According to *Da'as Zekeinim* and *Pa'aneiach Raza* on *Bamidbar 11:26–27*, they were children of Amram from another marriage. After the Torah was given, Amram parted from his wife Yocheved, who was also his aunt (he was now forbidden by Torah law to be married to her), and married someone else. *Pnei David* adds that the two mutes who attended Rabbi Yehudah haNasi and were eventually cured (see *Chagigah 3a*) were reincarnations of Eldad and Meidad. The first two letters of each of their names spell the word *almi*, mutes.

166. *Sanhedrin 17a; Sifrei, Rashi on Bamidbar 11:26; Bamidbar Rabbah 15:19.*

Others hold that they were worried they would be rejected and hence chose not to participate in the lottery.

167. *Bechor Shor, Bamidbar 11:26.*

for the august positions, but as they declined them, the seats went to others. Nonetheless, Hashem rewarded them by granting them prophecy on a higher level than that of the chosen elders;¹⁶⁸ the prophetic power of the elders was drawn from Moshe's "candle," so to speak, while the prophetic power of Eldad and Meidad came directly from Hashem.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, they are mentioned in the Torah by name, while the elders are not. Eldad and Meidad began to prophesy about events that would occur in the distant future, while the elders prophesied only about what would occur the following day. Eldad and Meidad continued to receive prophecies, while the elders received prophecies only on the day they were chosen to be on the Sanhedrin. Eldad and Meidad would one day enter Eretz Yisrael, while the elders would not.¹⁷⁰

As soon as the spirit of prophecy came upon Eldad and Meidad — while they were standing out in the open in the encampment — they immediately began to prophesy. People saw them going into a prophetic trance, and word spread quickly. Within minutes, a great crowd had gathered around them. The people stood in awed silence, watching the two men intently and waiting to hear what they would say.¹⁷¹

"Moshe will pass away," they prophesied, "and Yehoshua will lead the Jewish people into the land of Canaan."¹⁷² Tomorrow, a great tragedy will befall the Jewish people. And in the end of

168. *Tanchuma, Beha'alo-secha* 12; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:19.

169. *Tanchuma*, *ibid.*; *Bamidbar Rabbah*, *ibid.*; *Chizkuni*, *Bamidbar* 11:26. Otherwise, they couldn't have prophesied Moshe's death via a holy spirit that once belonged to him. No prophecy could have been known to them but not to Moshe, unless it came directly from Hashem.

170. *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:25; *Sanhedrin* 17a; *Tanchuma, Beha'alo-secha* 12. According to *Targum Yonasan*, the elders also continued to prophesy.

171. The people were in awe either because the prophecy concerned Moshe or simply because the spirit came directly from Hashem and not from Moshe.

172. Moshe had said, "Kill me," lest he witness the death of the Jews. Just as Yaakov's words led to the death of Rachel (see *Bereishis* 31:19, 32), Moshe's too indirectly caused his own premature demise (*Zohar, Beha'alo-secha* 155b).

days, there will a great war between Gog and Magog."¹⁷³

Moshe's son Gershom was among the crowd that had heard the prophecies of Eldad and Meidad. While the crowd quickly dispersed to carry the news to the far corners of the encampment, Gershom ran to tell his father what had happened.

"Father!" he cried out. "Eldad and Meidad are prophesying in the camp!"¹⁷⁴

Moshe looked at his son without the least bit of concern on his face, and said nothing. In his great humility, he did not take offense at what the two new prophets had done.¹⁷⁵ But his disciple Yehoshua rose to defend the honor of his master and teacher.

"My master Moshe," said Yehoshua with a great sense of urgency, "I plead with you. Please pray to Hashem that He cut off the conduit of prophecy from these two men."¹⁷⁶ Their prophecies outside the Ohel Mo'ed in full public view must be stopped. I suspect that theirs are false prophecies,¹⁷⁷ but even if there is some truth to them, it is unacceptable for them to receive their prophecies in public like that. It is an act of rebellion, and you should crush them¹⁷⁸—or at least have them arrested and removed from public circulation."¹⁷⁹

Moshe stood there silently. Yehoshua waited for a response, but there was none forthcoming.

"Even if there is nothing wrong with their prophecy itself," Yehoshua continued, "I must stand up for your honor. They had no right to prophesy in your presence and without your

173. See *Sanhedrin* 17a; *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 11:26; *Bereishis Rabbah* 15:19.

174. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:27; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:19.

175. *Tzeror haMor*, *Bamidbar* 11:29. See Zohar, *Beha'alo'secha* 155b.

176. See *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 11:28.

177. See Ramban, *Pa'aneiach Raza* on *Bamidbar* 11:28.

178. *Sifrei*, *Maskil l'David* on *Bamidbar* 11:28; Rashi, *Shemos* 17:9. Any affront to Moshe was considered an affront to Hashem Himself and, as such, punishable by death.

179. Rashi, Rashbam, Ramban, *Bamidbar* 11:28.

permission. For that alone they should be arrested. Or perhaps they should be given difficult community responsibilities that will take up their time, constrain their spirits and prevent them from engaging in this kind of behavior. After all, prophecy only comes to someone who is in a joyous state of mind.”¹⁸⁰

Moshe looked kindly at his beloved disciple. “Yehoshua, are you being zealous on my behalf? I have no problem whatsoever with what Eldad and Meidad have done. If it in any way infringed on my honor, I take no offense.¹⁸¹ I asked for people to share with me the burdens of prophecy, and I certainly have no issue with anyone who is a recipient of prophecy on behalf of the Jewish people. What’s more, I would be delighted if the spirit of prophecy would rest on all the Jewish people. These two good men are blameless. As for the place where they prophesied, their prophecy comes directly from Hashem, and it is not for me to criticize the place where it was transmitted.”¹⁸²

Yehoshua had acted with the best of intentions, but he stepped over an important line. In effect, he rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, his master and teacher, and he paid a heavy price for it. Yehoshua’s arguments to Moshe are encapsulated in ten words in the Torah,¹⁸³ and for each word, Yehoshua lost a year of his life.¹⁸⁴

180. *Sanhedrin* 17a with Tosafos; Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:28. Yehoshua never divulged to Moshe what they prophesied (*Yad Ramah*).

Even according to the view that Eldad and Meidad didn’t prophesy Moshe’s death, Yehoshua wanted to stop them from prophesying in Moshe’s presence, which was tantamount to rendering a halachic decision in front of him — a capital crime that, according to some, led to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu.

181. See Rashi, Ramban on *Bamidbar* 11:29.

182. See *Midrash haGadol*, Rashi, Ramban, *Lekach Tov*, *Pa’aneiach Raza* on *Bamidbar* 11:29.

183. See *Bamidbar* 11:28: ויען יהושע בן-נון משרת משה מבחריו ויאמר אדני משה כלאם (“Yehoshua the son of Nun, Moshe’s attendant, [and one] of his young men, said, ‘My master, Moshe! Eliminate them!’”)

184. *Tanchuma*, *Tetzaveh* 9. Yehoshua lived to 110 rather than Moshe’s 120. Others

While this drama was playing itself out, the selection process continued in the Ohel Mo'ed. The seventy elders were chosen. Thirty took up positions on the northern side of the Mishkan, thirty on the southern side and ten on the eastern side.¹⁸⁵ Moshe stood on the western side facing all of them, and they all received their prophetic visions together. Then Moshe escorted each of the elders back to his own tent.¹⁸⁶

A Blizzard of Quail

On the morning of 23 Iyar,¹⁸⁷ Moshe and the elders made one last, desperate attempt to persuade the people to abandon their misguided ways, but the people turned a deaf ear.¹⁸⁸

"You have humiliated me," Moshe said to them. "I am ashamed to be your leader. You have failed to show gratitude to Hashem for all the blessings He has bestowed upon you, and I can no longer advocate for you. The time for prayers and arguments on your behalf is over."¹⁸⁹

The people had only one thought in their heads. They wanted to see the meat arrive. But the elders had the opposite thought. They knew that the meat would come with a large measure of retribution and calamity, and they wanted to be back in the safety of their tents when it came to pass.¹⁹⁰ In deference, to them, Moshe held back until each and every elder had entered his tent. And then it happened.¹⁹¹

add that because of his crime, he merited no sons. Alternatively, Yehoshua lost ten years of his life for postponing the conquest of Eretz Yisrael.

185. *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 737.*

186. Rabbeinu Bachya, Ibn Ezra, *Chizkuni* on *Bamidbar* 11:30.

187. *Chizkuni, Bamidbar* 11:31.

188. *Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar* 11:30.

189. Rabbeinu Bachya, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bamidbar* 11:33.

190. *Tzeror haMor, Bamidbar* 11:30. *Meshech Chochmah* adds that the righteous didn't partake of the quail either.

191. Rashi, Rabbeinu Bachya on *Bamidbar* 11:30.

A tempestuous gust of wind roared in from the southeast.¹⁹² An angel¹⁹³ thrust millions¹⁹⁴ of quail into the windstream¹⁹⁵ near the seashore,¹⁹⁶ and like grains of sand helpless in a sand-

192. Seforno, *Bamidbar* 11:32; Radak, *Tehillim* 78:26. According to *Targum Yonasan*, *Bamidbar* 11:31, this wind would have blown away the world if not for the merit of Moshe and Aharon. Abarbanel suggests that it was an unnatural wind, clearly directed at the Jews by Hashem.

193. *Chomas Anach*, *Bamidbar* 11:31.

194. *Tehillim* 78:27.

195. It is the accepted opinion that the birds in question were a species of pheasant or quail. Indeed, Rav Avraham ben haRambam translates *slav* with the Arabic word for quail. Some see this bird as a fish-like creature, while others suggest it hunted fish; hence its fish-like flavor. See *Lekach Tov*, Rokeach, Rav Chaim Paltiel, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, Abarbanel, *Ma'aseh Hashem* on *Bamidbar* 11:31.

How many episodes involving *slav* were there? Some posit that it was one long episode, beginning a year earlier than depicted here and continuing for forty years. Rashi and others suggest that quail fell daily and that the people complained only to test Hashem. Alternatively, they complained now because they wanted *additional* meat. According to *Ma'aseh Hashem*, they wanted their meat prepared as effortlessly as the *mahn* came to them. Another opinion maintains that they wanted a less "spiritual" food than had fallen until now.

Others contend that the *slav* fell one night at the beginning of the Children of Israel's sojourn, and returned in response to complaints a year later, on 23 Iyar. According to *Tosefos Rav Ephraim*, the quail disappeared after the Jews worshiped the golden calf some ten months earlier. While the first quail episode lasted only one night, the second lasted two days.

According to Tosafos, the Jews had no meat, but their complaints were still invalid, for one of three reasons: animals were available, the *mahn* was enough, the nation's lack of faith was shameful.

Based on the opinion that there were two *slav* episodes, was the second one accompanied by the same factors and miracles as the one mentioned in *parashas Beshalach*, about which the Torah offers less detail? See *Mechilta d'Rashbi*, *Beshalach*.

For more on the various opinions and their implications, see *Chizkuni*, Tur, *Pa'aneiach Raza*, *Bechor Shor*, *Sifsei Kohen*, Abarbanel on *Bamidbar* 11:31–33; *Arachin* 15b with Rashi and Tosafos; Ramban, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Riva, Rabbeinu Bachya, Tur, *Bechor Shor*, *Pa'aneiach Raza*, *Seichel Tov*, *Pnei David* on *Shemos* 16:6, 35.

Regardless of the truth about the quail, the *mahn* receives more attention in the Torah because it was more miraculous and contained greater lessons for the Jewish people.

196. See Rav Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra on *Bamidbar* 11:31. According to *Targum Yonasan*, the quail blew in from the Mediterranean.

storm,¹⁹⁷ the quail were swept across the wilderness by the force of the wind toward the Jewish encampment. The birds were so numerous that they obscured the sun¹⁹⁸ until they rained down¹⁹⁹ like a blizzard of meat onto the outskirts of the encampment.²⁰⁰

The Eirev Rav, which was stationed on the outskirts of the encampment, was pelted with meat coming down at high velocity, and a large number of them were struck on the head and killed instantly. The casualties from this onslaught were indeed greater than the casualties that would soon mount among those who ate the quail.²⁰¹

The quail did not scatter all over the encampment when they struck the ground, nor were the birds killed by the impact.²⁰² They survived alive and intact so that they were still fresh and edible.²⁰³ And they piled upon each other in one location in huge, three-foot-high piles of squirming, live birds²⁰⁴ that covered a distance of thirty-four miles—a full day's wilderness travel.²⁰⁵

197. Radak, *Tehillim* 78:27.

198. *Tosefta Sotah* 4:1.

199. Radak, Alshich on *Tehillim* 78:27; *Tosefta Sotah* 4:1.

200. Tosafos, *Beshalach* 16:7; Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:31. See Alshich, *Tehillim* 78:27.

Rabbeinu Bachya suggests that by the time the quail fell every night, the *mahn* had melted into a stream. Thus, the fowl could be gathered without obstacles. According to *Chizkuni* and Ibn Ezra, the *mahn* fell outside the camp altogether. Others opine that only the quail did. See Malbim on *Shemos* 16:13, *Bamidbar* 11:31; *Metzudos*, Alshich on *Tehillim* 78:28.

As stated below in the text, the *slav* covered the ground for thirty-four miles. Yet some venture that most of the quail fell within the camp. Outside, the fowl was less concentrated.

201. See *Sifrei*, Tur, *Emek haNetziv* on *Bamidbar* 11:31.

202. *Sifrei*, *Chizkuni*, *Bechor Shor* on *ibid.*

203. *Lekach Tov*, *ibid.*

204. *Mechilta*, *Mechilta d'Rashbi* on *Beshalach* 16:13. The quail were piled two amos high, two to three rows deep. See Ibn Ezra; Ralbag; *Ma'aseh Hashem*.

205. *Mechilta*, *Mechilta d'Rashbi* on *Beshalach* 16:13; *Bechor Shor*, *Bamidbar* 11:32. See Rav Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*, *Bamidbar* 11:32. It was a day's travel in all four directions.

Here was the final opportunity for the complainers to repent and avoid retribution. The piles of birds were on the ground, ready to be eaten, but the malcontents could still turn their backs on the birds and walk away. However, their desire was too overwhelming. They surged into the piles of birds, and for a full day and night, they grabbed as many as they could.²⁰⁶

The more vigorous among the men quickly²⁰⁷ gathered enormous piles of quail and hurried home to share them with their families before heading back to get some more. Those who were weaker or somewhat handicapped also didn't have to worry. The weakest among them was able to gather with hardly any expenditure of effort ten full *chomer* measures of quail—the equivalent of about one thousand pounds.²⁰⁸ All they had to do was reach out their hands and take the quail. They did not have to bend over or reach up to get them. The piles were on the level of the person's heart, the least stressful position from which to take something.²⁰⁹ It was not even necessary to turn around. Wherever they looked, in any direction, they were surrounded by piles of quail.²¹⁰

The ravenous among the people sat down to enjoy the feast in

206. *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Alshich on *Bamidbar* 11:31–32; *Ha'amek Davar*, *Bamidbar* 11:33.

207. *Tzeror haMor*, *Bamidbar* 11:32.

208. See *Targum Yonasan*, Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bamidbar* 11:32. According to *Mechilta*, *Beshalach* 16:15, this portion measured either 675 gallons or a volume exceeding that of 400 eggs. See *The Living Torah*, *Bamidbar* 11:32. *Sifrei* puts this figure at five thousand pounds.

Most of the quail landed outside the camp. (Compare note 200.) People in the middle of the camp therefore had to walk the farthest to collect the food. They are the ones who collected ten *chomarim* each. Those on the outskirts of the camp, such as the tribe of Dan, could have easily collected much, much more (Gra, *HaKesav vahaKabbalah* on *Bamidbar* 11:32).

209. According to *Targum Yonasan*, the piles were the height of one's stomach.

210. *Mechilta*, *Mechilta d'Rashbi* on *Beshalach* 16:13; *Sifrei*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:32. Some suggest that the Jews used nets to capture as many birds as possible. See *Bechor Shor*.

full view of their stockpiles of quail.²¹¹ They gorged themselves with a ferocious gluttony, using both hands to stuff their mouths rapidly with fatty pieces of meat,²¹² but their hunger was not stilled.²¹³ Others were reluctant to gorge themselves because they were afraid they would not have enough quail left for the future. They ate more sparingly and salted away the rest for when they would do battle with the Canaanites and need all their strength.²¹⁴

Quail is a fatty meat with little nutritional value, the lowest in quality among the four species of poultry.²¹⁵ Its taste is similar to the taste of meat and fish.²¹⁶ The quail that were swept in by the wind were a particularly fatty breed, so fatty that one small bird would balloon during roasting and fill the entire oven.²¹⁷

Like the *mahn*, the quail could provide every possible taste.²¹⁸ Unlike the *mahn*, however, the quail lasted more than one day; with such a boundless supply, the people did not have to worry about having meat the following day. The less wicked found the quail to be a mild and pleasant food. The more wicked, who had stormed against Moshe, found the quail to have a gristly texture that made it hard to chew.²¹⁹

211. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:32.

212. Ibn Ezra, *Bamidbar* 11:18.

213. Abarbanel, *Bamidbar* 11:32.

214. *Targum Yonasan*, *Tosefos Rav Ephraim*, Ibn Ezra, Rokeach, *Toldos Yitzchak*, Abarbanel on *ibid.* See also Seforno.

215. *Yoma* 75b; Rashi, *Kli Yakar*, Abarbanel on *Shemos* 16:7. Because the request for meat had been improper, Hashem responded with inferior poultry (Maharsha).

Both male and female fowl were available, however, lest anyone complain (*Otzar haRishonim*, *Bamidbar* 11:31).

216. *Chizkuni*, *Bamidbar* 11:31.

217. *Yoma* 75b.

218. Tur, Rokeach on *Bamidbar* 11:20. The quail included every flavor but that of the *Livyasan*, the great fish destined to be eaten in the Messianic era.

219. See *Yoma* 75b with Maharsha; *Hadar Zekeinim*, *Beshalach* 16:13; Tur, *Bamidbar* 11:31.

The Consequences

Despite all the worries and doubts of the fainthearted,²²⁰ Hashem had proved He could provide food in the most miraculous ways whenever and wherever He chose to do so.²²¹ And now it was time for the consequences of the rebellious demand for meat.²²²

On that very first day,²²³ the encampment was struck by a plague²²⁴ unlike any the people had witnessed since their days in Egypt.²²⁵ Some people were struck down and killed instantaneously with their mouths still full of meat.²²⁶ Those watching them die did not push themselves away from the feasting tables.²²⁷ They refused to believe that these deaths were in retribution for rebellion and blasphemy. Rather, they chose to believe that it was just a coincidence; perhaps the unfortunates had choked on the meat in their eagerness to indulge their desires. They continued to gorge themselves.²²⁸

After a day or two of incessant gluttony, some of the people had had their fill and were ready to desist.²²⁹ But Hashem forced them to continue eating. They ate and ate until they were thoroughly

220. See *Ha'amek Davar*, *Bamidbar* 11:18. "Fainthearted" refers to all those who lacked faith.

221. *Eliyah Rabbah* 12; Abarbanel, *Chasam Sofer* on *Beshalach* 16:13.

222. *Da'as Zekeinim*, *Chizkuni*, *Pa'aneiach Raza* on *Bamidbar* 11:33.

223. Abarbanel, Malbim on *ibid.* See also Seforno.

224. Rabbeinu Bachya, Ibn Ezra on *ibid.* *Mei haShiloach* suggests that Nachshon ben Aminadav died during this plague.

225. *Sifrei*, *ibid.*

226. *Targum Unkelos*, Rashi, Rav Saadiah Gaon, Seforno, *Be'er Yitzchak* on *ibid.*

227. See Rashi, *Tehillim* 78:30.

228. *Minchah Belulah*, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bamidbar* 11:20. Some complainers demanded meat every six hours. See *Panim Yafos* on how this demand translated into meat getting stuck in their teeth. See *Chullin* 105a; *Yoreh Deah* 89:1.

229. *Sifrei*, *Targum Unkelos*, Rashi, Ramban on *Bamidbar* 11:18, 20.

nauseated,²³⁰ and still, although the sight and smell of the quail aroused only revulsion in them, Hashem compelled them to eat more.²³¹ By the time they perished, it was as if the meat were coming out of their noses.²³² Exhausted and debilitated, these people fell into their sickbeds and never arose again. They withered away for thirty days, and then died.²³³

According to another view, the less wicked died immediately so that they would not have to go through extended suffering, while the more wicked perished after a long month of pain and agony.²³⁴

Some of the people who fell upon the meat were not rebellious. Rather, they were undernourished and emaciated, and they hoped the meat would restore them to robust health. These people survived the plague, because their intentions were not evil.²³⁵ But after a month of eating to more than an excessive degree, they realized that the request for meat had been inappropriate.²³⁶

The form of death depended on the level of wickedness. Some people choked to death on the meat.²³⁷ Others became so

230. *Ohr haChaim*, *Bamidbar* 11:19. See Rashi, Radak on *Tehillim* 78:30.

231. *Sifsei Kohen*, *Bamidbar* 11:20. See also Ibn Ezra, *ibid.*

232. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:18; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4; *Vayikra Rabbah* 18:4 with Mahrzav.

233. See *Sifrei*, Rashi, Rav Saadiah Gaon on *Bamidbar* 11:20.

234. See *Sifrei*, *Mechilta*, Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:18; *Yoma* 75b. See Ramban for his view. According to *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4, the non-complainers ate without incident. This may explain the statement in tractate *Yoma* that the average ones received a lesser punishment than the most wicked, as there were three categories rather than the two suggested by *Sifrei*.

235. See *Da'as Zekeinim*, *Pa'aneiach Raza* on *Bamidbar* 11:33. How could anyone have been malnourished when the *mahn* offered every possible form of nutrition? Perhaps some preferred to subsist on the animals available to them.

236. Abarbanel, *Bamidbar* 11:20.

237. Some suffered from diphtheria, an ailment that affects the throat and breathing. This sickness served as retribution for slandering Hashem (*Tiferes Tzion*, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4).

sick²³⁸ that their bellies swelled²³⁹ and tapeworms consumed their innards.²⁴⁰ Others perished from dysentery.²⁴¹

As the piles of quail went down, the piles of dead bodies grew. Burial parties were organized to inter their remains in full view of the public as a reminder of the consequences of uncontrolled desires and cravings. As the people watched, their cravings did indeed evaporate,²⁴² and Moshe²⁴³ appropriately named the place Kivros haTa'avah, the burial place of cravings.²⁴⁴

But that was not the end of the consequences of this sordid episode. Because the people had shed senseless tears over their imagined frustration, Hashem vowed that one day they would shed justified tears. It would happen when they wept over the destruction of the Beis haMikdash.²⁴⁵

238. Seforno, *Bamidbar* 11:20.

239. They suffered as a *sotah* (suspected adulteress) did, because they craved adultery (*Tiferes Tzion*).

240. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 7:4; *Vayikra Rabbah* 18:4. See Rav Saadiah Gaon, *Bamidbar* 11:20.

241. *Bamidbar Rabbah*, *ibid.*; *Vayikra Rabbah*, *ibid.*, with Mahrzav. Others add that the Jews suffered *tzara'as*.

242. *HaKesav veHaKabbalah*, Malbim on *Bamidbar* 11:34.

243. Ibn Ezra, *Rabbeinu Meyuchas* on *ibid.*

244. See *Sifrei*, Abarbanel, *HaKesav veHaKabbalah*, Malbim on *ibid.*

245. See *Eichah Rabbah* 1:23. Some suggest that because the Jews cried needlessly twice—here and at the incident of the spies—they would cry over the loss of two Temples.