

בהעלתך

THE COMPLAINERS

ויהי העם כמתאננים

And when the people complained (*Bamidbar* 11:1).

The Torah testifies at length to the loyalty of *Klal Yisrael* in the *midbar*:

At the command of Hashem *Klal Yisrael* journeyed, and at the command of Hashem they encamped... Sometimes the cloud was a few days...and sometimes from evening until morning...whether by day or by night...whether it were two days, or a month, or a year...the charge of Hashem they kept (*Bamidbar* 9:18-23).

There were six hundred thousand men between the ages of twenty and fifty. There must have been a number of men above age fifty — but they were not included in the census. The vast majority had wives not included in this count. Each of the six hundred thousand averaged five children per man (Targum Yonasan *Shemos* 13:18). They were also accompanied by two hundred forty thousand members of the *Eirev rav* (Targum Yonasan *Shemos* 12:38). There was a sum total of at least four and a half million people traveling together in nomadic fashion. There was certainly room for confusion and dissension, yet the Torah bears witness that their fealty to the word of Hashem harnessed the potentially unruly mob into an obedient, organized traveling machine (see Ramban, *Bamidbar* 9:19).

The Torah criticizes some of B'nei Yisrael for committing “murmuring” (מתאננים) against Hashem (Ramban *ibid.* 11:1). This huge mass of humanity trekked through the hot desert, carrying all their possessions, with their crying children in tow, hungry, thirsty and weary, for a full three days (Rashi *ibid.*). How much can be expected from mere mortals? Would it not be reasonable for people to consider this cruel and unusual punishment? Yet, the Torah holds these individuals to a higher standard, for Hashem looked into their hearts and detected a deep character flaw. They were complainers in their manner of speech; they had no legitimate complaints (Seforno, *ibid.*). They merely sought a pretext to provoke Hashem, because it is in the nature of man to find fault with others. Man never finds fault with himself, only with those around him. The closer the relationship, the more dramatic the fault-finding. Hence, men find fault with their wives, with their friends and acquaintances, and even with strangers. *Klal Yisrael*, at this point, was extremely close to Hashem, hence it was easy for this deep character flaw, present in all men, to surface. Hashem sought to teach future generations that it is essential to control this ugly trait.

Within three days of this incident (Rashi, *Shabbos* 116•), *Klal Yisrael* was again tested (*Arachin* 15•) for frivolous complaints (*Shemos* 15:2; *Bamidbar* 11:4). *Klal Yisrael* should have been grateful that they miraculously received manna from Heaven, food designed for celestial beings, food never before and never again available to mortals. Instead of being appreciative, they

again demonstrated that weakness of man — the desire to complain, to find fault, “we have nothing but manna to look to” (*Bamidbar* 11:6). In a humane sense, their complaint was understandable; after all how much of your favorite food can you eat at one time? Especially if this favorite food were to be served for breakfast, lunch and dinner, day in and day out. There is a limit to how much that favorite food could be consumed every meal, everyday, ad infinitum. Even according to the school of thought that every food taste could have been savored from the manna (*Yoma* 75•), this was not a simple accomplishment. It required hours of intense thought and holy concentration to imagine various flavors into the manna, certainly not an act easily achieved. Yet, the Torah held *Klal Yisrael* to a higher standard — and held them accountable for finding fault. Fault-finding is a basic evil which must be eradicated from perfect man.

The great Moshe Rabbeinu was also held culpable for this type of behavior. He was designated to lead, teach and control *Klal Yisrael* — but instead he, too, fell prey to this trait. He complained to Hashem:

למה הרעת לעבדך...את משא כל העם הזה עלי...לא אוכל אנכי לבדי לשאת את כל העם הזה
Why have you dealt badly with me...the burden of all this people...I am not able
to bear alone... (*Bamidbar* 11:11-14).

It was clearly Hashem’s intention that Moshe be in total control of *Klal Yisrael*, completely independent of any outside assistance (*Maharam Bamidbar* 11:11). But, once Moshe spoke up in complaint, he was no longer to be the sole leader; he would now be assisted by a committee of seventy elders (*Bamidbar* 11:16). Rashi (*ibid.* 11:15) comments that “Moshe’s strength waned like that of a woman”, and therefore his power of prophecy and his ability to perform were diminished (*Maharal, ibid.*). Moreover, since Moshe complained about his unwillingness to lead *Klal Yisrael*, Hashem immediately revealed Moshe’s sealed fate through the prophecy of his half-brothers, Eldad and Meidad (*Targum Yonasan, Bamidbar* 11:26).

משה מת יהושע מכניס את ישראל לארץ
Moshe will die, and Yehoshua will lead us to *Eretz Yisrael* (*Sanhedrin* 17•).

Moshe complained that the job was too big for him, so Hashem said: “Fine! You are out of a job!” All these punishable acts are monuments for future generations commemorating the necessity for self-control.

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