YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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Dedicated in memory of
Joseph Y. Nadler, z”l, Yosef ben YechezkelTzvi

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**PARASHAT BESHALACH**

**"You were Rebellious" or "The Kindness of Your Youth"**

**Tracing the Complaints of *Am Yisrael* in the Desert**

**By Dr. Brachi Elitzur**

The wandering journey of *Am Yisrael* in the desert is mentioned in many different places in *Tanakh*, but the evaluation of their coping with the trials and tribulations of the journey is not clear-cut. When the sins of the golden calf and the spies are mentioned in historical speeches, they are treated as clear transgressions, but what is the status of the people's complaints and their demands for water, meat, and bread? Are these regarded as an ongoing misdeed on the part of the generation of the wilderness? Or did the prophetic leaders of the following generations show understanding for the trauma of a nation that had just emerged from the claws of the taskmasters and needed some time for adjustment? Did they show sympathy for the needs of nomads facing the hardships of the desert?

Yirmiyahu's depiction of *Am Yisrael* as a cherished bride is well-known:

So says the Lord: I remember in your favor the kindness of your youth, your love as a bride, when you followed Me in the desert, in a land that was not sowed. (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2)

In contrast, we also find harsh criticism of the nation's stubbornness, ingratitude, rebelliousness, and transgressions. For instance, in Yechezkel's historical survey, there are stinging accusations of violating God's statutes and judgments:

But the House of Israel rebelled against Me in the desert; they did not follow My statutes and they despised My judgments, which a person should perform to live by them; and they desecrated My *Shabbatot* greatly, and I declared that I would pour out My anger upon them in the wilderness, to consume them. (*Yechezkel* 20:13)

The psalmist also emphasizes the nation's ingratitude:

He divided the sea and caused them to pass through, stationing the water in a heap. And he led them with a cloud by day, and all night with the light of fire. He split rocks in the wilderness, and gave them to drink as from great depths. And he brought forth streams from rocks, causing water to run down like rivers. But they sinned further against Him, rebelling in the wilderness against the Most High. And they tested God in their hearts, seeking food for their craving. And they spoke against God, saying, “Can God set a table in the wilderness? Behold, He smote rock and water flowed, and streams gushed forth; can He then also give bread, can He provide meat for His people?" (*Tehillim* 78:13-20)

Do not harden your hearts, as in Meriva, as on the day of Masa, in the wilderness, when your forefathers tried Me, tested Me, even though they saw My deeds. For forty years I loathed this generation and said, “They are people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways.” I therefore swore in My anger that they should not enter My place of rest. (*Tehillim* 95:8-11)

They soon forgot His deed, and did not wait for His counsel. They had a lustful desire in the wilderness and tried God in the desert. (*Tehillim* 106:13-14)

Similarly, we find in Nechemia's historical speech summarizing the nation's history:

You gave them bread from the heavens for their hunger, and brought forth water for them from the rock for their thirst, and You told them that they would go in to take possession of the land which You had promised to give to them. But they and their forefathers acted with arrogance, and stiffened their necks, and did not obey Your commandments. And they refused to obey, nor did they pay heed to Your wonders which You performed with them, stiffening their necks and appointing a leader, in their rebellion, to return to their slavery… (*Nechemia* 9:15-17)

In *Sefer Devarim* we find Moshe's repetition of the Torah after he led the nation during their years of wandering and experienced first-hand their complaints. Here again, the evaluation of their conduct is not clear-cut. His opening speech includes scathing criticism of the nation's response to the report of the spies, but there is no reproach for the nation's complaints concerning water, meat, and bread. Further on, Moshe mentions the period of wandering and God's concern for all the nation's needs, but with no hint of rebuke:

For the Lord your God has blessed you in all of your endeavors. He knows your journeying through this great wilderness. For these forty years, the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing. (*Devarim* 2:7)

In fact, when Moshe expresses his concern at the possibility of the nation forgetting God in light of their future prosperity in *Eretz Yisrael*, he recalls the hardships of the wilderness from a perspective of absolute understanding of the people's difficulties during the period of wandering, with no reproach for the way they handled the challenges that faced them:

And you shall remember the way in which the Lord your God has led you for these forty years in the wilderness, to afflict you, to test you, in order to know what was in your heart – whether you would observe His commandments or not. And He afflicted you and brought you hunger, and fed you manna, which was unknown to you and unknown to your fathers, in order to make it known to you that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God's mouth does man live. Your garments did not wear out upon you, nor did your feet swell, throughout these forty years. You shall therefore know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you. And you shall observe the commandments of the Lord your God, to follow His ways, and to fear Him. (*Devarim* 8:2-6)

He Who led you in the great and terrible wilderness of snakes, serpents and scorpions, and drought, where there is no water; Who brought forth water for you from the flint rock. Who fed you manna in the wilderness, which was unknown to your fathers, in order to afflict you, and in order to test you, that He might grant you goodness at your end. (ibid. 15-16)

Elsewhere, however, Moshe rebukes the nation strongly for their actions during the forty years of wandering. In the speech in which he explains the reason for their inheritance of the land, he rules out the possible notion that "it was because of your righteousness and the uprightness of your heart that you come to inherit their land.” He supports this with a description of the nation's rebellion in the wilderness:

Remember, do not forget, how you provoked the Lord your God in the wilderness; from the day when you came out of the land of Egypt, until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against God. (*Devarim* 9:7)

Thus, the record of the nation's complaints "from the day when you came out of the land of Egypt" until the entry into *Eretz Yisrael* does not provide us with an unequivocal answer to our question. Likewise, God's responses to the complaints are not consistent. Some complaints lead to a miracle that fulfills the nation's requests, sometimes the response to a complaint is dependent on their fulfillment of a series of commands, and at other times God acquiesces to their request, but punishes them for complaining.

The sense of uncertainty in evaluating the nation's religious performance in the wilderness would seem to arise from a mistaken generalization of their complaints, ignoring the unique elements of each of them. The complaints seem to all be of a similar nature, representing a situation of some deficiency that causes the nation to complain and to recall and long for Egypt and to claim that those who brought them out of Egypt acted for the nation's detriment. Indeed, in terms of the general external appearance of the complaints, they are similar. In order to arrive at an answer to the question that we posed at the outset concerning the seemingly ambivalent attitude of the text, we must categorize the complaints in such a way as to evaluate their various parameters.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this *shiur*, we will compare the nine stories of complaints that occur during the nation's journey, with attention to the unique elements of each of them:

1. Pursuit by the Egyptians (*Shemot* 14:9-13)
2. Mara (*Shemot* 15:22-26)
3. The wilderness of Sin (*Shemot* 16:1-35)
4. Refidim (*Shemot* 17:1-7)
5. Tav'era (*Bamidbar* 11:1-3)
6. Graves of Lust (*Bamidbar* 11:4-35)
7. The spies (*Bamidbar* 14:1-23)
8. The waters of Meriva (*Bamidbar* 20:1-13)
9. The circuitous route around the land of Edom (*Bamidbar* 21:4-9)[[2]](#footnote-2)

We will examine the information alluded to in the text, helping the reader to discern the level of justification for each complaint. We will compare the ways in which the people make their requests or demands and the character of those making these requests or demands. We will look at God's different responses in each case. All of this will help us to understand the reason for the varying evaluation of *Am Yisrael* during their period of wandering. (Attached at the end of this shiur is a table comparing the elements of the complaint in each of the nine instances listed; readers are encouraged to consult the table over the course of the *shiur*.)

**Description of the Situation Prompting the Complaint**

Our first parameter for comparison is the textual description of the situation that invites the complaint. As the table shows, in three out of nine instances – in the wilderness of Sin, at Tav'era, and at the Graves of Lust – there is no prior description of the situation, suggesting that the complaint does not arise from any objective reality that oppresses the nomads. Ramban comments on the absence of any record of the situation facing the nation in the wilderness of Sin:

"And the entire congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe…” – The text fails to narrate the beginnings of the story of the complaint, as it does at Mara (15:24) and at Refidim (17:2) and in all the other complaints, such that we would read here, “And there was no meat to eat, and no bread with which to be satisfied, and the nation was hungry for food."

The Ramban proposes that we judge the complainers favorably, viewing the very mention of "the wilderness of Sin" as hinting to the reason for the complaint – the distance from Egypt and from any place of habitation and the fear of facing conditions of starvation. However, we propose that the nation's request is actually presented in a critical light, through the juxtaposition of this complaint to the description of the abundance of water and food at their previous station, Eilim:

And they came to Eilim, where there were twelve springs of water, and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water. (15:27)

The juxtaposition suggests that the complaint did not arise from any objective shortage. We might compare this to a complaint where the text *does* begin with a description of the situation. The Torah goes into great detail in its description of the Egyptians pursuing *Bnei Yisrael*, in a manner which conveys very clearly the terror that engulfs them:

**The Egyptians chased after them** – **all of Pharaoh's horses and chariots, and his horsemen, and his army** – **and they caught up with them** as they encamped by the sea, at Pi ha-Chirot, before Ba'al Tzefon. **And Pharaoh drew closer**, and *Bnei Yisrael* lifted their eyes and behold, **the Egyptians were journeying after them**.

The complaint at Mara is voiced after three days of journeying in the desert without water, with not a word of protest on the part of the nomads. They grow desperate only after the longed-for source of water appears and they discover that it cannot quench their thirst. In the case of the complaint following the report of the spies, there is a description of the situation, but the text emphasizes that the report is slanderous, and that there were those among the spies who took pains to disprove the slander and to calm the nation's fears. When it comes to the journey around the land of Edom, the complaint is accompanied by a description of the objective situation, with no explanation for the nation's impatience.

Thus, the exposition of each of the narratives provides us with some clues as to the varying levels of justification.

**The Reference to the Complainers**

Above, we examined the description of the situation prior to the complaint as one indication of the degree to which the complaint is justified. Even if the complaint is justified – and all the more so if it is not – the manner in which it is voiced and the identity of those voicing it are also important parameters for our evaluation. The text refers to the complainers in different ways, and this is no coincidence. There are four different groupings: "*Bnei Yisrael*,” "the nation,” "the entire congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*/the entire congregation,” and "the riffraff" (*asafsuf*). These appellations serve to distinguish between instinctive, spontaneous complaints that are voiced by people in distress – referred to as"*Bnei Yisrael*" or "the nation" – and an organized coalition – referred to as "the entire congregation (of *Bnei Yisrael*).” Ramban (*Shemot* 14:10-11) notes these different appellations, but he considers "the nation" (even without the emphasis of "the entire nation") to refer to an organized group:

"*Bnei Yisrael* cried out to God” – for those among them who were righteous cried out to God, while the rest rebelled against His word. Therefore, the text states further on (verse 31), “The nation feared God and they believed in God and in Moshe, His servant.” It does not say, “Yisrael feared God and they believed,” but rather, “The nation feared…” For “*Bnei Yisrael*” is a reference to a group of individuals, while “the nation” is the name for the collective; we see this also in “the nation murmured” (15:24). And *Chazal* also mention (*Bamidbar Rabba* 20:23), “The nation began to go astray” (*Bamidbar* 25:1). Wherever the text says “the nation,” it is a term of disapproval; wherever it says “Yisrael,” it is a term of praise.

The appellation "riffraff" (*asafsuf*) likewise hints at an organized initiative, but this time on the part of a marginal, trouble-making group.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The varying terms used for the groups of complainers provides us with another yardstick for evaluating their level of justification – the more coordination and planning has been invested in the complaint, the less justified it is, because where the distress is real and existential, a person cries out spontaneously; he does not wait to coordinate his protest with others and to gain their support.

**The Nature of the Complaint**

The actual act of complaint is also depicted in the text in different ways. “They cried out" or "they murmured" sound more legitimate than acts of lust, weeping, or rebellion. Ramban notes this distinction:

This is the meaning of the verse, “The nation quarreled with Moshe.” For the complaints occurring in places where we read that “they murmured” are instances of disgruntlement; the people were disgruntled about some issue – what shall we do, what shall we eat, what shall we drink. But “they quarreled” means that they actually confronted him. (*Shemot* 17:1)

At Refidim, we find a dual description of the action of the complainers: first they "quarreled" and then they "murmured.” The episode of Refidim is substantially similar to the episode at Mara; in both instances, there is a prior description of a shortage of water, and only afterwards a description of the effect of this shortage on the state of the people.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, the description of the shortage at Mara does not prompt the complaint; this comes only after the description of the distress experienced in the wake of the shortage. At Refidim, the complaint comes even before there is a description of the distress. It would seem that Moshe's rebuke – "Why do you quarrel with me?” – occurring in between the two expressions of complaint is what changes the nature of the quarrel itself. The expression that follows ("and the nation were thirsty… and the nation murmured") seems to be expressed in a less confrontational way, and only when the existential distress has spread throughout the nation.

At Tav'era, the people are explicitly described as "complainers" (*mitoninim*), which leaves no doubt as to their motives, and of course the same applies to those who "lusted a lust.”

In the story of the spies, four different verbs are used to describe what the nation does, reflecting an escalation:

The entire congregation **lifted** and **sounded** their voices, and the nation **wept** on that night. And all of *Bnei Yisrael* **murmured** against Moshe and against Aharon.

Intra-textual exegesis can aid us in understanding the process leading up to the complaint:

You grumbled in your tents and you said, “It was out of God's hatred for us that He brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Emorites, to annihilate us." (*Devarim* 1:27)

It seems that the slander spoken by the spies did not filter its way to every part of the nation. It is "the congregation" that fans the nation's fear into the flame of rebellion. The expression, "they sounded their voices and wept" recalls the act of the weepers, whose role was to arouse weeping among others. The "congregation" achieves only partial success, "the nation wept"; it is only towards morning that the intimidation campaign is complete among "all of *Bnei Yisrael*.”

The complaint at Mei Meriva starts with a moderate description of a gathering, with no indication of the identity of those involved; only afterwards does the Torah describe an action of "quarreling" on the nation's part. In the complaint at Refidim, Moshe's rebuke draws a distinction between two actions of complaint, while at Mei Meriva no such distinction exists. This may indicate a difference between the two groups of complainers – as indeed we see from the continuation of the verses, where there is a distinction between God's command to "Gather the **congregation** (*ha-eda*),” and the execution: "Moshe and Aharon gathered the **company** (*ha-kahal*)…” Malbim comments:

As I have already explained… there is a difference between *eda* and *kahal*. They are called *eda* when they appear in the proper hierarchy, led by the elders; they are then called *eda* in deference to the Sanhedrin, who are the most important among them. They are called *kahal* when the masses gather without the proper hierarchy, without their elders leading them.

The nation circumventing the land of Edom is not described as complaining, but the emphasis on the speaking "against" God and Moshe (***be****-Elo-him u-ve-Moshe*), rather than "to" (*el*) God and to Moshe, indicates rebellion. Indeed, this interpretation is reflected in the translation of both Onkelos and the Targum Yonatan.

**Content of the Request**

The concreteness of the complaint represents a further yardstick for evaluation. At Mara we hear, "What shall we drink?" and at Refidim, "Give us water, that we may drink" (seemingly a more aggressive demand, but in fact indicating faith in the power of the leadership to provide solutions to the problem, as opposed to the helplessness reflected in the first two complaints). In contrast, we encounter pseudo-complaints, where the people are "as complainers" (*ke-mitonenim*), or complaints that do not address the actual aim, but rather a longing for an unattainable reality: "Who can feed us meat?"[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The Description of Egypt and the Attitude Towards the Exodus**

Any mention of Egypt by the complainers, as a justification for their complaint is a sign of ingratitude and indicates their distorted judgment and selective memory. Even here, however, a distinction must be drawn between complainers who recall Egypt as the object of their aspirations and as the land of unlimited food opportunities and those who invoke Egypt as an alternative to death. Egypt is depicted as a desired destination in four of the complaints, but whereas the newly-liberated *Bnei Yisrael* speak of Egypt in comparison with a place where they are going to be killed, the complaints in the wilderness of Sin, at the Graves of Lust, and in the journey around the land of Edom, Egypt is described as preferable to the wilderness **as a place to live**. An interesting development occurs in the complaint at Mei Meriva. The younger generation refuses to "buy" the imaginary, demagogic description of the pleasures of Egypt as offered by their parents; their complaint pertains purely to the difficulties of the wilderness as a place that devours its inhabitants.

As noted, a comparison of the conditions in the wilderness and those in Egypt is to be found in only four of the complaints, but Egypt is invoked to back up the complaint in almost every instance. Nevertheless, here too there is a difference between a questioning of the point of the Exodus and a longing to return – with absolute disregard for the years of suffering and servitude, depicting Egypt as a fantasy that epitomizes the realization of the desert nomads' wishes.

The nation glancing back fearfully at the Egyptians in pursuit and the complainers at Refidim question the meaning of their salvation; they express their preference for slavery over the prospect of death. This comparison makes sense and sounds like an expression of desperation, in view of the armed pursuit or the terrible thirst that threaten them.

The complainers in the wilderness of Sin compare the food possibilities of the two situations. Seemingly, the comparison here is once again logical: Egypt, with its well-developed sources of sustenance, does indeed offer better opportunities for feeding the nation than does the desolate wilderness. However, the complainers do not suffice with an objective description of the differences – which itself would be quite convincing. Rather, they become carried away and exaggerate: "As we sat at the fleshpot, eating bread to satiety.” At this point, their complaint enters the realm of demagoguery.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The complaint of the "riffraff" is more serious, while the comparison raised by the complainers in the wilderness of Sin pits the threat of death posed by the desolation of the wilderness against their confidence in the possibilities for sustenance offered by Egypt. The complainers at the Graves of Lust compare the quality of life of both places. Of course, "quality of life" is judged by many different parameters, but the complainers choose just one that gives Egypt an advantage of life in the wilderness, and even that one element is described with wild exaggeration, with disdain for the divine miracles that attempt to create material conditions in the wilderness to in some way recreate what they had in Egypt.

The complaint of the spies represents a further stage in this line of complaint, and it reaches its climax here in two respects. First, the congregation does not describe the advantages of Egypt only in comparison with life in the wilderness; rather, they present Egypt as an alternative **preferable even to *Eretz Yisrael***. When they cry, "our wives and our little ones will be for prey,” they seem to have forgotten the decree of their former captors, "Every boy that is born shall you cast into the Nile,” and Pharaoh's refusal to release the women and children to go and sacrifice in the desert along with the men: "Not so; go, now, the men, and serve God" (10:10).

Second, the complaint of the congregation in the wake of the spies' report introduces an element of activist planning: "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." This represents a clear violation of the divine command, "For as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see it again forever" (14:13).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The complaint of the younger generation at Mei Meriva represents a "*tikkun*" – a repairing – of the sin of the spies. There is no longer any longing for Egypt; rather, there is a desire to realize the purpose of the Exodus: "To bring to… a place of sowing, and figs and grapes and pomegranates."

In the complaint over the circuitous route around the land of Edom, there is a regression: while the people do not mention any possibility of returning to Egypt, the younger generation, just about to enter the land, is expected to be future-orientated rather than focused on the past. The complaint that they might be expected to offer, in the face of a reality where "the nation grew impatient with the way,” is a request for some short-cut to *Eretz Yisrael*, the "place of sowing, and figs, and grapes and pomegranates,” a land "flowing with milk and honey.” Instead, the people complain about the difficult conditions of the wilderness and expect that this will change.

**Results of the Complaint**

God's response varies with the nature of each complaint. The aim of His response is to fulfill the nation's request, when it is justified (as in the pursuit of the Egyptians, at Mara, Refidim, and Mei Meriva), or to uproot the source of the sin when the complaint is unjustified or where the claim accompanying it is misguided.

*Bnei Yisrael*, pursued by the Egyptians, fear for their lives, and God's response neutralizes the source of their terror. The root "*r-a-h*" (to see) is a key word in Moshe's speech to the people; indeed, the sight of the complete disappearance of the threat is what restores their faith in Moshe's leadership in the wilderness.

The complaint at Mara may express the nation's concern that the plague of blood in Egypt might have contaminated all the water in the region.[[8]](#footnote-8) The complainers demonstrate greatness in that they make no mention of any desire to return to Egypt. God's response to their complaint includes giving them the rules of "statute and judgment," which will shield them from "all the illness which I placed upon Egypt.”

The root of the sin in the wilderness of Sin is the longing for the "fleshpots" and "satiety" of Egypt. God's response comes in the form of an accumulation of food that is posed as the antithesis of the "fleshpot" ideology of material gorging, placing meat and the desire for satiety at the center of one's day-to-day existence. The framework within which the quails and the manna descend limits the time for gathering and the quantity that may be gathered, thereby turning the food into a means of survival rather than the center of existence.

The complaints at Tav'era and at the Graves of Lust bring punishments which strengthen the same idea that was not sufficiently well inculcated in the lessons of the manna and the quails. God's response allows the people to enjoy the "fleshpots" and experience ongoing satiety – with a view to making them understand that, in fact, a situation that includes limits is preferable.

The uprooting of the sin of the spies through the punishment meted out to them is stated explicitly by God. The punishment for despising the good land will create a situation of ongoing, unrealized longing to be able to settle there.

The poisonous serpents that attack the complainers who must circumvent the land of Edom come to repair the nation's ingratitude, as expressed in their expression "measly bread” for the manna. God leads them to an encounter with the true conditions of the wilderness – "the great and terrible wilderness, with snakes, serpents and scorpions" – in order to awaken in their hearts the recognition of God's kindness throughout their period of wandering and that which is destined to happen as a result of their impatience at the remainder of the journey to a place of habitation.

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*Parshat Beshalach* describes the climax of the process of the Exodus, the sight of those who had enslaved *Bnei Yisrael* drowning before their eyes. Our expectations of the generation which experienced "the great trials… those great signs and wonders" are very high, and our encounter with their complaints and their requests to return to Egypt later on in the *parasha* are disappointing. The complaints of the first year, concentrated in one single *parasha*, amplify this sense of disappointment and arouse our sympathy for Moshe and his rebuke at the plains of Moav: "Since the day you came of Egypt until you came here you have been rebellious towards God." However, along with this disappointment, we hear the echoing words of Yirmiyahu: "I remember in your favor the kindness of your youth, your love as a bride, when you followed Me in the desert, in a land that was not sown." This effusion of praise demands that we undertake anew an unmediated reading of the stories of the complaints, with an attempt to understand the aspects of innocence and devotion that were also part of the journey. A renewed look at the stories of the complaints and a comparison between them helps us to differentiate between real, objective complaints and false ones, between spontaneous anguish and calls to rebellion, and between requests for help and expressions of complaint.

Most of all, this analysis helps us to place the issue of gratitude over the past and the present as a yardstick for judging the complainers. "You have been rebellious" applies to the complaints when the nation did not "remember Your wonders which You performed for them, and they stiffened their necks, and appointed leaders to return to their servitude, out of rebellion.” The "kindness of your youth" describes the innocent cry of people in distress, feeling that their very lives are at stake, and who only then cry out to Moshe, "What shall we drink?”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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|  | **Pursuit by the Egyptians (*Shemot* 14)** | **Mara (*Shemot* 15)** | **Wilderness of Sin (*Shemot* 16)** | **Refidim (*Shemot* 17)** | **Tav'era (*Bamid*-bar 11)** | **Graves of Lust (*Bamidbar* 11)** | **Spies (*Bamidbar* 13-14)** | **Mei Meriva (*Bamidbar* 20)** | **Journey around land of Edom (*Bamidbar* 21)** |
| **Description of the situation** | The Egyptians chased after them – all of Pharaoh's horses and chariots, and his horsemen, and his army - and they caught up with them as they encamped by the sea, at Pi ha-Chirot, before Ba'al Tzefon. And Pharaoh drew closer, and *Bnei* *Yisrael* lifted their eyes and behold, the Egyptians were journeying after them. | Moshe journeyed with Israel from the Sea of Suf, and they set off into the wilderness of Shur, and they journeyed for three days in the wilderness and they did not find water. And they came to Mara, but they could not drink the water from Mara, for it was bitter. | They came to Eilim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water. And they journeyed from Eilim, and the entire congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Eilim and Sinai. | They encamped at Refidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. | - | - | They slandered the land which they had scouted, before *Bnei Yisrael*, saying, “The land which we passed through, to scout it, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people who we saw in it are giants. And we saw there the Nefilim, the children of Anak, who emerged from the Nefilim, and we were in our own sight like grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.” | And there was no water for the congregation | They journeyed from Hor ha-Har, by way of the Red Sea, to circle the land of Edom, and the soul of the people was impatient because of the way. |
| **The applicants and content of their request** | And *Bnei Yisrael* were very afraid and they cried out to God | The nation murmured against Moshe, saying, “What shall we drink?” | The entire congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe and against Aharon in the wilderness. | The nation quarreled with Moshe…And Moshe said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test God?” And the nation was thirsty for water, and the nation murmured against Moshe, and they said, “Give us water, that we may drink.” | And the nation were as complainers; it displeased God | The riffraff who were in their midst lusted a lust, and they once again…And they said, “Who can feed us meat?” | The entire congregation lifted and sounded their voice, and the nation wept on that night. And all of Bnei yisrael murmured against Moshe and against Aharon. | They gathered against Moshe and against Aharon. And the nation quarreled with Moshe, and they said, saying, “If only we had perished as our brethren perished before God.” | The nation spoke against God and against Moshe. |
| **Their description of Egypt** | “Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you have brought us to die in the wilderness?” | - | “If only we had died at God's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat at the fleshpots, eating bread to satiety.” | - | - | “We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt; the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic. But now our soul is dried up; there is nothing at all, besides this manna before our eyes.” | - | “And why have you brought God's congregation to this wilderness, to die there, both us and our cattle?” | [“For there is no bread and no water, and our soul is impatient with this measly bread.”] |
| **Attitude towards the Exodus** | “What is this that you have done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt’ – for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness.” | - | “For you have brought us out into this wilderness to put this entire congregation to death by hunger.” | They said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” | - | - | “And why is God bringing us to this land, to fall by the sword – us and our wives and our children will be for spoil. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt? And they said to one another, ‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.’” | “And why did you take us up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place, not a place of sowing, and of figs and grapes and pomegranates, and [where] there is no water to drink.” | “Why did you take us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread and no water, and our soul is impatient with the measly bread.” |
| **Result** | Moshe said to the nation: “Do not fear; stand by and see God's salvation which He will perform for you this day, for as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see it again forever. God will fight for you, and you will be silent.” | God showed him a branch, and he cast it into the water, and the water was sweetened; there He gave him a statute and a judgment, and there they tested Him. And He said, “If you will diligently obey the Lord your God and do what is proper in His eyes, and listen to His commandments and observe all of His statutes, all of the illness which I placed upon Egypt – I shall not place it upon you, for I am the Lord Who heals you.” | God said to Moshe, “Behold, I will rain down bread for you from the heavens, and the nation will go out and gather daily rations each day, in order that I may test whether they will follow My teaching or not.” | “Pass before the nation and take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there, at the rock at Chorev, and you shall strike the rock, and water will emerge, that the nation might drink.” | God heard, and His anger burned, and God's fire was kindled against them, and it devoured the outer limits of the camp. | And to the people you shall say, “Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have cried before God, saying, ‘Who can feed us meat, for it is better for us in Egypt ‘– so God will give you meat, and you shall eat. Not for one day shall you eat it, and not for two days, and not for five days and not for ten days, and not for twenty days. A whole months, until it comes out of your noses, and will be loathsome to you, because you have despised the Lord Who is in your midst, and have cried before Him, saying, ‘Why did we come out of Egypt?’” | “As you have spoken before me – so I shall do to you. Your corpses will fall in this wilderness, and all of your census, according to all your number, from the age of twenty upwards, who have murmured against Me. None shall come to the land which I lifted My hand [in an oath] to settle you in it, besides Kalev ben Yefuneh and Yehoshua bin Nun. And your children, whom you said, They shall be for spoil – I shall bring them, and they shall know the land which you have despised. As for you, your corpses will fall in this wilderness. And your children will wander in the wilderness for forty years, and will bear your going astray, until your corpses are finished in the wilderness.” | “Gather the congregation, you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock, before their eyes, that it may give of its water, and you shall bring forth water for them from the rock, and give the congregation to drink, and their cattle.” | God sent poisonous serpents among the nation, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died. |
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1. The direction that we propose here is somewhat different from that proposed by some of the commentators, who do not differentiate between one complaint and the next, but rather seek within each specific instance the level of and motive behind the dissatisfaction. They note some complaints that are uttered with faith in God, and those which represent a call for rebellion. See Ramban 14:10, who describes different groups among *Am Yisrael*, who had just left Egypt and were now closed in by the Egyptian army and the Red Sea: "The proper interpretation is that there were different groups, and the text records what each of them did. One group cried out to God, while the other denounced His prophet and would not acknowledge the salvation that had been performed for them, announcing that it would have been better had they not been saved."

Similarly, Ibn Ezra, commenting on the nation's complaint in Refidim (17:2): "For there were two groups. One had no water to drink, and they raised a fight against Moshe. The other group had water, which they had brought from Alush; this group wanted to test God, to see whether He would give them water."

The Or Ha-Chaim explains (16:3): "Obviously, not the entire congregation was as one in their complaint against God and against His prophet. For this reason, God wrote two complaints, corresponding to two groups that existed among *Bnei Yisrael*: one group was demanding meat, while the other was demanding bread."

There is also the well-known *midrash* in the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach* 2, enumerating four groups: "There were four groups among *Bnei Yisrael* at the sea: one group wanted to jump into the sea; another wanted to return to Egypt; a third suggested waging war against them, while the fourth suggested crying out (praying). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Miriam's complaint and Korach's rebellion, although they both include explicit protest against the leadership, are not included in our discussion, since they represent lobbies of specific individuals or groups. We are focusing on those narratives which describe a broader coalescence of different parties and strata amongst the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Concerning the composition of the group referred to in the text as *asafsuf*, see the various commentators, who all propose negative descriptions. See, for example, Kli Yakar: "But the mixed multitude, who had originated in the licentious Egypt, did not learn their lesson, and continued to sin, uttering outwardly whatever thoughts arose within them. This is the meaning of the expression, ‘*ve-ha-asafsuf asher [mi-techila] be-kirbo*’– the riffraff that were [originally] in their midst – i.e., in their own heart of hearts – lusted after a lust, and ‘cried once again’ – i.e., they sinned once again by expressing their dissatisfaction outwardly, and weeping." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Let us compare the two instances.

At Mara: "They journeyed for three days in the wilderness, and did not find water. And they came to Mara, but they could not drink the water from Mara, for it was bitter. And the nation murmured against Moshe, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’"

At Refidim: "They encamped at Refidim, and there was no water for the nation to drink. **And the nation quarreled** with Moshe… And the nation was thirsty there for water, and **the nation murmured** against Moshe, and they said, 'Give us water, that we may drink.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This brings to mind the familiar phenomenon of some parents who, when faced with a child's incessant crying, with no indication of what he or she is crying about, lose patience and shout angrily, "Tell me what you want already!" Crying that is accompanied by some specific request – even it if it is unjustified – is easier to deal with than unexplained crying, which one cannot hope to alleviate since even the general direction for a solution is unknown. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Abravanel takes a different view, interpreting their words in a positive light: "Note that they say, 'as we sat at the fleshpot, eating bread to satiety' – for we already know that in Egypt, meat was very expensive, while fish was very cheap. Therefore, they say at the Graves of Lust, 'We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt for free,' but make no mention of meat. And for the same reason they say here that when, in Egypt, they were fortunate enough to eat meat, they would gather and sit, elders and youth together, around the pot of meat – for they would gather together in anticipation of the meat cooking so they could eat it. And while they were there around the pot, they would 'eat bread to satiety' – meaning, bread alone, for wheat was very cheap for them, while meat was a great luxury." [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Ramban ad loc: "'For as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see it again' – according to *Chazal*, this is a negative commandment, applying to all future generations… For Egypt, as you have seen it today – God commands that you shall not willingly observe it again, from now on, forever. And this commandment was conveyed by Moshe to Israel." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibn Ezra (15:26) points out the contrast between episode of Mara and the first plague in Egypt, where the water started off sweet but became undrinkable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)