YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BESHALACH**

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**Dedicated in memory of Gertrude Spiegel *a"h*   
by Patti and Michael Steinmetz and Family**

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Two Models of Leadership

By Rav Shimon Klein

What was the nature of Moshe's leadership? To what degree did he exercise his own discretion? What degree of responsibility did he bear? Many people relate to Moshe as God's emissary, in the fullest and most complete sense. God decides, chooses, and is responsible – and Moshe faithfully carries out his Creator's commands. In this *shiur*, we will put this perception to the test. We will examine an episode of crisis between the people and their leadership – Moshe and Aharon – and try to understand the dynamics. What was the people's argument? What was the leaders' response? When and how does God intervene, and when does He refrain from doing so? This episode is instructive as to the general situation and the position that Moshe occupied in relation to God, as the leader of the people, and eventually as the giver of the Torah.

They journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe and against Aharon in the wilderness. And *Bnei Yisrael* said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, as we ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (*Shemot* 16:1-3)

*Bnei Yisrael* journey from their station in Elim and proceed into the wilderness.[[1]](#footnote-1) The transition is not an easy one, and the response is not long in coming: "If only we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, as we ate our fill of bread…" If only we could have died in Egypt, that place of plenty, rather than in this wilderness to which you, Moshe and Aharon, have brought us to die of starvation![[2]](#footnote-2)

Their cry compares God, upon whom they were dependent in Egypt, with Moshe and Aharon, who have brought them into the wilderness. This is rather astonishing. The Exodus from Egypt is presented as the initiative of Moshe and Aharon, while the dwelling in Egypt is attributed to God.

The continuation of the text, with Moshe's response to them, supports this reading:

"At evening you shall know that God has brought you out of the land of Egypt."

In other words, Moshe takes pains to prove to the people that it is in fact God Who brought them out of Egypt. To distance himself and Aharon even further from involvement, he asks:

"And what are we, that you murmur against us?!"

The whole situation is baffling. Did the people not know what every Jewish child knows – that Moshe was merely God's emissary? Did the people not see God's strong hand with their own eyes? Did they know nothing of the plagues upon Egypt or the splitting of the Red Sea?

The people's complaint invites us to take a closer look at the nature of the leadership of Moshe and Aharon.[[3]](#footnote-3) If Moshe and Aharon are simply carrying out God's command, never needing to make any decisions, then the people's argument is unintelligible. If, on the other hand, God gives them instructions, but also leaves their own discretion and responsibility a wide berth, then we have a lead for understanding the *parasha*.

God's Response

The first response to the people's complaint comes from God:

God said to Moshe, “I, behold, will rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a certain portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will follow My Torah or not. And it shall be, on the sixth day, when they prepare that which they bring in, that it shall be double what they gather daily." (*Shemot* 16:4-5)

God addresses Moshe, and His words accede to the nation's argument and their longing for bread. His promise – "I, behold, will rain bread from heaven for you (*lakhem*),” in the second person plural, is directed towards the nation. "I, behold" announces God, introducing His Presence. Here I am. As you have requested, you will have bread, with My direct involvement, and it will be produced from the heavens, not from the earth. The people will go out and gather it, "a certain portion every day." The portion that is meant for each day will be given on that day, not on any other. There will be no "saving for later," no natural housekeeping. At this point, God adds the purpose of this exercise: it is to test the people, "whether they will follow My Torah or not.” Quite simply, God is telling the people: You want to be dependent on God's hand, directly under His sovereignty, and not subject to human leadership? By all means – but understand what this entails. There will be tests and there will also be a price – a spiritual demand that accompanies the giving.[[4]](#footnote-4)

"And it shall be on the sixth day, when they prepare that which they bring in, that it shall be double what they gather daily."

After a detailing of what will happen every day, there comes a description of something different regarding the sixth day of the manna falling. On this day, the people will prepare what they have brought into their tents, and it will be double the amount gathered on each of the other days. This verse is somewhat opaque. What is the purpose of the "preparing"? Why is the quantity on this day doubled? This obscurity would seem to be yet another expression of the "test" – the position of those who are directly subject to God's hand and receive wondrous bread, and who are now required to prepare something with it for a purpose that has not yet been made clear.

Thus far, we have examined God's response. The next stage involves Moshe and Aharon addressing *Bnei Yisrael* and describing what is going to happen. The seemingly obvious expectation would be that these leaders will convey the message and solution proposed by God.

The Response of Moshe and Aharon

"At evening you shall know that God has brought you out of the land of Egypt. And in the morning you will see God's glory when He hears your murmurings against the Lord. And what are we, that you murmur against us?" (*Shemot* 16:6-7)

It is with these words that Moshe and Aharon respond to the people. The words are startling. They start with the indication of a general direction: "At evening you shall know that God has brought you out of the land of Egypt." In the evening, something will happen that will cause you to know that it was God Who brought you out of Egypt. "And in the morning you will see God's glory, when He hears your murmurings against the Lord" – in the morning, something will happen that will cause you to see that God hears your complaints. You claim that you are given into our hands and not directly in God's hands? In the evening, then, you will know His part and His involvement in the Exodus, and in the morning you will see His glory as he hears your complaints. "And what are we, that you murmur against us?" This serves to deflect the entire protest: "We are not the address for complaints!"

This introduction sets forth the general principle. Moshe now translates the concept into practical terms:

And Moshe said, “[This shall be] when God gives you meat to eat in the evenings, and your fill of bread in the morning; when God hears your murmurings which you murmur against Him – and what are we? Your murmurings are not against us, but against God." (ibid. 8)

God will give you meat to eat in the evening, and you will thereby know that He brought you out of Egypt. Why will the eating of meat lead to this awareness? Seemingly, this comes as a response to the content of the complaint: "If only we had died by God's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots…” God's hand is perceived by the people as an abundance that was available to them in Egypt, so now they are promised a similar abundance in the wilderness. We might compare this to a maternal or paternal image, whose presence is associated in the child's mind with the provision of all needs.

Moshe continues, "… and your fill of bread in the morning; when God hears your murmurings which you murmur against Him.” This, too, responds to the people's complaint: "… as we ate our fill of bread.” You will eat your fill of bread in the morning, and thus you will come to see and understand that God is present; you are subject to His hand, and He hears your complaint.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As noted, this is a rather surprising response. Whereas God talks about bread, Moshe talks about meat and bread. The bread mentioned by God will come from heaven, while Moshe makes no mention of its heavenly origin. God talks about a test – "whether they will follow My Torah or not" – while Moshe speaks of closeness and the knowledge that God is with them. God speaks about a double quantity and preparation on Friday, while Moshe says nothing of this.

God's Response vs. Moshe's Response

What is the meaning of the significant disparity between these two messages? Why does Moshe change what God said when he speaks to the people?

In order to answer this question, we must take a step backwards and ask a preceding question. What is the people's argument? Do they really and truly wish to return to Egypt? Was their experience in Egypt truly characterized by flesh pots or by bread that they ate to their fill? Careful attention should be paid to the textual formulation: "All the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe and against Aharon in the wilderness." This verse defines the subject – a complaint against Moshe and Aharon – in the context of the situation in the wilderness. In the next verse, the people recall with nostalgic longing the time when they were given into God's hand, "When we sat at the flesh pots, as we ate our fill of bread.” They contrast the leadership of Moshe and Aharon with the "hand of God" that provided for them in Egypt.

Why is dwelling in Egypt equivalent to or associated with being given into God's hand?

Thus far, the people's fate has not been up to them. They have dwelled in a foreign land, under a foreign regime, and these forces are perceived by the people as being part of the hand of God, Who is King of the entire world. This hand of God, in its Egyptian garb, provided them with meat and took care of their needs – "and our fill of bread in the morning.” Now they are in the hands of Moshe and Aharon, and decisions are being made not "somewhere up there" but rather right here, very close to them. The existential foundation that was assured in Egypt – meat and bread – is no longer assured, now that they are entering the wilderness. Instead of the Divine fate or decree that until now had determined what would happen to them, they are now subject to the whims, decisions and choice of mortal leaders, in a sort of contrast to "God's hand.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This is how the people perceive the situation, and they grumble; they make no attempt to speak with Moshe and Aharon or to solve the difficulty.

As noted, Moshe hears God's response, but conveys a different message to the people. Why is this? What would happen if Moshe were to convey God's word, as he heard it from God, directly to the people? What would happen if he were to tell them that their request has been acceded to and inform them of the spiritual price that this will entail? We cannot know, but we may guess that the result would be profound crisis. The spirit of the people is fragile, and this burden would weigh them down and distance them even further. Moshe "reads the map" and takes a mediating position, assuming responsibility and seeking to sweeten the pill. He hears God's word, understands that the people's ears are unready to accept it as it stands, and brings it to a different place. Instead of judgment and testing, he speaks of God's closeness and connection with them. He does not understate the measure of bread, nor does he make any mention of its source. He starts off by speaking about the meat, which the people are longing for, recalling their sitting at the flesh pots, and he seeks to calm them. This mediation amplifies his own presence as a leader who stands in their midst and takes upon himself to fend off the breakdown.

If we were to imagine a model of this sort of functioning, we might view Moshe as a sort of junior officer who is under the authority of a supreme commander. The supreme commander leads and issues directives, but these are not operative instructions; they do not match the conditions on the field, the first-hand reality. Essentially, these directives serve to define objectives and policy; their implementation will always need to take into account the need to adapt to reality. This task will be entrusted to the responsible position-bearer – in this case, the junior officer. It is his job to understand how the land lies and the particulars of the situation; he must adapt the instructions issues from "on high" and decide on the best way to implement them.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Moshe Seeks Backup

Moshe said to Aharon, “Say to all the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*: Draw close before God, for He has heard your murmuring.” And it came to pass, as Aharon spoke to the whole congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of God appeared in the cloud. (ibid. 9-10)

Once again, Moshe initiates. He turns to Aharon and asks him to gather the congregation and to prepare them for a Divine revelation. Aharon does so, and the people face the wilderness, readying themselves for the occasion. "And behold, the glory of God appeared in the cloud.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This step is not self-evident. First, Moshe is handling God's itinerary, as it were. Without any prior consultation, he announces to the people that God's glory is about to appear in the cloud, presenting God with a fait accompli. In addition, Moshe asserts that God has heard the people's complaints – "Draw near before God, for He has heard your complaints" – and while this is true, it is not the whole truth. In fact, God's glory appears and He is going to speak with Moshe, not with the entire nation. What is new in this Divine speech that was not already part of God's previous words to him? What is the logic of this revelation before the eyes of the people?

The answer to this question must be sought in the continuation of the text:

God spoke to Moshe, saying: “I have heard the murmurings of *Bnei* *Yisrael*. Speak to them, saying: At evening you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread." (ibid. 11-12)

With these words, God confirms what Moshe has said – twice over. Once through the very fact of the revelation before the nation – as Moshe had requested – and the second time through the content of His words. The issue at the heart of the crisis is the status of Moshe and Aharon. Now, God appears before the people, but He does not speak to them; He confers, in their sight, with Moshe. The message is clear: God has heard their complaints, He has shown His glory before the eyes of the entire nation – but at the same time, He addresses His words to Moshe. In this way, Moshe's status is boosted in the eyes of the people.

In terms of the content of God’s words, there is likewise full backing for Moshe. Moshe promises meat and bread for the people, on his own initiative, and now God backs him up and promises both. In contrast to the fixed quantities of which God spoke previously, He now speaks of the people eating their fill, and in this sense, He once again confirms Moshe's position. The message is that God trusts Moshe; he and his discretion have God's full support, and what he has proposed will come to pass.

Now, let us look at what actually happens:

And it came to pass in the evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning the dew lay around about the camp. And when the layer of dew had risen, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost upon the ground. And *Bnei* *Yisrael* saw it and they said to one another, “What is it? (*Man hu?*)” For they did not know what it was. And Moshe said to them, “This is the bread which God has given you to eat.” (ibid. 13-15)

Three verses describe what happened, and they include the realization of the concept envisioned by Moshe and Aharon – quails and bread provided by God. The quails are mentioned only briefly, and their presence appears to have only local, transient significance.[[9]](#footnote-9) The flock of quails, upon rising, covers the camp, providing easily accessible meat for everyone. The manna, in contrast, is described at length, and it will accompany the nation throughout the years of wandering in the wilderness. Its dispersion around the camp requires that the people go out in order to find it; in addition, they view it as a marvel.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The dew, like the quails, is described as "rising," but it is not clear where both rise from. It seems that the description is meant conceptually rather than literally; "rising" or "ascent" implies a movement from below, upwards. The Torah is telling us, as it were, that the quails arise from the ground, as something belonging to the natural world. The dew also rises from the ground. This movement runs contrary to the original Divine description, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.” The attribution of the quails and dew to the ground would seem to be a function of Moshe's efforts to sweeten and mediate the transcendent Divine word and adapt it to "the way of the world.”

Values, Morality, and Spirituality

Before addressing the continuation of the story, we must stop at this point and consider what we have seen. God says something. Moshe then says something else. What happens to God's original statement? Does Moshe simply ignore it? If we pay close attention, we discover a fascinating scene. Thus far, God's word has been shifted aside. In the next stages, Moshe will come back to God's original message and the long list of commands that emanate from it. It is not God's explicit words that he repeats, but it is certainly the same content, dressed in different garb.

The structure would appear to be as follows. First, Moshe lays the foundations: God will accede to the nation with no preconditions. The nation accepts the response and is mollified by the solution. Now the time has come to add another layer. Another process unfolds during which Moshe connects the people, step by step, to a higher level – to God. This level involves work; there is a moral and spiritual demand entailed by God's presence, and by the miraculous bread that He produces for them. In contrast to the previous stages, when the subject was hearing the nation's distress, here the subject will be God's educational and spiritual demands of the people.

We will note a few points from among a long series of verses in which Moshe reveals God's command bit by bit, using it to mold a new moral and spiritual position.

The verse introducing this new stage is:

"This is the matter which God has commanded: Gather of it, every man according to his eating, an *omer* per person, according to the number of souls; each man for those who are in his tent shall you take it." (*Shemot* 16:16)

a. Gather of it, every man according to his eating" – This description alludes to intentions; a person eats according to the amount that he needs in order to feel satisfied. At the same time, this command includes a distancing from eating in a wild and uncontrolled manner, as might arise in the mind's eye of those who remember the "sitting by the flesh pots in Egypt.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, these words mold a precise, moderate eating – the first step in the chain of values and the spiritual standards now required of the people.[[12]](#footnote-12)

b. "An *omer* per person" – This is the fixed measure; later on, the *omer* is defined as a tenth of an *efa*. At first glance, the command seems to be contradicting itself. Previously, there was mention of a personal measure that could differ from one person to another. How, then, are we to understand this phrase, indicating a fixed measure for everyone, “an *omer* per person,” for everyone, adults and children alike? Moshe starts with the words, "Every man according to his eating," thereby appealing to the heart's desire as the point of departure. What is the desire of every individual? The matter of how much manna to gather could have been left open, to differ from one person to another, and even from one day to the next. The quantity could have been determined by the inner struggle between what the eye desires and what the body actually needs. Since the individuals concerned had, until very recently, been slaves, the results of the struggle would likely have been far from any lofty aspirations. In the solution that is proposed, the point of departure is the personal measure – along with some guidance as to what such a measure should be.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, Moshe points to a precise, moderate position in which the measure of an *omer* is an expression of the inner desire of each and every individual.

c. "According to the number of souls; each man for those who are in his tent shall you take it" – Not everyone goes out to gather; a man is responsible for all those dwelling in his tent. From here the Sages deduce a man's responsibility to support his household: "From here we learn that a man is obligated to support his wife and children" (*Mekhilta Beshalach* 16).

d. Further on, Moshe commands that none of the manna be left over until morning: "Moshe said to them: ‘Let no man leave of it until morning’" (v. 19). This would seem to be an implementation of God's command to gather "a certain portion every day.” Each day has its own food, which belongs to it and not to any other day. In terms of God's presence and His accompaniment of the nation, this expresses faith in the connection with God. It is a sort of promise concerning a bond that is renewed every day, continually.

e. On the sixth day, the people collect a double portion of bread. This is another reflection of the wonder of their inner spiritual instincts: they sense the essence of this day and gather a double portion.[[14]](#footnote-14)

f. As part of the process that is gradually taking shape, the people encounter – for the first time – the concept of Shabbat: "He said to them, ‘This is that which God said; tomorrow is the rest of the holy Shabbat unto God.’" Preparations are necessary, since food will not be provided on that day: "Moshe said to them, ‘Eat it today, for today is a Shabbat unto God; today you will not find it in the field’" (ibid. 25). As explained above, the Divine abundance that comes from heaven is a sort of encounter with God. Thus far, the people have found this encounter in the manna that is provided for them. Now the abundance and the encounter with God move to a different sphere: "See that God has given you the Shabbat; therefore He gives you on the sixth day the bread of two days. Remain every man in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.” The abundance has already been prepared on the sixth day, and on Shabbat, it already stands ready and waiting in the place of each individual, such that he has no need to leave his place. It is a Divine blessing found in that which is already present, having been prepared in advance.

g. *Midrashei aggada* offer a long series of teachings about other wondrous qualities of the manna. These transform the story into much more than the solution to the problem of hunger that prompted the whole episode.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**What Does Manna Have to do with Mortal Leadership?**

Before returning to the beginning of our discussion, let us briefly summarize. We started off with the question of what sort of leader Moshe was. To answer, we looked at an episode describing a schism between the people and their leaders, Moshe and Aharon. A fascinating situation unfolded: God offers a response to this schism, but Moshe and Aharon offer a different one. God addresses the situation from "on high," while the two leaders display the human concern related to the here and now, as those responsible for the practical implementation of God's instructions.

God supports and empowers their leadership. But what about His original statement? The text reveals that it is indeed realized, in a gradual process of stages. The first stage is that God's solution is postponed. Once meat and bread have been provided, the way is open to slowly exposing the people to the Divine vision of the manna, with all its wondrous properties. These invite the people to a new moral and spiritual position.

Perhaps we are now in a position to answer a different question. What is the connection between the fundamental question posed by the people – What is the nature of Israelite leadership? – and the response offered in the form of the manna and the Shabbat? We might answer as follows. The people complain about their leaders as they request bread. Two answers come in response. God's answer is "bread that descends from heaven;" Moshe and Aharon's answer is "bread that rises from the earth.” In fact, Moshe initiates, assumes responsibility for, and develops a response that combines these two. It would seem that his involvement and the responsibility that he assumes in his handling of the episode are in fact a profound answer to the nation's question. To put this differently, the response to the people's physical distress is the manna given to them from God. The answer to the more fundamental question concerning mortal leadership is embedded in the process in which this response takes shape, the manner in which Moshe as leader directs the crisis and the way in which he merges God's presence with mortal presence.

Still, the human component that is integrated here is only initial and exploratory. The story is essentially about miraculous bread, about the wonder that accompanies the nation throughout its desert wanderings, about God Who is present, as they wish Him to be, and about eating that which is ready. This describes a sort of childhood in which there is no labor or responsibility. The additional dimension, then, seems to pop into this unit from an unexpected direction.

**"And It Shall Be On The Sixth Day"**

God talks about gathering "a certain portion every day" and presents as a contrast "the sixth day," when the people will prepare that which they have brought. What lurks in the tension between these two images? "A certain portion every day" means that God is present, and He will rain down bread from heaven each day. What is man expected to do? To gather it and to eat. Further on, Moshe reinforces this idea through the prohibition of leaving over any of the manna until morning. In the context of the discussion about leadership, "leaving over" means thinking ahead; it means planning for tomorrow and not just today. This is one of the most fundamental concepts relating to responsibility. But in terms of the manna in the desert, this is a sin, and it is with regard to this matter that Moshe becomes angry. Moshe prohibits the people from leaving manna over for the next day, thereby placing the people in a position that has so far been sorely lacking – the position of acceptance, of faith that tomorrow, too, God will provide, just like a child who relies on his mother to feed him "a certain portion each day.”

At the same time, the people are also encouraged to adopt another position: "And it shall be on the sixth day, when they prepare that which they have brought, it shall be double what they gather daily" (ibid. 5). The sixth day is a day of preparation, a day of thinking about tomorrow – a first inkling of the concept of responsibility. Simultaneously, the people arrive at this position on their own (ibid. 22). Moshe's reaction to this is surprising:

He said to them, “This is that which God said; tomorrow is the rest of the holy Shabbat unto God. Bake that which you will bake [today], and that which you will boil – boil, and all **that which remains over** (*ha-odef*) - leave for yourselves to keep until morning." (ibid. 23)

The reader can hardly believe it. Moshe speaks of rest and of "a holy Shabbat unto God" as justification for the people's gathering of a double quantity – but then immediately reverts to the labor of the sixth day, with the food for Shabbat depicted as a "remainder" that is kept until the next day. Indeed, the issue here is not the sanctity of Shabbat, nor even the preparations for it. The issue is the double portion that is gathered, the labors that improve the manna (baking and boiling), and the possibility of leaving it until the next day. This idea is further reinforced in the next verse:

And they left it until morning, as Moshe had commanded, and it did not stink, nor were there worms in it.

"Until morning" means until Shabbat day, and the issue here is what becomes of food that has been left from Friday until the next morning. On any other day, it would stink – a sign of deficiency in the complete devotion required of man towards God. On this day, its status is different.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In these verses, the Shabbat is depicted as a blessing that is to be found in a man's place. There is no need to go out and seek it elsewhere. But what is this blessing? It is not the blessing of God's creation, nor the blessing of that which comes about by itself. The blessing of Shabbat is dependent on a person's prior labor. "And Moshe said, ‘Eat it today’" (verse 25) – i.e., that which has been left over to keep from the sixth day – "for today is a Shabbat unto God; today you will not find it in the field" (verse 24). He also tells them, "See that God has given you the Shabbat; therefore He gives you on the sixth day the bread of two days" (verse 29). The subject is now the Shabbat: God has given it to you; therefore He gives you the bread of two days on the sixth day, as preparation. "Remain every man in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day" (ibid.). Every man shall remain in his place, for it is there that the Divine blessing awaits him, in that which exists and that which was prepared in advance.

To return to the subject of the *parasha*: The people reject their leaders. They view mortal leadership as a nullification of the desired situation in which man is given into God's hand and therefore bears no responsibility for reality – as was their situation in Egypt. As a first step, God accedes to their request, in the form of manna – Divine bread, given as "a certain portion each day.” This is an intensive form of "parental Divine presence.” Then He moves them another step forward, to the blessing of the sixth day. On this day they will encounter a double portion of God's abundant blessing, and they will gather double their daily portion. God speaks with them about baking, boiling, doing – essentially, preparation. In contrast to the "certain portion every day" embodying reliance on God, their preparation now will embody thinking ahead, reflecting responsibility. Shabbat arrives – "holy unto God" – but paradoxically, its blessing lies in the preparations that a person has made the previous day; its blessing lies in the degree of responsibility that he takes for himself and his future. These are now sanctified and there is a "Shabbat that is holy unto God.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Elim is a place of abundance: "They came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water, and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water" (*Shemot* 15:27). It would seem that the sharp transition from this place of plenty to the barren wilderness plays a role in this outburst. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The wish expressed by *Bnei Yisrael*, "If only we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt,” is puzzling. It would seemingly make more sense for them to wish to *live* in Egypt by God's hand, in contrast to their present situation in which, as they see it, they are going to die in the wilderness. Apparently, the mention of death is meant to create a contrast between death by starvation and death by the sword or any other cause. In other words, dying of starvation in the wilderness appears to them to be the worst possible fate, and they longingly conjure up a gentler death, which would have been possible if they had remained in Egypt, sitting by the flesh pots and eating their fill of bread. This distinction between different forms of death has support from elsewhere in *Tanakh*: "Those slain by the sword are better [off] than those slain by hunger, for when pierced through, the former ooze with the produce of the fields" (*Eikha* 4:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Our attention will be focused here mainly on the leadership of Moshe, although in some instances we will examine verses that mention both Moshe and Aharon together. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At a later stage, the people will ask Moshe to mediate between them and God so that they will not be exposed directly to God's word: "And all the people saw the thunder, and the lightning, and the sound of the *shofar*, and the mountain smoking, and when the people saw it they were shaken, and stood far off. And they said to Moshe, ‘You speak with us, and we will hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die.’ And Moshe said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for it is in order to test you that God comes, and in order that His fear may be before your faces, so that you will not sin’" (*Shemot* 20:16). We also find that when Eliyahu lives in the house of the woman of Tzorfat and her son dies, she comes to him with the claim: "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Did you come to me to recall my transgression and to slay my son?" (*Melakhim* *I* 17:18). Living in proximity to the man of God means constantly living up to spiritual demands of a very high level, and thus "recalling transgressions." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The text refers to "knowledge" in the evening and "seeing" in the morning. In the evening, the eating of meat will create knowledge of the Exodus, while in the morning the eating of bread will show the glory of God Who hears the nation's complaint. The meaning of this distinction would seem to be the following: Evening represents a time of turning inward, a focus on the personal. Accordingly, "knowledge" is a personal, intimate encounter, and the eating of meat also arouses a sort of knowledge, through the pleasure and desire accompanying it. In this sense, the experiential encounter with meat may reawaken the old psychological state that prevailed when the people "sat by the flesh pots" in Egypt, and arouse within them the recognition that it was God (Who now gives them meat) Who brought them out of Egypt (for there, too, He had given them meat). The morning is a time that gives rise to "seeing,” to clarity and awareness. This is the time for understanding that God hears and responds to your complaint by giving you your fill of bread. This responds not to the need for an inner experience, but rather concern for your actual survival in the wilderness. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We find something similar to this concept in the words of Shmuel. The nation asks for a king, like all other nations, thereby expressing the wish for leadership that assumes ongoing responsibility for reality. In Shmuel's view, the sort of figure who is worthy of leading *Bnei Yisrael* is a man of the spirit (a prophet) or a judge dispatched by God when necessary. He argues that the existence of a king, a bureaucratic system and executive mechanism that respond to all problems, will represent a substitute for God's Kingship. Point by point, he reviews (at the assembly in Mitzpeh – chapter 12) the period of the judges, while the people were in God's hands – "And they cried out to God and said,‘We have sinned, for we abandoned God and have served the Ba'alim and the Ashtarot; and now, save us from our enemies, and we will serve You.’ And God sent Yeruba'al, and Bedan, and Yiftach, and Shmuel, and He saved you from your enemies round about, and you dwelled securely" (*Shmuel* 12:10-11). He contrasts this with the request that he now appoint a king over them: "And you saw that Nachash, king of the children of Amon, came upon you, and you said to me, ‘No, for a king shall rule over us’ – but the Lord your God is your King" (ibid. 12). In this sort of situation, when there is a king and a ruling mechanism, the people will turn to God in times of trouble, but He will tell them, as it were, “Go appeal to the king you chose for yourselves.” Or as Shmuel puts it: "And you will cry out on that day before you king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and God will not answer you on that day" (*Shmuel* 8:18). This perception of the appeal to God might be stated thus: When the nation is subject to domination by another nation, they may ask for Divine mercy, pray, and anticipate salvation "from the heavens" – i.e., the unknown, unknowable. When responsibility lies in the human realm, God is no longer the address for requests for mercy or for prayer, since it is the leader, the king, who is supposed to provide the appropriate response.

   In contrast *to Bnei Yisrael's* claim, *Chazal* present a perspective that views *Am Yisrael* in Egypt as being given into human hands, as opposed to their status in the wilderness, which is defined as "in the hands of heaven": “The school of R. Yishmael taught: Here [in connection with Yom Kippur] the phrase ‘affliction’ (*inui*) is used [‘you shall afflict your souls’], and there (*Devarim* 8) the term ‘affliction’ is used [in relation to the manna]. Just as there the affliction refers to hunger, so here it refers to hunger… Let us infer it from the ‘affliction’ in Egypt, as it is said: 'And [the Lord] saw our affliction' - but in connection with this we have said: This refers to the enforced abstinence from marital intercourse. Rather, one compares one sort of heavenly affliction with another sort of heavenly affliction, but one should not compare a heavenly affliction with **affliction through human beings [the subjugation in Egypt]**" (*Yoma* 74b). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Had Moshe not been given extensive room for discretion, and had he not carried the responsibility for the nation on his shoulders, we could not have learned from him any principles of leadership, for he would not have been required to deal with these two most fundamental elements – decision-making and responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Why is Aharon dispatched to gather the people? Why does Moshe not do this himself? Here we see a division of roles: Aharon is entrusted with closeness and connection to the people, while Moshe is their liaison with God. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. From this point onwards, there is no further mention of the quails. Moreover, in *Sefer Bamidbar*, the people complain about the manna, but say nothing about the quails. The response to their distress in that instance will be quails that are given for a short time, but they are immediately rejected: "And say to the people: Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the ears of God, saying, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? For we had it well in Egypt.’ Therefore God will give you meat, and you shall eat. Not for one day shall you eat, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, for you have despised God Who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, ‘Why did we come out of Egypt?’" (*Bamidbar* 11:18-20). It seems that in our *parasha* as well, the quails are provided for a short time, and perhaps just in the context of their role – engendering the knowledge that it was God Who brought *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt. This awareness can come about in the short term, as opposed to "seeing" that God hears and watches over them day by day, which requires ongoing effort and attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We see this from the description of their perception of it, from the fact that the people turn to one another and ask, "What is it?," and from the fact that they needed Moshe to explain it to them – implying that without his explanation they would not have connected the layer of dew that they see on the ground and the bread promised to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the second occasion when God sends quails, the Torah does indeed describe such wild gorging: "And the people stood up all that day, and all that night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails; he who gathered the least gathered a quantity of ten *chomarim*, and they spread them all out around the camp. And while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of God was ignited against the people, and God smote the people with a very great plague" (*Bamidbar* 11:32-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is interesting to note the *midrash* identifying the fixed quantity of manna as a type of lifestyle recommendation: "Eating this fixed quantity is healthy and praiseworthy; less than this is a curse to the innards; more than this will leave one ravenous" (*Mekhilta Shemot, parasha* 5). The *midrash* then goes on to elaborate: "This is the matter which God has commanded: Gather of it… They said: Nachshon ben Aminadav and his household will now go out and gather much, while a poor Jew will go out and gather little. But when they come to measure it against an *omer*, they found that each had gathered the same amount" (ibid. *parasha* 5). The *midrash* starts with a description of what the command would naturally cause one to think: Nachshon ben Aminadav and his type (the aristocracy) are likely to gather a great quantity, while the poor are likely to gather very little. But upon measuring, both estimations turn out to be false; it turns out that in both groups the same amount has been gathered by each man. The *midrash* is not speaking of miracles. It seems to be indicating the intention behind the moral position. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We find eloquent expression of this principle in the laws concerning Yom Kippur. On this day there is an obligation of affliction – "And you shall afflict your souls” – and the quantity of food for which a person incurs the punishment established in the Torah is a fixed amount (*shi'ur*) for everyone. When it comes to drink, however, the quantity for which one is punishable is "a mouthful" – a quantity that changes from one person to the next. The logic would seem to be that drinking is perceived as a physical need, and the amount that one needs to drink is a function of various physical indicators. Eating to satisfaction, in contrast, is a matter of culture, education, and cultural conventions, and it is possible that an adult and a child might be satisfied by the same quantity of food. (Indeed, the accepted situation at a meal with many participants is that there is a fixed portion for each participant, and yet everyone is satisfied.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Torah describes the scene as follows: "And it was on the sixth day that they gathered a double portion, two *omers* per person, and all the princes of the congregation came and they told it to Moshe" (ibid. 22). Moshe had commanded them, "Each person in accordance with his eating, an *omer* per person,” and they were not aware of God's command to Moshe concerning the sixth day – "And it shall be, on the sixth day, when they prepare that which they have brought, it shall be double what they gather daily" (ibid. 5). What prompted the people to gather a double portion? Seemingly, the people were taking another step in following the inner guidance that had overseen the gathering of the manna. Just like the gathering of "each person in accordance with his eating” produced the desired quantity – an *omer* per person – when it came to the sixth day, their gathering resulted in two *omers* per person. How did this come about? The text offers no explanation. It describes the gathering of two *omers* as though the action came to them naturally. The princes, with their higher status, as well as Moshe himself, were astonished: "He said to them, ‘This is that which God said; tomorrow is the rest of the holy Shabbat unto God. Bake that which you will bake [today], and that which you will boil – boil, and all that which remains over, leave for yourselves to keep until morning’" (ibid. 23). Moshe approves of what the people have done naturally, and notes the according of their actions with "that which God said." Attention should be paid to the datum provided further on, that on this day a double portion of manna is provided to them: "See that God has given you the Shabbat; therefore He gives you on the sixth day the bread of two days" (16:29). The doubled overall quantity of manna obviously corresponds to the double portion gathered by each individual. However, it should be noted that this datum appears in Moshe's speech only later; it may illuminate a new aspect of the people's behavior, but it is not presented as the ultimate explanation for the phenomenon. In the section on "And it shall be on the sixth day” below, we will examine another aspect of the people's motivation in gathering a double portion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Let us examine some of the qualities of the manna as reflected in the *aggadot* of *Chazal* (*Yoma* 75a). Many of these *midrashim* reflect a view of the manna and its significance as going far beyond its physical nourishing function. Over and over, they describe an encounter with morality and the values of justice and righteousness accompanying its distribution:

    "Another *beraita* taught: [The manna is described using the word] ‘*gad’* because it would tell [*magid*] Israel whether a child was one of nine months’ pregnancy from the first husband or of seven months’ [pregnancy] from the second. [The word] ‘white’ hints that it would whiten [cleanse] the sins of Israel." The *gemara* is describing the situation of a pregnant woman who was divorced or widowed and then remarried, and it is not clear whether her pregnancy is from her first husband or her second husband. The manna would fall at the tent of whoever was the father, and thus the question would be clarified.

    "It was taught: R. Yossi said: Just as a prophet would tell Israel what is to be found in clefts or holes, so the manna would reveal to Israel that which is to be found in clefts or holes. How was this so? If, for example, two men came before Moshe with a dispute, one saying: You have stolen my servant, and the other saying: You sold him to me, Moshe would say to them: Tomorrow judgment will be pronounced. The next day, if the slave's *omer* [of manna] was found in the house of his first master, it was evidence that the other one had stolen him; if it was found in the house of his second master, that was proof that the former had sold him to the latter." In this example, the manna fell in the slave's rightful place, rather than whichever place he actually was located. "Similarly, if a man and a woman came before Moshe with a suit, the man claiming: She was unfaithful me, and the woman asserting: He was unfaithful to me, Moshe would say to them: Tomorrow judgment will be pronounced. The next day, if the woman's *omer* was found at her husband's tent, this was proof that it was she who had been unfaithful, but if it was found in her father's house, that was evidence that her husband had been unfaithful." Here the manna serves as an arbitrator between husband and wife. As noted, the basis for these teachings is to be found in the plain meaning of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. From an exegetical perspective, the focus in this unit is the sixth day and its status as a day of preparation for Shabbat, rather than the Shabbat itself. This is reflected in the very first command in which God speaks of the sixth day: "And it shall be on the sixth day, when they prepare that which they have brought, it shall be double what they gather daily" (ibid. 5). Later on, the text describes the gathering of a double quantity on the sixth day, without the people knowing anything about Shabbat: "And it was on the sixth day that they gathered a double portion, two *omers* per person, and all the princes of the congregation came and they told it to Moshe" (22). The text also describes the uniqueness of Shabbat in that food from the previous day can be eaten from the previous day, the sixth day: "Moshe said, ‘Eat it [the remainder] today, for on this day you shall not find it [manna] in the field’" (ibid. 25). Most clearly, the message is conveyed in verse 29: "See that God has given you the Shabbat; therefore He gives you on the sixth day the bread of two days. Remain every man in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." [↑](#footnote-ref-16)