

## Kvetching

### Summary of Torah text relevant to theme

- God performs ten miracles and frees the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.
- The Israelites complain to Moses that Pharaoh is pursuing them and the sea is in front of them. God splits the sea.
- They go to Marah and complain that the water is bitter. Moses throws a tree in the water and it becomes sweet.
- They complain that they want meat and bread. God provides quail and manna.
- They complain because there is no water. God commands Moses to strike a stone to get water.

### Theme

Why are the Israelites complaining? Is it not clear that God is providing for everything time after time? Still, are their complaints not legitimate? So why are they being implicitly criticized for them? Are they supposed to expect (are WE supposed to expect) continuous miracles to get them out of trouble?

-Ben Gurion: We don't BELIEVE in miracles. We RELY on them.

### Torah text relevant to theme

#### Exodus, Chapter 14

10. Pharaoh drew near, and the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold! the Egyptians were advancing after them. They were very frightened, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord. 11. They said to Moses, Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? 12. Isn't this the thing [about] which we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, Leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert

- Midrash (Shmot Rabbah): They also complained about the mud on which they had to walk after the sea split open.

#### Exodus, Chapter 15

**22.** Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea, and they went out into the desert of Shur; they walked for three days in the desert but did not find water. **23.** They came to Marah, but they could not drink the waters from Marah because they were bitter; therefore, it was named Marah. **24.** The people complained against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? **25.** So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord instructed him concerning a piece of wood, which he cast into the water, and the water became sweet. There He gave them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them.

## **Exodus, Chapter 16**

**2.** The entire community of the children of Israel complained against Moses and against Aaron in the desert. **3.** The children of Israel said to them, If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by fleshpots, when we ate bread to our fill! For you have brought us out into this desert, to starve this entire congregation to death **4.** So the Lord said to Moses, Behold! I am going to rain down for you bread from heaven, and the people shall go out and gather what is needed for the day, so that I can test them, whether or not they will follow My teaching.

**11.** The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, **12.** I have heard the complaints of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, In the afternoon you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be sated with bread, and you shall know that I am the Lord, your God. **13.** It came to pass in the evening that the quails went up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. **14.** The layer of dew went up, and behold, on the surface of the desert, a fine, bare [substance] as fine as frost on the ground. **15.** When the children of Israel saw [it], they said to one another, It is manna, because they did not know what it was, and Moses said to them, It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

## **Exodus, Chapter 17**

**1.** The entire community of the children of Israel journeyed from the desert of Sin to their travels by the mandate of the Lord. They encamped in Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. **2.** So the people quarreled with Moses, and they said, Give us water that we may drink. Moses said to them, Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? **3.** The people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and they said, Why have you brought us up from Egypt to make me and my children and my livestock die of thirst? **4.** Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, What shall I do for this people? Just a little longer and they will stone me! **5.** And the Lord said to Moses, Pass before the people and take with you [some] of the elders of Israel, and take into your hand your staff, with which you struck the Nile, and go. **6.** Behold, I shall stand there before you on the rock in Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, and the people will drink. Moses did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel. **7.** He named the place Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling] because of the quarrel of the children of Israel and because of their testing the Lord, saying, Is the Lord in our midst or not?

## **Why are the Israelites complaining? Four explanations:**

- **Jews love to complain.** However:
  - It is not as if one or two Hebrews complained once. The entire congregation rose up against Moses four times.
  - It's more than just complaints
    - Sarcasm, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert?"
    - Deep suspicion, "For you have brought us out into this desert, to starve this entire congregation to death"; "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to make me and my children and my livestock die of thirst?"

- Preferring slavery to uncertainty, “Leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert”
  - Notes
    - Jewish proverb: If God lived on earth, all His windows would be broken.
    - Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, always complained to God
    - Complaining is good and the source of Jewish greatness: Being unhappy is the condition of progress in any field. Heschel: “All that is creative stems from a seed of endless discontent”.
- **It’s a character flaw** of this particular generation: They were never happy. (Kotsker Rebbe)
- **The Israelites still had a slave mentality.** Slaves have everything provided for them. They may lack freedom, but they also have very little worry.
  - God decides not to take the Israelites via the land of the Philistines, “lest they get scared by war and return to Egypt” (13:17-18). Rather, he takes them by the Reed Sea, a circuitous route. However, this is exactly what happens anyway! The Israelites *do* face the Egyptian army at the Reed Sea and *do* ask to return to Egypt! (14:11-12). And they have to face Amalek in battle also.
    - So why bother avoiding the “short cut” through the Philistines in the first place?
    - Why *should* the Israelites fear war? After all, they are 600,000 strong, and armed. And they know they will have to fight their way into the Promised Land.
    - Why the complaining after the splitting of the Sea? Didn’t God just perform a whole bunch of miracles for them?
  - All three questions have one answer – God is breaking their slave mentality
  - Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun: God takes them by the Reed Sea to put them in military conflict with Egypt, so they won’t look to Egypt for assistance in the future. The Israelites feared war because but it is inconceivable to slaves to rise up against their masters.
  - Rabbi Menachem Leibtag says that *Beshallah* is about liberating the Israelites from the slave mentality.
- **It’s the voice of fear.** Ex14:15: The Lord said to Moses, Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel.
  - But Moses *doesn’t* cry out to God. If Moses *was* crying to God off text, what was He asking for? Not for instructions, because God tells him, in so many words, to “Quit crying and get going.”
    - Sforno: Moses was afraid he would not be able to get the Israelites to do THEIR PART in the miracle, and was asking God how to handle them. **So God is rebuking Moses for not seeing that the children of Israel are merely venting their fears and that Moses is hearing the voice of fear as opposed to the voice of rebellion.** God is rebuking Moses for not being able to tell the difference between the two. God says, so to speak, “I can split the sea, but you, Moses, have to bring them across and in order to do that, you must know your people. This is not something that I will do for you.”

instead of realizing that "it was only the fear talking." Remember, Moses never knew slavery. He has yet to become part of the people he is required to lead. God tells him, in order for this people to do what I tell them, you have to know their hearts. This was Moses' challenge and the criterion by which he was judged.