

## Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

### Are We There Yet?

Someone once asked me, 'Aren't road trips with your kids just amazing?' I answered, 'If by 'amazing', you mean better than being locked in a room with mosquitoes, then I agree.' For the record I hate mosquitoes! The worst torture possible is that whirring sound they make near your ears before sucking your blood. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, 'A mosquito takes on a personality - a hatefulness, a sinister quality of the struggle to the death.' Yeah, that's the way I feel, too, it's her or me (It's the females who bite). But I'm just using those agents of Satan as a metaphor for the trauma of travel. Well, one can't really understand the vicissitudes of voyages without studying this week's Torah reading.

Parshat B'ha'alot'cha has a dual personality. From Bamidbar 8:1 to the end of chapter 10, the sedra presents an idyllic picture of the Israelite camp. All is ordered and content. This precipitously changes at the beginning of chapter 11. It reminds one of the beginning of the William Tell Overture (not the Lone Ranger part), when the opening pastoral scene is shattered by a massive storm. It's the suddenness of

the deluge which shakes us. So, too, here all the organized and confident planning is destroyed in an instant.

This impending fiasco is foreshadowed by the last verses before the disaster descends: And it was, when the ark set out, that Moshe said, 'Rise up, Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let them that hate You flee before You.' And when it rested, he said, 'Return, Lord, to the multitude of thousands of Israel (Bamidbar 10:35-36).' We recognize those verses from the davening when we take out and replace the Torah into the ark. But here it's a fervent prayer that God should disperse the difficulties and adversities to be encountered in their trek. And then settle down with us when we move into our permanent home.

This famous prayer has backwards letters NUN before and after. Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi actually suggests that these two verses are so significant that they constitute a separate book of our Tanach. Less dramatically, I would suggest that this material is meant as a sign of the changing mood of Sefer Bamidbar. However, it's also informing us about the reality that travel for a massive group entails huge impediments (from the Latin for 'shackled feet', again hinting at the travails of travel). I remember the TV series Wagon Train, as it presented the difficulties encountered by those traveling West in search of better

lives. I'll wager that Sinai is tougher than the American Plains.

Chapter 11 brings the deluge: And the people became nasty complainers (verse 1). This first verse is full of whining. The abruptness of the change is unnerving. Rav Soloveitchik commented: Whenever I read this parsha, it affects me... Sometimes, I want to cry... Moshe was so certain that he is going to enter the promised Land... Then a great tragedy happened. This triumphal final march came to a stop. They don't violate the prohibition of AVODA ZARA (idolatry), but they adopted the pagan way of life. And the Torah hated the pagan way of life more than it did the idol (Thinking Aloud: Bamidbar, p. 47-49).

What does the Rav mean? There is no mention of idolatry in our parsha. What is this 'pagan way of life'? The description of the Jews' behavior in the story of the SLAV (quail) he avers is a description of pagan life style. 'Now a wind went out from God and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to a meter (2 AMOT) deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than 50 bushels (others: 1.75 tons, verses 31:32)'.  
Wow!

The Rav goes on to explain that this is the opposite of the MAHN, concerning which it says: Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an OMER (about a kilo and a half) for each person you have in your tent. The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the OMER, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed (Sh'mot 16:16-18).

Please, don't think the Torah's telling us that pagans are rich and we are poor. It's not that at all. The Rav says: A people which rejected the basic principle of economic limitedness and aesthetic enjoyment are not worthy of entering the Land (p. 51).

This helps us to understand the incident of Eldad & Meidad (Bamidbar 11:26-30). These two were prophesying in the camp, and Yehoshua was very upset. Why? Because they announced that Moshe would not go into the Land. But Moshe wasn't upset. He already knew.

Here in Israel there is a custom on Yom HaZikaron to recite Psalm 9. It's because this is King David's lament after the death of his son. But I'd like to point out that it contains the following verse: Those who know Your name trust in You, for You, God,

have never forsaken those who seek You (verse 10). I hope some of you recognize that as the penultimate verse in the UVA L'TZIYON, recited every day. We start every weekday announcing to God and ourselves that we have BITACHON (trust) in Him. That's what evaporated when the Jews began their trek in the trackless wilderness.

It's true, travel can be a bummer. But we (and Moshe Rabbeinu) expected more of the Jews who had experienced the Exodus. It's like the verse described: when the Ark set out, that Moshe said, 'Rise up, God, and let Your enemies be scattered'. When you travel for spiritual purposes, have faith in God's protection. But bring bug spray. 🦟