

בְּהַעֲלֹתָךְ

B'HAALOT'CHA/IN THE LIFTING UP Bemidbar/Numbers 8:1-12:26

The book of **Vayikra** contained many **commandments** concerning **loving Elohim, loving others, and instructions for holiness**. Now, the book of **Bemidbar** will give an account of the **children of Israel** in their **attempt to serve יהוה**. Sometimes they **addressed their problems head-on**, but other times they gave in to **frustration**. This week we find them once again, **complaining bitterly**. יהוה is quick to **respond**:

***Bemidbar 11:1** Now when the people complained, it displeased יהוה; for יהוה heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of יהוה burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp.*

This is **not the first time** we read of the **Israelites complaining in the wilderness**. Earlier in **Shemot**, we read this:

***Shemot 16:3** And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of יהוה in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*

יהוה responded in this instance, **not with fire** but **with manna** from heaven!

***Shemot 16:4** Then יהוה said to Moshe, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you..."*

In another instance, when the people were **complaining at Rephidim** that they were **dying of thirst**, יהוה responded with **water from the rock**:

***Shemot 17:2** Therefore the people contended with Moshe, and said, "Give us water, that we may drink." ...³ And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moshe, and said, "Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"⁴ So Moshe cried out to יהוה, saying, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!"⁵ And יהוה said to Moshe, ...⁶ "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink."...*

And there's more. Remember at **Marah** when they complained to Moshe that the **water was bitter and undrinkable**? יהוה didn't become **angry**. Instead **He told Moshe how to make the waters sweet**:

***Shemot 15:23** Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah.²⁴ And the people complained against Moshe, saying, "What shall we drink?"²⁵ So he cried out to יהוה, and יהוה showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet...*

When יהוה had **responded** with such **understanding and generosity** in the above instances in **Shemot**, why did He **react so differently** in our parasha in **Bemidbar**? There are **two basic differences** between the **complaints** in **Shemot and Bemidbar**:

1. **Timing** – The stories in **Shemot** took place only **days after they left Egypt**. They were still not accustomed to their **new freedom** and **every difficulty** was a **challenge**. The story in **Bemidbar**, by contrast, took place “*in the second year in the second month*” (Bemidbar 10:11). This is **after** they **received the Torah** from **Mt. Sinai** and **after** the **Tabernacle** was raised. One would **expect** them to have reached a much **higher level of trust** by this time. Instead of “**complaining**”, they were “**like complainers**”. This is more obvious in **Young’s Literal Translation** of 11:1:

Bemidbar 11:1 And the people is evil, as those sighing habitually (כְּנִיחֵי אֲנִיִּים) in the ears of יהוה, and יהוה heareth, and His anger burneth,

2. **Circumstances** – **Before** the **manna** rained down from heaven, they were truly **fearful of dying of hunger**. The incidents in **Shemot** also reflect a **legitimate thirst**. What we have in our current parasha is **not a shortage of food** or a **fear of starvation**, but a “**lust**” for “**meat**”.

Bemidbar 11:4 Now the rabble who were among them lusted greatly; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat?"

Now we can begin to **understand** why the Almighty reacted so **differently** in **Bemidbar 11**. When the **Israelites** had some **rationale behind their complaints**, יהוה reacted with **kindness and long-suffering**. But when they became **chronic complainers**, He became **angry**. I believe the **Yiddish** for this type of **complaining** is “**kevetching**”!

Not only did they **lust for meat**, but they **verbally attacked the “manna”**!

Bemidbar 11:6 "but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!"

They also made a **strange comment** referring to “**free fish**” in **Egypt**:

Bemidbar 11:5 "We remember the fish which we used to eat, free in Egypt..."

The **ancient sages** tell us that “**free**” meant that the **food** was “**free from mitzvot**” (**free from commandments**). In other words, **now** the **Israelites** were **obligated to observe the commandments**, as their **sustenance** was dependent upon **keeping the Torah**:

Devarim 11:13 ' And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love יהוה your Elohim and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,¹⁴ 'then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil.

So...a **larger picture** is forming here. The **people** are beginning to **rebel against the Torah system of commandments!** So **why** did they **attack the manna?** Because this was the **miraculous provision** that the Father had chosen for them to **eat according to the Torah.** They **rejected the manna** (i.e. **Torah commandments**) and **complained for meat!** This is likely the **reason** why the **Torah** inserts here the verses on the **goodness of the manna:**

***Bemidbar 11:7** Now the **manna** was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium.⁸ The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil.⁹ And when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it.*

They ask for **meat**, and the **Almighty** decides to **comply** with their **unreasonable request.** We know that their **problem** really wasn't about **food.** It is interesting that the **Hebrew** word for "**meat**", **בָּשָׂר** (basar), is also the word for "**flesh**". The "**flesh**" is often used as the **opposite** of "**spirit**", so **what** was it exactly that they were **asking for?** Did they **prefer** the "**world**" (**flesh**) over the "**spirit**"? When **יהוה** gave them **more "basar"** (**meat/flesh**) than they **needed,** **what** may He have been **trying to teach them?** And **what** is the **connection** in **chapter 11** between the **70 appointed elders** and the **flesh/meat?**

What we're going to learn is **how יהוה builds community** when there are "**issues**". The **Scriptures** often use **wordplay** and **repetition.** As **Richard Elliot Friedman** points out in his book *Commentary on the Torah,* **chapters 11 and 12** of **Bemidbar** repeat a form of the verb "**asaf**" (**אַסַּף**) **nine times.** Its **basic meaning** is "**to gather**", and following the word takes us through a **range of contexts,** from the **self-absorbed concerns of complaining troublemakers** to the **embracing generosity of a loving community.** In **Chapter 11,** we see a form of "**asaf**" as it takes on a **sinister connotation,** involving **people coming together to rebel against Moshe's authority:**

***Bemidbar 11:4** And the **rabble** (**רַב־עַמִּי**) who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "**Who will give us flesh** (**basar** - **בָּשָׂר**) to eat?"*

Three other instances in **chapter 11** have **negative connotations.** In context, we see **people "gathering"** (**asaf** - **אַסַּף**) large numbers of **quail** which they were **ravenously eager to eat immediately:**

***Bemidbar 11:22** "Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be **gathered** (**אַסַּף**) together for them, to provide enough for them?"*

***Bemidbar 11:32** And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and **gathered** (**אַסַּף**) the quail (he who gathered least **gathered** [**אַסַּף**] ten homers); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.*

The last **five** instances of "**asaf**" (**אַסַּף**) used in **chapters 11 and 12** are all **used positively.** Two relate to the "**gathering**" of the **70 elders** who will **share the burden of leadership with Moshe** by **receiving** some of his **spirit (ruach):**

Bemidbar 11:16 So יהוה said to Moshe: "**Gather** (אָסַף) to Me **seventy men** of the **elders of Israel**, whom you know to be **the elders of the people** and officers over them...

Bemidbar 11:24 So Moshe went out and told the people the words of יהוה, and he **gathered** (אָסַף) the **seventy men of the elders of the people** and placed them around the tabernacle.

The **third** of the **positive five usages** of “asaf”, is **unusual Hebrew phrasing** as Moshe reenters the **camp** after his conversation with יהוה:

Bemidbar 11:30 And Moshe is **gathered** (אָסַף) to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.

The usage of “asaf” in 11:30 will **parallel** the last two instances of its use as it refers to **Miriam** being “gathered” back into the camp following her **punishment**:

Bemidbar 12:14 Then יהוה said to Moshe, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterwards she is **gathered** (אָסַף)." ¹⁵ So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey till Miriam is **gathered** (אָסַף).

Both Moshe and Miriam are “gathered” (אָסַף) into what now appears to be a **cohesive and unified camp**. How did this **unity** happen? To answer this question, let’s go back to **chapter 10** to catch the **first time** “asaf” is used in our parasha:

Bemidbar 10:25 Then the standard of the camp of the children of Dan (the **rear guard** [אָסַף] of all the camps) set out according to their armies...

The **tribe of Dan** is referred to as “m’asaf”, the “rear guard”. Rashi explains that **Dan’s task** was to “gather” (asaf) up lost objects, returning them to their owners. They also “gathered” (asaf) **individuals** who had become lost or had fallen behind. Put this **first usage** of “asaf” in **Bemidbar 10:25** together with its **final usage** in **12:15**, where it refers to **Miriam**. Both refer to acts of “gathering” (asaf) that are **generous, compassionate, and inclusive**. The **tribe of Dan** ensures that **no one is left behind**. At the **other end**, a **community reintegrates** an **outcast** (**Miriam** – her name means “rebellion”). **Between** these **two**, we read of the “gatherings” of people who are **self-centered** and **ungrateful**. But the **result of kindness** (**Dan**) and **forgiveness** (of **Miriam/rebellion**) “gathers” (asaf) **all of Israel back together**.

Now, changing directions, let’s focus on the “asaf” (gathering) of the **70 elders**. The “gathering” (asaf) of the **elders** represents the **beginning** of יהוה’s response to the **Israelite’s request for “flesh”/meat**.

The **Hebrew** word for **meat/“flesh”** (בָּשָׂר - basar) is often **juxtaposed** with the word for “spirit” (רוּחַ - ruach). It is the “spirit” (ruach - רוּחַ) that **breathes life** into the “flesh” (basar - בָּשָׂר). In our reading, “flesh”/meat (basar - בָּשָׂר) refers to **consumption**. We find it in the **people’s request**:

Bemidbar 11:4 And the **rabble** (*asaf*) who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "**Who will give us flesh (*basar* - בָּשָׂר) to eat?**"

“Flesh” and “spirit” are **opposites**. This is why we see the **incident** of the **craving of meat/“flesh” side by side** with the **placing of the “spirit” upon the 70 elders**:

Bemidbar 11:17 "Then I will come down and talk with you there. **I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone.**

יהוה's response to the **craving of “flesh”** is to take some of **Moshe's “spirit”** and **place** it on the **70 elders**. This will **distribute a broader Mosaic leadership** amongst the people. These **elders** are **authentic representatives of the nation** (11:16 – “elders of the people”). Thus, in the midst of the people, they will be able to **lead the nation to follow Moshe** (i.e. **Torah**) instead of **yielding** to the **temptation of following the “rabble”** (*asaf*). **Bemidbar 11:24** says that יהוה caused them to “**stand around the Tabernacle** (represents the **unity of יהוה's people**)”. What a **plan!**

There are also a couple of interesting verses about **two others** who **received the “spirit”** within the **camp**, but had **not gone out to the Tabernacle**:

Bemidbar 11:26 *But two men had remained in the camp: the name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them. Now they were among those listed, but who had not gone out to the tabernacle; yet they prophesied in the camp.*²⁷ *And a young man ran and told Moshe, and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."*²⁸ *So Yehoshua the son of Nun, Moshe's assistant, one of his choice men, answered and said, "Moshe my lord, forbid them!"*²⁹ *Then Moshe said to him, "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all Adonai's people were prophets and that יהוה would put His Spirit upon them!"*

יהוה's goal in **placing the “spirit”** onto the **70** was to **strengthen the “spirit” of the nation** by forming a **group of spiritual people** who would **prophecy** and thereby **influence those lusting after the “flesh”**. Therefore He answers Yehoshua, “**Are you zealous for Me?**” יהוה wanted **ALL** to have the **right heart** that **they might receive the “spirit”**. We also note that **not everything happens according to OUR expectation**. After this little scenario, we read the verse that says that **Moshe** was “**gathered**” (*asaf*) into the **camp**:

Bemidbar 11:30 And Moshe is **gathered** (*asaf*) to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.

All are “**gathered**” **back to the camp** for the **same purpose** – to **influence, educate and serve** those who are of a “**fleshy**” attitude by bringing the “**spirit of prophecy**” to them. And where do we find this “**spirit of prophecy**”?

Revelation 19:10 ... Worship Yah! For the testimony of Yeshua is the **spirit of prophecy**.

The “**harvest of souls**”, pointed to by the concepts of “**gathering**” (asaf) and “**spirit**” is also pictured so beautifully in the **Feast of Sukkot**, called not by coincidence...the **Feast of “Ingathering”** (תְּשׁוּבָה):

*Shemot 23:16 "and the **Feast of Harvest**, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the **Feast of Ingathering** (תְּשׁוּבָה) at the end of the year, when you have **gathered** (תְּשׁוּבָה) in the fruit of your labors from the field.*

From our parasha, we see that it is ה'’s intention to “**gather**” (asaf) **His people**, despite their **longing for “flesh”**. He will even do this by **giving them** what they **want...more “flesh”**. Yet, He will **position Moshe and His representatives of the nations (70 elders)** in the **midst of His people** to **spread more of the “spirit” of Moshe/Torah/Yeshua**. Others, like **Eldad and Medad**, whose names mean “**El has loved**” and “**loving**”, will **also catch the “spirit” of Moshe/Torah/Yeshua**. This is all part of the “**gathering**” (asaf) process which **culminates at the Feast of “Ingathering”** (asaf).

The **Brit Chadasha** tells us we must be **born again** to come **out from under the “flesh”** (basar) and be of the “**spirit**” (ruach):

*John 3:6 "That which is **born of the flesh** is flesh, and that which is **born of the Spirit** is spirit.*

John 6:63 "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.

Romans 8 is also a little **midrash** on this **Torah** concept:

Romans 8:5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.⁶ For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.⁷ Because the carnal mind is enmity against Yah; for it is not subject to the Torah of Yah, nor indeed can be.⁸ So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please Yah.

The “**Spirit**” will **prevail** over the “**flesh**” and we will see this in the **final “gathering”** (asaf) when the **desire** will not be for the “**flesh**”/meat, but for the “**water of life**”!

Revelation 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

Shabbat Shalom!

Ardelle