

Rebellion in the Wilderness

As the Book of Numbers relates the Israelites' epic wilderness journey, episodes of rebellion and conflict emerge. With the help of traditional Jewish wisdom, let's explore an aspect of the rebellion in chapter 11. With the sages we ask: what is the real significance of the people's complaints over their craving for meat? We also consider the character of Moses in both his fragility and strength. We begin with the Israelites' complaint:

"Who will give us meat to eat?" (11:4)

Observe how Moses relays this complaint to God:

"Where should I (get) meat to give to this entire people, when they weep on me, saying: Give us meat so that we may eat!" (11:13)

Does Moses communicate the complaint accurately? What contradiction do you notice?

Actually, the people are not weeping to Moses. In fact, the cry of *'who will give us meat?'* implies that there is no one who can help, that they consider themselves leaderless. Worse, nowhere in their outburst do we hear any attempt to place their trust in God; they look elsewhere for their sustenance. This, say the Jewish sages, is what angers God: their grumbling amounts to idolatry. (See, too, how the psalmist recalls this event in Ps. 78:18-19.) Instead of being grateful that God feeds them with manna, the people bitterly and undermine the evidence of God's action in their lives. Further, this loss of confidence is systemic. Remember all that counting of clans in the opening chapter of Numbers? Well, now they are *'weeping by their clans'* (v.10); not only the *'riffraff'* on the camp's outskirts but the entire *'Children of Israel'* (v.4).

The maternal imagery in Moses' prayer is striking. As he cries out to God in grief (11:11-15), the images of conception, birth and suckling suggest the intimate depths of Moses' relationship with Israel. He leads not an organisation but *a people* formed by blood ties and divine election, a relationship both familial and spiritual. Like a parent he hurts when his

children hurt. Further, his words suggest that God, not Moses, is the real mother of Israel.

God's anger in this event is directed at the people rather than Moses. Why not Moses? After all, he too is having words with God. Hasn't the grumbling spread though the Israelite ranks right to the top, affecting Moses himself (not to mention Miriam and Aaron as we read later in chapter 12)? Look closely at the text. Despite Moses' suffering and remonstrations, he maintains his relationship with God, calling himself *'your servant'* (11:11). He doesn't cry out *'Poor me!'* to the air; he cries out *to God*, speaking directly and honestly about his pain.

"I am not able, myself alone, to carry this entire people, for it is too heavy for me!" (Num. 11:14).

The *'ill-fortune'* which causes Moses to prefer death is not the lack of meat but grief over the people's rebellion, and a sense of having failed them. And if it seems that Moses doubts God's willingness to respond to the people's plight, in fact verse 12 leaves no room for doubt that Moses knows exactly who is Israel's real parent. If it was not Moses who *'conceived'* and *'gave birth'* to this people, then who did? The clear implication is that God did.

Moses' heartfelt plea to God reminds us that even the *'greats'* of the Bible struggled and went through periods where they experienced their faith, mission and community/family as a burden. Yet they kept talking to God. No matter how tumultuous the relationship, they maintained it. How do we relate to God in difficult times? Continue to ponder this Torah text in view of your experience of community and leadership. •

Sources: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York, n.p.d.).
Scripture: Fox.

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