



WALK THROUGH

THE PARSHA

WITH RABBI DAVID WALK

Faculty, OU Israel

The Joys of Travel

Did you ever notice that travel looks best from the vantage point of one's living room? When you're actually out there on the road, or worse on the plane, being back home often looks very attractive. Of course, now that travel plans are all on hold, we're all depressed that we can't go on that vacation. I can't speak for anyone else, but I don't think I'm getting on a plane until there's a vaccine. Bottom line: whether we're home or on the road, we tend to complain. And if you like complaining, this week's Torah reading is for you.

This week's parsha is a tale of two mind sets. The prospect of traveling forward toward the Promised Land at the beginning of the parsha looks amazing. There are trumpets and flags. When the Holy Ark of the Covenant is readied to move, there is triumphant singing. It all seems amazing, until they actually set out.

The very first verse after departure is extremely disappointing: And the people complained (murmured, grumbled) bitterly about their hardships, and God was displeased (11:1). This description

of the take-off is a very unclear verse, indeed. What hardships? What bothered God? Rashi dispatches the entire problem by saying that the complainers were a distinct group of wicked folk, not mainstream Jews. I'm glad that Rashi didn't know normal, non-evil Jews who were complainers.

The Sforno seems to have known real Jews who complained. He suggests that this group was complaining about the travails of travel. They probably had kids. The Bachur Shor had a very reasonable, but very disturbing idea. He assumed that were concerned about the prospect of entering Israel soon and going to war. They were afraid to die in battle.

Rabbeinu Bechaye reasonably maintains that the complaints had to do with the harsh conditions of the desert. These people had spent their whole lives near the banks of the Nile, described as a veritable 'vegetable garden (Devarim 11:10).' Now they're traveling across a dangerous desert. The anger of God in this scenario is that the Jews had so quickly lost the optimistic and even joyous spirit of just a few days earlier, when they departed from the camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

Personally, I'm not sure what the complaint was. All these opinions have

great merit, but as a parent and teacher, I think I know what angered God, as we'll soon see. There are legitimate complaints and there are reasonable ways of complaining. The book of Bamidbar deals with many complaints. It's almost a subtheme of the volume. And they have already seen how to complain correctly.

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Earlier in this week's Torah reading, there are Jews who approach Moshe Rabbeinu, and rightfully claim: We are ceremonially unclean because of touching a dead body. Why are we being restrained from presenting the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the Israelites? (Bamidbar 9:7). These people have a legitimate complaint. They performed the mitzva of caring for a deceased member of the nation (according to the Midrash, they were carrying the bones of Yosef for reburial in Eretz Yisrael), and now are being barred, for technical reasons, from bringing the Korban Pesach, Paschal Lamb. It doesn't seem fair.

No problem! God instructs Moshe to announce a brand new mitzva and observance: Pesach Sheni. From now on, there will be an assigned make-up date for anyone who technically can't bring the Korban Pesach in its proper time, and it will be the 14th of Iyar, one month later

than the normal date. Problem solved; everyone's happy.

Why didn't this happen when the Jews complained a few days out from Mt. Sinai?

Simple, they didn't follow the previous example of coming before Moshe and reasonably laying out their grievance. Why didn't they? I wasn't there, but I think that they were suffering from the harsh circumstances, and didn't think through their complaint. Instead, their behavior smacked of rebellion and, because it was against God, heresy or, perhaps, blasphemy.

Why was the response so harsh and quick? I believe, because now they're in the army. They're preparing to enter the Land of Israel and fight for their birthright. This kind of immature behavior is no longer to be tolerated. Emergencies, wars, pandemics require discipline. God is instilling it into the nation.

The lessons here are eternal and crucial. There are respectful and proper ways to lodge complaints, and there are circumstances which require strict discipline. The nation was young, but couldn't act like children in the face of grave dangers. The bad news is we still must put up with children in the back-seat whining, 'Are we there yet?' The good news is that we have every right to expect them to grow into responsible members of the Jewish people, who will learn how to lodge legitimate complaints.

Ah, so when are we all going to grow up? ■