



EXCUSES: THEIR MEANING & TRUE SOURCE

TIRED OF CARRYING THEIR BURDENS

In this week's *parsha* we confront an episode that transpired in the *midbar* which was a pretty surprising episode. Whilst it was surprising, it was also very revealing. The Torah tells us the following: *the people complained bitterly before Hashem* - ויהי העם כמתאננים רע באזני ה' ותאכל בקצה וישמע ה' ויחר אפו ותבער במ אש ה' ותאכל בקצה (Bamidbar 11:1). The passuk continues: *and Hashem heard their complaints and the fire of Hashem devoured the complainers, the outsiders*. This is a very important *pasuk* that sheds a lot of light, and it teaches us a lot about ourselves.

First it says, ויהי העם. Who was the *am*? The “*am*” refers to the complainers. It does not say *כמתאננים*, it says *ויהי העם*. *Am* is a term that is used for the *resha'im* of the *nation*.¹

What does it mean “like complainers”? Rashi says: *אין מתאננים אלא לשון עלילה*, the word *מתאננים* means finding a reason in order to be contentious. *מבקשים עלילה*, they were seeking to get into a contention with the Ribbono Shel Olam. For what reason? *האיך לפרוש מאחרי המקום* - in order to distance themselves from Hashem.² Therefore, they began to talk about the *tirchah*, the difficulties of the way. That they complained is unbelievable. Then it says *רע באזני ה'* - it was evil in the eyes of Hashem. That means they did not complain quietly, or inside themselves. They actually raised their voices and voiced their complaints, in order *שמתכוונים*; they intended, *שתבא באזניו*, it should come to Hashem's “ears,” and it should cause pain.³ They tried to start up with Hashem. They said: *שלא נחנו מענוי*, *לא נחנו מענוי*, שלא נחנו מענוי, שלא נחנו מענוי, שלא נחנו מענוי - “Oy, woe unto us that we are already tired out from this *derech*, that we went for three days and we did not rest from the affliction of the *derech*.” They complained about that. And Hashem got angry. Why did Hashem get angry? He said, *אני אמרו אוי לנו כמה לבטנו בדרך הזה שלשה ימים, שלא נחנו מענוי*, *אני אמרו אוי לנו כמה לבטנו בדרך הזה שלשה ימים, שלא נחנו מענוי*, שלא נחנו מענוי, שלא נחנו מענוי - “My intention was for your benefit.” I wanted you to get to Eretz Yisrael *miyad* (immediately) and you are complaining about the *tovah* that I am doing for you, as if it is *ra*? So HaKadosh Baruch Hu sent forth a fire, *ותאכל בקצה*, *ותאכל בקצה*, and it devoured them. What does *בקצה המחנה* mean? *בקצה* means at the edge (or in the extremity) of the *machaneh*. Why were the ones who were at the edge of the *machaneh* punished more than the ones who were in the center of the *machaneh*? Rashi says “the edge” is a *mashal* that means the *aish* devoured those who were *לשפלות*, the people who were “extreme” in their baseness chose to distance themselves. Who were those? *אלו ערב רב* - the mixed multitude.⁵

WHO ARE YOU REALLY COMPLAINING TO?

There are many lessons found in this passuk. The first lesson is that the Torah tells us in every situation a person can find himself dissatisfied. Throughout your life you will notice that people are dissatisfied. They complain over the *matzav* that they are in. You have one person who is complaining about the family he comes from. Another person complains about the yeshivah he went to. Another person complains about the person he or she married. There are people who complain about their children. People complain about their rebbeim and rabbanim. People complain about their neighborhood. Everybody always thinks that their complaint is coming from a genuine lack of comfort, “I am not comfortable.” The Torah tells us, “Let me introduce you to yourself.”

When people go into a complaint mode, especially where what they are experiencing is not a *ra'ah* but it may be even a *tovah* for them, they have to know why they do that. *What they are seeking, is to distance themselves from the thing they are complaining about*. A husband who is complaining about a wife when there is nothing to complain about, is trying to create distance. The person who complains to Hashem about his wife is trying to tell Hashem, “You see, I know that when it comes to finding my wife *מהי יצא הדבר*, but I want You to know, Hashem, that I am very unhappy with what You gave me.

¹ רש"י ד"ה "ויהי העם כמתאננים": אין העם אלא רשעים, וכן הוא אומר "מה אעשה לעם הזה" (שמות י"ז), ואומר "העם הזה הרע" (ירמיהו י"א); ויבא העם כשירים קרואים "עמי", שנקמר "שלא עמי" (שמות ח' ט"ז), "עמי מה עשיתי לך" (מכה ו')

² רש"י ד"ה "כמתאננים": אין מתאננים אלא לשון עלילה - מבקשים עלילה לפרש מאחרי המקום, וכן הוא אומר בשמשון (שופטים י"ד), "כי תאנה הוא מבקש" (ספרי)

³ רש"י ד"ה "רע באזני ה'": תואנה שהיא רעה באזני ה', שמתכוונים שתבא באזניו ויקניט, אמרו: אוי לנו, כמה לבטנו בדרך הזה, שלשה ימים שלא נחנו מענוי הדרך

⁴ רש"י ד"ה "ויחר אפו": אני הייתי מתפון לטובתכם - שתפנסו לארץ מנד

⁵ רש"י ד"ה "בקצה המחנה": במקצו שבהם לשפלות, אלו ערב רב, רבי שמעון בן מנסיא אומר, בקצינים שבהם ובגדולים (עיי ספרי)

I am very unhappy with the family You put me in. I am very unhappy with the *parnassah* You gave me. I am very unhappy with this thing that You gave me. I am very unhappy with that thing that You gave me.”

There is one guy who knows inside himself that he has a complaint, but he knows he should be happy with what he has, “I should appreciate what I have.” Then you have the person who tells people about his complaints. You know what they think? “Oh, he’s just expressing himself.” You should know - that is called talking against Hashem! Here is a person who finds himself in a relationship, or in a job, or in a yeshivah, and he is feeling a little pressure to become better. His wife is telling him, “Why don’t you learn more? You should go to more classes, you should go to more *shiurim*. You don’t have *chavrusos*. You were a yeshivah *bochur*,” she tells him. The guy feels the pressure so he says, “Hashem, this is what you give me? This is what I have to deal with?!” He starts making all kinds of excuses. That fellow is trying to distance himself from Hashem. When he goes to his friend, he says, “Did you hear what my wife told me?” He is complaining. That fellow is trying to tell Hashem, “I am not interested. I want to distance myself from You and my wife.”

You have a person who complains about the way people behave and dress in a yeshivah. People complain about it. Do you know how many people have told me, “Ah, *tzitzis*, it makes me so hot.” But the same *shoteh* will put on a sweatshirt and then put a hoodie over his head as if he is sitting *shivah* and he wants to be *be’aveilus* and cover up his head, and the guy all of a sudden is comfortable with that! People have complaints, and what they are trying to say is: “I want to get away from these people, I want to get away from Hashem.” Such a person becomes *muktzeh* (set aside). *Muktzeh* means you become separated from the people.

NO HEAVENLY PRESSURES

It is unbelievable to imagine that people who experienced *kabbalas haTorah* complained. These people made up such *bobbe maasehs* against Hashem. The passuk says that one of the things they complained about was: זכרנו את הדגה - אשר נאכל במצרים חנם - *we remember the fish that we used to eat for free in Mitzrayim* (Bamidbar 11:5). Mitzrayim was such a pleasure! We were used to eating fish! There was water, there was the Nile. We used to make these fish fries. What a pleasure it was! They had these fish parties. Rashi says, fish? What kind of fish? They didn’t even give them straw to do their labor, you think they gave them fish? You think they gave them fish if they wouldn’t give them straw? What does it mean that they ate fish for free? They said, “We remember the fish that we ate in Mitzrayim *chinam*.” Rashi says חנם מן המצות.⁶ They had no mitzvos in Mitzrayim (i.e. without us having been burdened with mitzvos). The newly-given mitzvos were creating the pressure; that is what was bothering them!

Could you imagine to what extent a person does not even begin to know himself? Most people do not know themselves and therefore they live in a world of excuses. Here they said: מי יאכילנו בשר - *who will feed us meat* (Bamidbar 11:4). Rashi asks again, they didn’t have *bassar*?! They had plenty of *bassar*! The Bnei Reuven had tons of cattle, they had no shortage of *bassar*. Says Rashi: אלא שמבקשים עלילה.⁷ They wanted to complain about the *man*. When a person wants to complain, they make up absolute *bobbeh maasehs*. They complained because they really sought an עלילה - a pretext to abandon Hashem.

ACCEPTING OUR LOT

Every one of us has to look into his own life and ask himself: do I accept the place, the situation, the challenges that Hashem has given me? Because life by definition means ordeals. Life by definition means challenges. The challenges are always challenges of growth. They are always challenges of commitment. Will I commit? Or do I fall back to my lowest denominator. Do I say, “I don’t want to push myself, I don’t want to climb that mountain, I don’t want to grow. I don’t want ordeals and ultimately, I don’t want Hashem?” Because you must realize there is no ordeal that is not from Hashem. I am talking about real ordeals. And if a person is complaining about his life and about his situation, that person for sure is disattached and he is not aware of reality.

You have to know the following. A person should understand that life is a series of ordeals, and it goes against his grain, and it goes against his weakest point. The goal is to bring him closer to *olam habo* and distance him from *olam hazeh* - because this is the name of the game. The game is, that we find ourselves in *olam hazeh*. Hashem gives us a series of ordeals and the purpose of the ordeals is for us to get separated from *olam hazeh*, not to get buried in *olam hazeh*, and to begin a climb and set our direction towards *olam habo*. Every ordeal you go through represents this exact challenge. Sometimes a person has it rough. Just today I spoke to a young person who was not yet blessed with kids, and

⁶ רש"י ד"ה "אשר נאכל במצרים חנם". א"ת שפמריים נותנים להם דגים חנם, והלא כבר נאמר "ותבו לא ינתו לכם" (שמות ה'), אם תבו לא היו נותנין להם חנם, דגים היו נותנין להם חנם; ומהו אומר חנם, חנם מן המצות (ספרי)
⁷ רש"י ד"ה "מי יאכילנו בשר". וכי לא היה להם בשר? והלא כבר נאמר "ונם ערב רב עלה אתם וצאו וברקו" וגו' (שמות י"ב), וא"ת אכלום, והלא בקניסתו לארץ נאמר "וימקנה רב היה לבני ראובן" וגו' (במדבר ל"ב); אלא שפמריים עלילה (ספרי)

his whole family all around him are all *gebentched* with kids. The fellow is struggling. He wants to know, is it okay if he feels an “ouch” when he hears about somebody else’s simchah. I said, “Of course you should feel ‘ouch.’ I feel the ‘ouch’ for you, too.” My heart breaks, I really feel terrible for him. I can only try to imagine what it feels like. But I said, “Whenever a person feels that struggle it is an opportunity that could bring him closer to *olam habo*.”

ACKNOWLEDGE THE ‘OUCH’ MOMENT

Here is a person who likes to walk around dressed like a *shaygetz*. He thinks it’s cool. So that’s an ‘ouch’ when he is told he can’t dress like that. So what do you do with that ‘ouch’? The challenge you have is to take that ‘ouch’ and turn it into something positive. The feeling of pain makes you aware of the fact that Hashem is giving you an ordeal, and if you try to overcome that ordeal, you can get closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Say to Hashem, “I acknowledge the ordeal is from You and I rise to the occasion.”

Do you know what a bochur who is challenged by a mode of dress says to Hashem? “Hashem, I acknowledge that the ordeal is from You, and I want to get away from You.” If he is honest with himself, that is what he is going to say. I have told many people who have answered me, “I don’t need to get away from Hashem,” the following: “You are like the guy who wears an iron Nazi helmet and a jacket with swastikas on them and says, ‘Oh, I just find these comfortable to wear.’ You are not trying to get away from Hashem, right? You are not trying to identify with the Germans, right? You are trying to show you are a *heimishe* Yid. You are a regular full-blown member.” I said, “You are either nuts, or you are a liar and you need serious medication,” because there is no greater denial than that!

If a person feels more comfortable with behaving like a *goy*, and then somebody challenges him and asks: “Why do you behave like a *goy*?” so he starts to make all kinds of excuses. Now, please understand that I am *not* talking about a guy who is going on a bike ride and he is afraid his yarmulke is going to fall off, so he puts on a cap. I am not talking about that kind of cap. That is not called running away from Hashem. What I am talking about is a person who is uncomfortable with being a yid, and a person has to be honest with himself about that. This is the attitude of the *eirav rav*. Especially when a person comes from a different background, because he has had that exposure and he has old friends like that, so then, of course, he is going to be ‘poisoned.’ Of course he is going to be like them or identify with that behavior. My zeida (R’ Avigdor Miller) used to say, “You know how many Jews are ecstatic when somebody asks them, ‘Are you Greek?’” He said they feel like a million dollars, like they ‘made it.’ And they say, “Yes.” But it’s a shame on you! You don’t want people to think you look Jewish. You want them to think you look cool. That is how people are.

KNOWING YOUR TRUE FEELING

You have to understand, what does a person want to gain when he lodges his complaint about his life? When a person makes this complaint, what is he trying to accomplish? Does he really think that Hashem is going to change the rules for him? Does he think Hashem is going to say, “Oh, okay, okay,” when he distances himself from Hashem?! You know what it is? “I am just trying to find an excuse to say goodbye to Hashem. This lifestyle is too stifling for me. It is too difficult for me.” He thinks that if he would change his lifestyle, then somehow, it would be easier for him. It doesn’t work like that, Rabbosai. It doesn’t become easier. If the Torah tells us this story, this episode about how the yidden complained in the midbar, the Torah is telling me that we should study *ourselves*, when we face these kinds of challenges.

Reb Yeruchem writes, let’s say, *l’mashal*, I see a *goy* walking down the street, and he has a foot-long Subway. The guy is walking down the street, he takes off the paper wrapper, and throws the paper on the ground. If he is a fine gentleman, he will put it in the garbage. Then he starts to eat his sandwich just like that. Reb Yeruchem says, when I look at that *goy*, my first thought is: “This guy must be some species of *beheimah*. He eats with no *da’as*, he eats like a *sus*. There is no difference between him and a *sus*.” But his second thought is, “I am jealous of him.” Do you know why? Because the guy could eat on the street! The guy could feed his face and stuff himself without any qualms. He does not need to say any brachos, he doesn’t need to wash, (or as the modern people do, they hold the sandwich in a bag and if you don’t touch the bread they say you don’t have to wash). So this *yid* is really jealous of him. No brachos, no bentching, etc. And then you spit the food out that you don’t want. There are no responsibilities, basically. But you know what kind of *esek* a *yid* has to do before he eats? He has to find water, he has to find a *kli* to wash properly, he has to find something to wipe his hands with, and he has to make brachos. He has to be *mechaven*, he has to make a *brachah* with *kavanah*. There are a lot of *halachos* here! So a person has to know himself and be honest with himself. If you know yourself, then you stand a chance of making the proper adjustments in your life and not fooling yourself.

A BRUTAL HONESTY

Reb Yerucham writes about a story that shook him up. When he was very young, he learned in the Kelm Talmud Torah. That is how the yeshivah of Kelm was referred to. There were older, outstanding *avreichim* learning at the time. One time, a fire broke out near the Talmud Torah and many of the houses burnt down, besides for the Talmud Torah. One of the outstanding *avreichim* told Reb Yerucham what he was thinking about at the time of the fire. He said he thought the following: “The *beis hamidrash* is going to be burnt down. The fire is going to devour the yeshivah. What do I gain from that? I am going to be able to go home and see my wife and my family.”

You have to realize that when the *yungerleit* in those days went away to yeshivah, they went for a year's time. They went for a long time. They didn't jump home to see the family every couple of days, or every day for sure not. This was one *choshuve* person, a *metzuyendike mentch*, but he knew himself very well. He knew how to view himself, he knew how to process his thoughts, and he recognized that in the depths of his being, he was hoping that this was his chance to get out and go home. But he couldn't go home *stam azoy*, he would be embarrassed to see his wife. His wife would say, “What are you doing at home? You just went to yeshivah six months ago, what are you doing at home?” So he was embarrassed. Now - if the yeshiva burned down - he would have a good excuse. He could tell her there was a fire. “Ah, Baruch Hashem.” Since he has a good excuse, he does not have to be embarrassed anymore.

Then this *avreich* added and said, “Do you know what I learnt from this? I learned from this the *shiflus* of a person, the lowliness of a human being and how far it goes. Just to fulfill my *ratzon* for wanting to go home, it is worthwhile that the Talmud Torah of Kelm should be burned down! Just so I should get my way.” Could you imagine that?

COMPLAINING = NO COMMITMENT

Whenever a person is complaining that he cannot tolerate something it's proof that there is no commitment on the part of the person to do. Whenever there is a commitment on the part of a person to do something - if it is something that he wants to do - there are no complaints. When you feel some kind of burden from Judaism, you feel Torah is a burden, you feel tefillah three times a day is a burden, what most people do, is they alleviate this burden. Some move away, for example. I met a fellow who moved to California from Cleveland. I asked him, “Why in the world would you move here?” He said, “To get away from the pressure.” I knew him as a modern fellow in Cleveland, a young fellow. He wasn't part of the yeshivah. He said, “Over here, in California, it is a pressure-free environment. Whatever you do, everybody is satisfied with it.”

I went to another community once, a very small community, but it had some people from New York and other places. They told me the exact same thing. “You come here to be guiltless, unburdening yourself. There is no *minyán* during the weekdays.” The guy says, “You know what that means?” I said, “It means you never go to shul on the weekdays.” He says, “No, it means you never miss a *minyán* and feel guilty. No one ever asks questions, about how come you weren't by the *minyán*.” It is an amazing *zach*. It is a *pele*. You know what kind of lack of commitment that guy has to have to Hashem? You have to realize and feel that you are missing something, because Hashem gave us the Torah and Hashem gave us the mitzvos to serve Him *besimchah*.

It says *בשמחה* באלקידך - *because you did not serve Hashem with joy* (Devarim 28:47). When Hashem gives a person a prescription to follow and he says, “If you follow this prescription you will have *simchah*,” and then a person says, “It doesn't give me *simchah*.” No, it doesn't mean it gives him no *simchah*. What it means is: “I am not interested in doing it. I don't want to get to your *simchah*, so I am going to do everything I can, not to get to *simchah*.” That is called a *rasha*. That is called a person who has no interest in climbing the mountain toward *olam habo*. That is a person who lives to fulfill his *cheftzei haguf* (physical desires).

IGNORING THE THIRST OF THE NESHAMAH

Do you ever hear people complain about how long Shabbos is, especially in the summer? “Oh, it's so long!” You could ask them, “Why don't you try learning Torah? Why don't you try going to a shiur? Why don't you try finding out what you are supposed to do on Shabbos? Then you will find out where the *simchah* of Shabbos is.” Whenever you are not having *simchah*, you can know one thing - you are not doing it right. Or if you are doing it right, you don't want to do it. If you don't want to do something, you are never going to feel *simchah*. This is a very, very important lesson that a person has to think about.

There was a story with Rav Elyah Meir Bloch, zt”l (1895-1955). Once, he traveled to raise funds from rich people for the yeshivah. He said, “I was sitting at a table with this fellow, who was a tremendous *gvir*. Without me even asking him,

he said, 'I want to tell you about a problem I am having.' So I listened to him and he said, 'I lack nothing. I have a beautiful apartment in New York. I have a beautiful villa in Florida. I have a beautiful cottage on the seashore in California. I have a private plane. I have a fleet of cars, the best that money can buy. One thing I don't have. I don't have *simchas hachaim*. I really do not have satisfaction and *menuchas hanefesh*. You, however, go from city to city, putting your hand out raising funds. I can't imagine anything more humiliating than this, yet I look at your face and I see a glow. There is a sense of being fortunate. It is not possible to hide it. I see a face that exudes *simchas hachaim*. Even though you work so hard and you have so much discomfort to make money. What's the *pshat*?'"

Rav Elyah Meir Bloch told this *gvir*, "We are both Jews and we both have a *neshamah tehorah*. The *neshamah* is with us at all hours of the day. It has needs and demands just like the *guf* does. The *guf* demands food, *menuchah*, clothing - you have to take care of the needs of the *guf* and if you are not going to provide the *guf* with its needs, you are going to feel hungry, you are going to feel thirsty, you are going to feel the lack. This causes a person to drink a lot of water. He tries to quench his thirst. The main thing is, he provides his body with what his body needs. You have to know that the *neshamah* demands spiritual sustenance in exactly the same way! It also has a tremendous thirst to fulfill its goal and purpose in this world, and it sends us messages when it feels that thirst. Thirst, hunger, cold, heat. We both feel those same messages from our *guf* and *neshamah*. There is no difference between any two people. The difference is in how I react to that thirst or to that hunger. Whenever you have that thirst, you buy another villa, or another car, so you never feed your *neshamah*. You never give it Torah, you never have the joy of making *talmidim*, and *harbatzas Torah*. That is what gives me *sippuk*, that is what gives me *menuchas hanefesh*."

Rav Elyah Meir Bloch continued, "We are both thirsty, but you ignore that thirst. The only thing you supply is the physical stuff. So it is like drinking salty water and trying to quench your physical thirst. It will never work. When you get thirsty, you give your *guf* more salty water."

YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM YOURSELF

Every one of us is a physical being; we are like the *eirev rav*. We grew up in an environment of *gashmius*, where we are surrounded by people who are clueless, people who have no *da'as*. People who have no awareness of what they are in this world for. Whether they be Jewish or not, is irrelevant. They will smile nicely, they will give nice handshakes. But they are not-*stam* clueless. I remember talking to these types of people and thinking, "*Shrek*, I am talking to a wall. I am talking to a guy who is 'spiritually autistic.' This is complete autism. The guy has no idea." He is dressed nicely, his tie, his shirts, his sleeves have a brand name on it, his pocket has a brand name on it. He is sitting there smiling, "Yes rabbi, yes rabbi." And I am thinking, "We don't even speak the same language, we are not on the same planet - this guy is clueless." What happens is, he only has awareness of one dimension of himself. When the person becomes exposed to *yiddishkeit*, he starts to service his *ruchniyus* dimension. But he never gets to the point where he understands that the *ruchniyus* dimension is desperate for spiritual *mazon* (food) and more *mazon*, especially if he's a late starter. Especially if he was a kid who didn't give it his all in his youth. So his *neshamah* is starving and he has to feed that *neshamah* in order to get a sense of equilibrium, so that he is not hazy. When a person does that, then a person feels an inner satisfaction.

So, whenever a person seeks excuses to get out of his obligations, he has to know the following. You cannot get out, you are Jewish. You can't get out, it is not possible. You can get sidetracked, you could get involved in the *goyishe* world, in the *eirev rav* world. You could complain and tell Hashem that, "I can't handle this, this is too much for me. It is not for me. It is not for my kind. I am not used to this. I am not built for this. I am not made for this." All you are going to end up doing, is distancing yourself from Hashem and forfeiting your rights to exist in this world. Hashem is going to have to wake you up one day and He is going to have to bring you back and jolt you into the awareness of your *tafkid* for which you came to this world. Don't be one of the *misonenim*, don't be one of the complainers, don't be רע באזני ה'. You cannot run away from yourself.

THE BOTTOM LINE

When we complain about the challenges and hardships in our life, not only are we distancing ourselves from the thing (or a person) that we complain about, but inevitably, we show a lack of commitment and *simchah*. We also underscore an inner, perhaps subconscious, desire to free ourselves of *mitzvos* and distance ourselves from Hashem, r"l. Challenges and ordeals are designed to be a source of personal growth and to direct a person towards *olam haba* - our ultimate, eternal destination. This coming week, I will reflect on the lessons of the *מתאוננים*, and when someone points out something wrong in my behavior, middos, or dress code, instead of complaining, I will quietly say, "Hashem, I acknowledge that this is my challenge, an 'ouch' moment, that's coming directly from You. Give me the wisdom to understand what it is that I have to correct, and give me the koach to rise to the occasion and overcome it."

