

Between Pesach and Shavuot- The First Seven Weeks of the Exodus

Celebration, fear and panic must all have dominated the behaviour of the 600,000 Israelite families that so abruptly left the House of Bondage that they had known as their home all their life. They do not know what awaits them on their journey and, when confronted by the desert, live in constant fear of their lives. Yes, they have witnessed the hand of the Almighty in Egypt, but no one is privy to the future. They will be praised for their trust, later (*lechetch acharay ba midbar, eretz lo zarua* - you followed me in the desert, a barren land' (Jer.2,2). And so, when they murmur and complain that there is no drinking water, no regular food, when they see the Egyptian chariots behind them and later, the Amalekites attacking them, the Almighty supplies their needs and saves them from their enemies.

All of this happens during seven eventful weeks that it takes them to reach Mount Sinai. The Torah gives us a graphic account of these weeks. We recall this tense period by counting every day of the seven week Omer. Here is a brief reminder of the sequence of events:

They start off in **Goshen**, in **Sukkot** and **Etham**, 'at the edge of the wilderness' (Ex.13,20) , before camping near the Red Sea at **Pi Ha Hirof** facing the Baal Tzefon, where the Egyptians overtake them (v.9) They want to go back, 'It is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness' (Ex 14, 12). Immense relief, triumph and gratitude follow once they have safely crossed and witnessed the end of the Egyptian host, all powerfully captured in the Shirat HaYam.

Three days later, they reach **Midbar Shur**, the Wilderness of Shur, and there is no water to drink, 'What shall we drink? And Moses cries out...(Ex 15, 24-5), and G-d shows Moses the wood that will make the water drinkable.

Their next camp is in **Elim**, where there are twelve springs and seventy date palm trees, but this proved to be a short respite.

Six weeks into their journey, 'on the fifteenth day of the second month' (Ex.16,1) they reach **Midbar Sin**, the Wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Sinai. It is not clear what the people have been eating so far, but it was not the meat or bread that they remembered eating, 'Would that we had died by the hand of G-d in Egypt...for you have brought us out into this wilderness to have the whole multitude die of hunger' (Ex.16,3). The people are not rebuked. Now they are given the Manna. They complain about the situation; they do not question 'the hand of G-d'. It is their readiness to obey the Almighty, not their faith, that will be tested when they are to collect sufficient Manna for the Sabbath.

Their last camp is in **Refidim**, where, once again, there is no water. 'Give us water, that we may drink'; their complaint seems to be against Moses and he cries out to G-d, who instructs him to strike the rock for water. Moses sees this as a challenge to the Almighty by the Israelites and reports them as saying 'Is G-d in our midst or not?' (Ex.17,7).

At this point, almost at Sinai, in Refidim, Amalek attacks. We will be told, later (Deut.25,17) that this cowardly attack was against on the weak and tired , but we are not told of any complaints, or any regret about being here. The Almighty helps, but we are not told that Moses asks how to solve the problem. He knows that if his hands are raised, the enemy will be weakened; and the Israelites fight. They seem to be ready to reach 'the Mountain of the Lord' **Horeb**, which is where Yithro comes to meet Moses.

Seven fraught weeks from the day of their Exodus, the Israelites are now at **Mount Sinai**.

