



## Independence Day

Emmanuel Bloch, Ph.D., Adjunct Assistant Professor, JTS

In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Erich Fromm argued that freedom is not merely liberation from external constraints (“freedom from”) but also entails the capacity for self-realization and responsible action (“freedom to”). One of the most puzzling passages in Beha-alotekha reflects a similar insight.

In Numbers 11, the Israelites protest their steady diet of manna and forcefully demand meat (11:4–6). God’s response unfolds in two seemingly unrelated steps. First, the appointment of a council of seventy elders (11:16–17), often understood as the precursor of the rabbinic Great Sanhedrin; and only afterward, the sending of a powerful wind to bring the quail that will feed the people (11:31). This sequence is surprising: how exactly does a new tribunal offer an adequate response to what appears to be a legitimate desire to diversify the menu?

The beginnings of an answer emerge from a careful reading of the verses. Actually, the text seems to point to a more complex motive on the part of the Israelites: rather than simply craving meat, they seem intent on rejecting manna itself.

“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” (Num. 11:4-6)

What, then, is the problem with manna? Moses’s anguished response (Num. 11:11–15) provides a hint. It suggests that the Israelites’ complaint is not directed at the manna as food, but at what it signifies: the rejection of manna emerges as a rejection of Moses himself.

(...) Moses was troubled. He asked the Lord, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? (...) I

cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me.” (Num. 11:10-15)

Rabbinic tradition, characteristically attentive to the silences and nuances of the biblical text, makes the connection between Moses and manna even more explicit: the manna descended daily through Moses’s merit (BT, Ta’anit 9a), and with his death on the seventh of Adar, it ceased at once (BT, Kiddushin 38a).

From this perspective, the Israelites’ request for meat (and rejection of manna) catalyzes a reconfiguration of authority, shifting leadership away from Moses alone toward a broader structure embodied in the Sanhedrin.

Yet another element invites closer attention. The same biblical text simultaneously casts Moses in strikingly paradoxical terms, portraying him as a nurturing figure: a kind of wet nurse, even a symbolic mother.

Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? (Num. 11:12)

In this portrayal, Moses becomes a provider of “milk”, the very antithesis of “meat.” The biblical text further develops this motif by introducing two additional figures whose very names evoke the imagery of “milk”: Eldad and Medad (Num. 11:26). Counted among the seventy elders of the Sanhedrin, they nevertheless remain in the camp rather than assembling with the others, as if resisting full incorporation into the emerging structure of leadership.

In Hebrew, *dad* refers to the nipple, viz. the source through which a nursing infant receives milk. Thus, Eldad can be read as “toward the breast,” and Medad as “from the breast.” The symbolism is suggestive: it reinforces the

depiction of Moses as the nurturing source sustaining Israel in its earliest stage of development. Even as the Israelites begin to move beyond a “Torah of milk,” Eldad and Medad, two otherwise minor figures, quietly echo the formative stage now being left behind.

Moses, then, is associated with manna and milk, which share important structural similarities. Both are forms of nourishment meant for those who have not yet reached maturity; both cater to the needs of those still in the process of becoming. An infant cannot yet digest solid food; its system is not ready. For a time, it must rely on a provisional, sustaining substitute. So too with the manna, the divine food provided in the desert during the infancy of the Jewish people.

Here again, the rabbis amplified some of these themes in the midrash: “Just as a baby tastes different flavors from the breast, so too with the manna, every time that the Jewish people ate, they found in it many flavors” (BT, Yoma 75a). At the same time, if some flavors were absent from the manna (cucumbers, melons, leeks, ...), it is because these foods were deemed harmful to nursing mothers (Sifrei Bemidbar 87).

This implies that the relationship between Moses, the man of milk and manna, and the Hebrew people was one of radical asymmetry: the recipients, still immature, required what we might call a “Torah of milk,” a Torah of pure revelation. Just like manna, everything flowed from God; human beings were only receivers. At the earliest stage of their formation, the Jewish people needed a form of divine communication given directly, without the mediation of human effort or interpretation.

The demand for meat and the rejection of manna constitute, in effect, a declaration of independence. It is the people’s way of asserting that they will no longer remain in a purely passive relationship with the divine. They refuse to stand only as recipients of revelation and instead seek a different posture, in which they become active partners, shaping and engaging their relationship with the Transcendent rather than simply receiving it.

It is precisely in response to this deeper demand that God initiates a decisive shift: the gradual move away from Moses as the singular, all-encompassing leader toward a more layered and participatory form of leadership: the Sanhedrin. The demand for meat was, in fact, a bold claim to autonomy, a rejection of unceasing Revelation as a form of dependence, and a declaration of the people’s desire to encounter and engage the Torah on their own terms.

As Immanuel Kant famously observed, “enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.” In Beha-alotekha, we encounter an analogous moment of transformation: a people in the act of growing up. Here, a nascent nation begins to assume a more defined identity, and with that maturation come far-reaching consequences, reshaping not only its inner spiritual posture but also its institutional life and structures of authority.

A Jewish Independence Day, as it were.