

Numbers

Lesson #5

“Move ‘em Out”—the March Begins

(10: 1 – 14: 45)

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Review

Leading two million people—men, women, children and the elderly—on a 245-mile trek through the wilderness is much like herding cats, with the addition of difficult terrain, poisonous snakes, blazing heat, lack of food, water shortages, and very vocal opposition from within the group. As we learned in our study of Leviticus, the Levites are the intermediaries between God and the people, and they must be properly prepared—physically, spiritually and emotionally—for the task.

Lesson #4 addressed the Levite's preparation, focusing on their preparation and consecration.

Preview

“In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud rose from the tabernacle of the covenant, and the Israelites moved on from the wilderness of Sinai by stages . . .”

(10: 11)

And so the march begins.

And the complaining does, too! Moses had counted on Hobab, his Midianite father-in-law who knows the wilderness terrain intimately, to lead the march, but Hobab refuses and returns home. Within days, the people hate the bland, tasteless manna God provides, remembering the *“fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic”* (11: 5). Miriam and Aaron, Moses sister and brother, rebel against him, saying: *“Is it through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken?”* (12: 2). The twelve scouts Moses sends into the land of Canaan return with a negative report: the land is good, but its towns are fortified, and its people are like giants! As a result, the people rebel and cry out . . .

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Preview

... “If only we had died in the land of Egypt!” and “If only we would die here in the wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land only to have us fall by the sword? Our wives and little ones will be taken as spoil. Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt? (14: 2-4).



It's going to be a long 39 years!

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“The Lord said to Moses: Make two trumpets of silver, making them of hammered silver, for you to use in summoning the community and in breaking camp. When both are blown, the whole community shall gather round you at the entrance of the tent of meeting; but when one of them is blown, only the tribal leaders, the heads of the clans of Israel, shall gather round you. When you sound the signal, those encamped on the east side shall break camp; when you sound a second signal, those encamped on the south side shall break camp; when you sound a third signal, those encamped on the west side shall break camp; when you sound the fourth signal, those encamped on the north side shall break camp. Thus shall the signal be sounded for them to break camp.”

(10: 1-7)

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When the march begins, how will Moses signal 2 million people to move out in an orderly fashion?

Trumpets!

In 1922 British archaeologist, Howard Carter, discovered the intact tomb of Egypt's king Tutankhamun (c. 1332-1323 B.C.). In the tomb were two trumpets, one made of silver and the other of bronze. The silver trumpet measures a little over 19 inches and its bell's diameter is 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

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**King Tutankhamun's silver and bronze trumpets (c. 1330 B.C.).
Egyptian Museum, Cairo.**



Silver trumpet detail.



The trumpets were sounded for the first time in 3,000 years on April 16, 1939 on a BBC radio broadcast. Bandsman James Tappern of Prince Albert's 11th Royal Hussars regiment played them. Have a listen!

Well, he's not Louis Armstrong!



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The ancient Israelite version of the Egyptian trumpet is called a *hasoserah*. Josephus describes it in his *Antiquities*:

“In length it was little less than a cubit [45.72 cm]. It was composed of a narrow tube, somewhat thicker than a flute, but with so much breadth as was sufficient for admission of the breath of a man’s mouth: it ended in the form of a bell, like common trumpets.”

(3. 291)

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With the silver trumpets prepared and in position, Moses gives a blast, and the tribes begin moving out in an orderly fashion:

“In the second year on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud rose from the tabernacle of the covenant, and the Israelites moved on from the wilderness of Sinai by stages, until the cloud came to rest in the wilderness of Paran. The first time that they broke camp at the direction of the Lord through Moses, the divisional camp of the Judahites, arranged in companies, was the first to set out Then, after the tabernacle was dismantled, the Gershonites and Merarites who carried the tabernacle set out”

(10: 11-14, 17)

The Israelites head north—2 million people—into the wilderness of Paran.

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The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)





Moving north of Mt. Sinai toward the wilderness of Paran.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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That looks like a frightening place to go! Mt. Sinai is over 8,000 feet in elevation, and it is part of a very mountainous region, where the winter temperatures can drop to near-zero, and further north into the summer, temperatures can soar to well-above 100 degrees! With little rainfall and periodic squalls, flash flooding is a persistent danger!

I think I'll stay at home in my bed!



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Although Moses was familiar with the Sinai, he had planned on Hobab, Moses' father-in-law—a wilderness dweller—to be his guide through the treacherous terrain:

Moses said to Hobab . . . , “We are setting out for the place concerning which the Lord has said, ‘I will give it to you.’ Come with us, and we will be generous toward you, for the Lord has promised prosperity to Israel. But he answered, ‘No, I will not come. I am going instead to the land of my birth.’”

(10: 29-30)

With Hobab's refusal, Moses is on his own!

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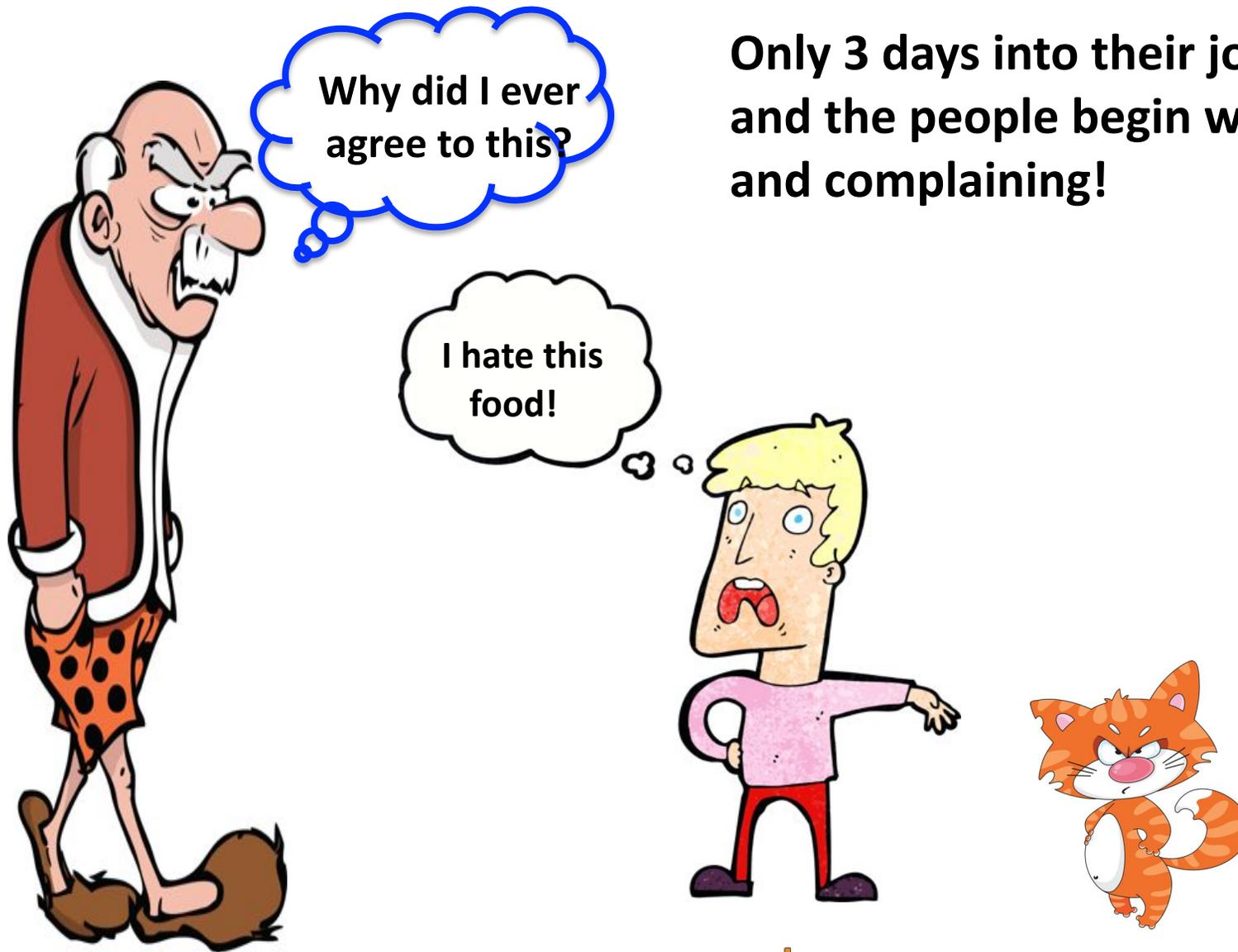
“From the mountain of the Lord they made a journey of three days, and the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them for the three-day journey to seek out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the Lord was over them by day when they set out from camp. Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say,

*‘Arise, O Lord, may your enemies be scattered,
and may those who hate you flee before you.’*

And when it came to rest, he would say,

‘Bring back, O Lord, the myriads of Israel’s troops!’”

(10: 33-36)



Only 3 days into their journey and the people begin whining and complaining!

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“Now the people complained bitterly in the hearing of the Lord . . . [and] the riffraff among them were so greedy for meat that even the Israelites lamented again, ‘If only we had meat for food! We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we are famished; we have nothing to look forward to but this manna.’”

(11: 1-6)

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So, 3 days out and the Israelites are singing the desert blues! What wimps. But Moses isn't much better!

Oh, my!



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“When Moses heard the people, family after family, crying at the entrance of their tents, so that the Lord became very angry, he was grieved. ‘Why do you treat your servant so badly?’ Moses asked the Lord. ‘Why are you so displeased with me that you burden me with all this people? Was it I who conceived all this people? Or was it I who gave them birth, that you tell me to carry them at my breast, like a nurse carrying an infant, to the land you have promised under oath to their fathers? Where can I get meat to give to all this people? For they are crying to me, ‘Give us meat for our food.’ I cannot carry all this people by myself, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you deal with me, then please do me the favor of killing me at once, so that I need no longer face my distress.’”

(11: 1-6)

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“Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, when you shall have meat to eat. For in the hearing of the Lord you have cried, ‘If only we had meat for food! Oh, how well off we were in Egypt!’ Therefore, the Lord will give you meat to eat, and you will eat it, not for one day or two days, or five, or ten, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your very nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Lord who is in your midst, and in his presence you have cried, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’”

(11: 18-20)

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“[Then] there arose a wind from the Lord that drove in quail from the sea and left them all around the camp site, to a distance of a day’s journey and at a depth of two cubits [36”] upon the ground. So all that day, all night, and all the next day the people set about to gather in the quail. Even the one who got the least gathered ten homers [about 6 bushels] of them. Then they spread them out all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it could be chewed, the Lord’s wrath flared up against the people, and the Lord struck them with a very great plague.”

(11: 31-33)

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**As if it weren't enough
that the people are
whining and complaining,
Miriam, Aaron and Moses
begin to bicker!**



***Miriam and Aaron Confront Moses (fresco), 10th century.
Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece.***

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“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses on the pretext of the Cushite woman he had married; for he had in fact married a Cushite woman. They complained, ‘Is it through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken? Has he not spoken through us also?’ And the Lord heard this. **Now the man Moses was very humble, more than anyone else on earth.** So at once the Lord said to Moses and Aaron and Miriam: ‘Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.’ And the three of them went. Then the Lord came down in a column of cloud, and standing at the entrance of the tent, called, ‘Aaron and Miriam.’ When both came forward, the Lord said: Now listen to my words . . .

'If there are prophets among you,
in visions I reveal myself to them,
in dreams I speak to them;
Not so with my servant Moses!

Throughout my house he is worthy of trust;
face to face I speak to him,
plainly and not in riddles.
The likeness of the Lord he beholds.

Why, then, do you not fear to speak against my servant
Moses? And so the Lord's wrath flared against them,
and he departed."

(12: 1-9)

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Now, this is really good!

- Miriam is Moses' older sister: she fished him out of the Nile River shortly after he was born (Exodus 2: 4); Aaron is three years older than Moses (Exodus 7: 7)—and their little brother is getting all the attention; well, they deserve some respect, too!
- Moses married a Cushite woman. Wait a minute, didn't Moses marry Zipporah, whom he met in Midian when he fled from Egypt? Didn't they have two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exodus 2: 21; 18: 3)? But it was a troubled marriage, that included a scathing argument over circumcision (Exodus 4: 24-26), and Moses sent Zipporah and the boys back to her father, who promptly returned them to Moses (Exodus 18: 1-6)! Apparently, Moses has now dumped Zipporah permanently, and he has married a Cushite wife!

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- And we read: ***“Now the man Moses was very humble, more than anyone else on earth”*** (12: 3). This is rich! Remember: it is Moses who is writing Numbers!
- God is fed up with all three—Miriam, Aaron and Moses—and he commands: **“All three of you: get out here, RIGHT NOW!”**

“Now the cloud withdrew from the tent, and there was Miriam, stricken with a scaly infection, white as snow! When Aaron turned toward Miriam and saw her stricken with snow-white scales, he said to Moses, ‘Ah, my Lord! Please do not charge us with the sin that we have foolishly committed! Do not let her be like the stillborn baby that comes forth from its mother’s womb with its flesh half consumed.’ Then Moses cried to the Lord, ‘Please, not this! Please, heal her!’ But the Lord answered Moses: Suppose her father had spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be confined outside the camp for seven days; afterwards she may be brought back. So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not start out again until she was brought back.

After that the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.”

(12: 10-16)

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Daniel Botkin. *Miriam the Leper* (acrylic on fabric), 1998.
Contemporary artist Daniel Botkin may be contacted at danielbotkin.com.
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To this point Moses and the Israelites have traveled from Mt. Sinai to Taberah (11: 3), Kibroth-hattaavah and on to Hazereth.

It's hard to travel when you're puking from bad birds. Been there; done that.



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Before continuing north to the Promised Land, Moses needs good intel.

“The Lord said to Moses: ‘Send men to reconnoiter the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. You shall send one man from each ancestral tribe, every one a leader among them. So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, at the direction of the Lord.’”

(13: 1-3)

These were their names:

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Tribe

Reuben
Simeon
Judah
Issachar
Ephraim
Benjamin
Zebulun
Manasseh
Dan
Asher
Naphtali
Gad

Leader

Shamma son of Zaccur
Shaphat son of Hori
Caleb son of Jephunneh
Igal
Hoshea [Joshua] son of Nun
Palti son of Raphu
Gaddiel son of Sodi
Gaddi son of Susi
Ammiel son of Gemalli
Sethur son of Michael
Nahbi son of Vophsi
Geuel son of Machi

The Reconnaissance Orders

“In sending them to reconnoiter the land of Canaan, Moses said to them, ‘Go up there in the Negeb, up into the highlands, and see what kind of land it is and whether the people living there are strong or weak, few or many. Is the country in which they live good or bad? Are the towns in which they dwell open or fortified? Is the soil fertile or barren, wooded or clear? And do your best to get some of the fruit of the land.’ It was then the season for early grapes.”

(13: 17-20)

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The reconnaissance team heads north into the highlands during “the season for early grapes,” which in ancient Israel is June.

I don't like grapes, although they are fun to play with, 'cause they roll.



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The Mission

“So they went up and reconnoitered the land from the wilderness of Zin as far as where Rehob adjoins Lebohamath. Going up by way of the Negeb, they reached Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, descendants of the Anakim, were. (Now Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) They also reached the Wadi Eshcol, where they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes on it, which two of them carried on a pole, as well as some pomegranates and figs. It was because of the cluster the Israelites cut there that they called the place Wadi Eshcol.

(13: 21-24)

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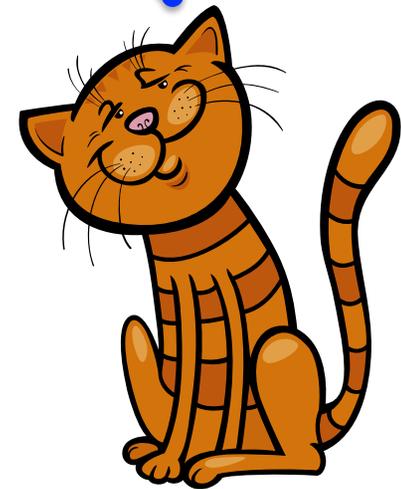
The Wilderness Years (1445 – 1406 B.C.)





The reconnaissance extended as far north as “where Rehob adjoins Lebo-hanath,” that is north of the Sea of Galilee to the southernmost boarder of Syria and Lebanon. That’s as far north as David’s kingdom extended.

That’s a long walk!



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The Majority Report

“They returned from reconnoitering the land forty days later. Proceeding directly to Moses and Aaron and the whole community of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh, they made a report to them and to the whole community, showing them the fruit of the land. They told Moses: ‘We came to the land to which you sent us. It does indeed flow with milk and honey, and here is the fruit. However, the people who are living in the land are powerful, and the towns are fortified and very large. Besides, we saw descendants of the Anakim there. Amalekites live in the region of the Negeb; Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites dwell in the highlands, and Canaanites along the sea and the banks of the Jordan.’”

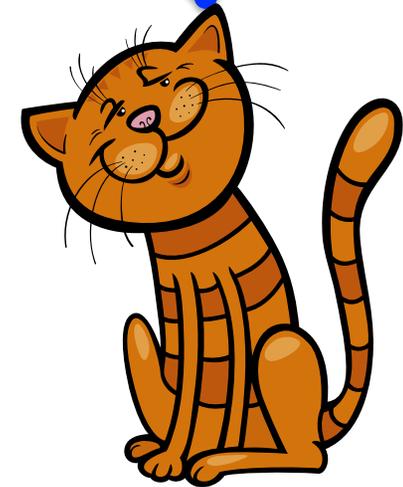
(13: 25-29)

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The Anakim are said to be a race of giants, the descendants of the Nephilim from the antediluvian world of Noah (Genesis 6: 4), who lived in the south of Canaan. All those mentioned are formidable enemies!

I wouldn't want to fight them!
I'm a lover, not a fighter.



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The Minority Report

“Caleb, however, quieted the people before Moses and said, ‘We ought to go up and seize the land, for we can certainly prevail over it.’ But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We cannot attack these people; they are too strong for us.’ They spread discouraging reports among the Israelites about the land they had reconnoitered, saying, ‘The land that we went through and reconnoitered is a land that consumes its inhabitants. And all the people we saw there are huge. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakim are from the Nephilim); in our own eyes we seemed like mere grasshoppers, and so we must have seemed to them.’”

(13: 30-33)

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With this report the Israelites throw up their hands in despair and want to go back to Egypt.

And it's a serious threat:

“At this, the whole community broke out with loud cries, and the people wept into the night. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, the whole community saying to them, ‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt,’ or ‘If only we would die here in the wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land only to have us fall by the sword? Our wives and little ones will be taken as spoil. Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?’ So they said to one another, ‘Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt.’”

(14: 1-4)

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“Milk and honey,” by the way, refers to goat’s milk and date honey.

But Joshua and Caleb jump in the fray, saying:

“The land which we went through and reconnoitered is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us in to this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord! You need not be afraid of the people of the land, for they are but food for us! Their protection has left them, but the Lord is with us. Do not fear them.”

(14: 7a-9)

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**As the argument rages on,
the Lord steps in, saying:**

***“How long will this people spurn
me? How long will they not trust
me, despite all the signs I have
performed among them? I will
strike them with pestilence and
disown them. Then I will make of
you a nation greater and mightier
than they.”***

(14: 11-12)

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Now, you would think that Moses would be very happy with God's threat to kill all the people and start over with Moses, building a new nation. I suspect that Moses is pretty fed up with the people, as well.

**But wait
'till you see what
happens!**



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“But Moses said to the Lord: ‘The Egyptians will hear of this, for by your power you brought out this people from among them. They will tell the inhabitants of this land, who have heard that you, Lord, are in the midst of this people; you, Lord, who directly revealed yourself to them! Your cloud stands over them, and you go before them in a column of cloud and by night in a column of fire. If now you slay this people all at once, the nations who have heard such reports of you will say, ‘The Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them; that is why he slaughtered them in the wilderness’”

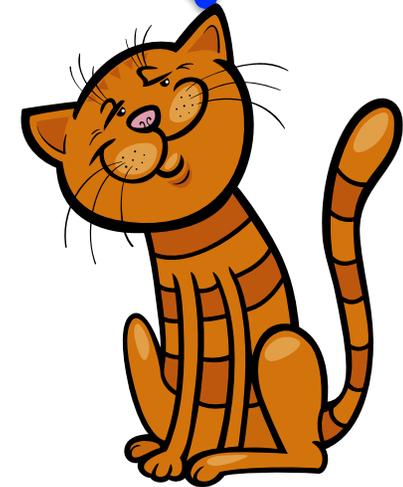
(14: 13-16)

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What a shrewd tactic! Moses stands up to God and says, "Go right ahead and kill them all, Lord, if that's what you want Go right ahead . . . and ruin your reputation. That's fine with me!"

What chutzpah!



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So, the Lord relents, saying:

“I pardon them as you have asked. Yet, by my life and the Lord’s glory that fills the whole earth, of all the people who have seen my glory and the signs I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and who nevertheless have put me to the test ten times already and have not obeyed me, not one shall see the land which I promised on oath to their ancestors. None of those who have spurned me shall see it. But as for my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and follows me unreservedly, I will bring him into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall possess it . . .

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“[Nevertheless] I have heard the grumbings of the Israelites against me. Tell them: ‘By my life’—oracle of the Lord— ‘I will do to you just what I have heard you say. Here in the wilderness your dead bodies shall fall. Of all your men of twenty years of more, enrolled in your registration, who grumbled against me, not one of you shall enter the land where I solemnly swore to settle you, except Caleb, son of Jephuneh, and Joshua, son of Nun. Your little ones, however, who you said would be taken as spoil, I will bring in, and they shall know the land you rejected. But as for you, your bodies shall fall here in the wilderness, while your children will wander for forty years, suffering for your infidelity till the last of you lies dead in the wilderness.’”

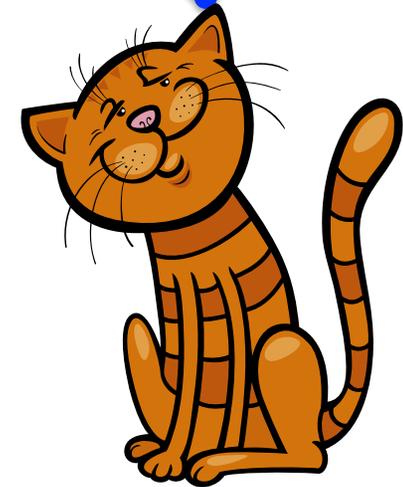
(14: 21-24; 27b-33)

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With that, the people moan and wail some more . . . and then in the morning they try to make up with God by attacking the Amalekites and Canaanites in the hill country, and they get their butts kicked!

Oh, my! What will happen next?



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Questions for discussion and thought

1. The Israelites aren't more than 30 miles from Mt. Sinai, when they begin complaining. What is the object of their complaints?
2. Even Aaron and Miriam join in the chorus of complaint. How does God deal with them?
3. The complaining explodes into open rebellion as the scouts return from their reconnaissance mission with a bad report. What do the people do? What does God do?
4. God forgives the people for their rebellion, but he does not cancel the rebellion's consequences. What are those consequences?
5. How would you characterize God's relationship with the Israelites? With Moses, Aaron and Miriam?

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