

A word that features prominently in Chapter 11 of our parashah is *af*, which literally means nose/nostrils, but figuratively, especially on the part of HaShem, stands for anger, snorting (i.e., in anger), and countenance. Indeed, noses are eloquent emotional barometers. Nostrils flare in anger, arrogant people are referred to as *snooty*, and the German expression *die Nase voll haben* means to be fed up. Our parashah begins calmly enough, with travel underway guided by the constant presence of HaShem. But despite all the efforts put forth in last week's parashah, along with additional measures now, peace remains elusive, repeatedly provoking HaShem's anger. Traveling through a vast desert is arduous, but the elaborate preparations, superb organization, and HaShem's presence should suffice to instill in the people the confidence they need to proceed. Instead, they once again begin to complain, and HaShem's wrath causes fire to burn among them and consume the outer borders of the camp. Of course, the people immediately cry out to Moses to do something. But by this time, his patience is wearing thin. The Talmud (Berachot 32a) discusses Moses' reaction ("Moses prayed to HaShem [va-yitpalel Moshe *el* Adonai] and the fire subsided." 11:2), concluding that Moses did not pray *el* (to) HaShem, but rather, *al* (at, or against) HaShem, which suggests that he spoke impertinently, or forcefully. Midrashic texts speak of Moses hurling words toward heaven both in frustration, and in defense of the recalcitrant people HaShem has deployed him to lead. This is certainly not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Moses struggles with HaShem on behalf of this ragtag bunch of ex-slaves who remain woefully unable to understand what freedom really entails. The fires have scarcely died down when the people once again begin to complain, this time because they are tired of manna and suddenly crave meat. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, and onions, and the garlic." Free of charge? Did they not pay for their food through hard labor? Amazing, how cravings skew memory and distort judgement! Moses hears the people weeping at the entrance of their tents, HaShem is furious, and Moses views it as evil (11:10). Tired of playing nursemaid to these people and feeling unable to bear this tremendous burden alone, he is ready to give up. In compassion HaShem allows Moses to choose 70 trustworthy elders to help him, but then turns the tables on the people. Moses is to tell them that they will get all the meat they want and then some. For a full month HaShem will inundate them with meat, and they will eat it until it comes out of their noses and nauseates them. They will literally be fed up, sick to their stomachs from the excess. The quail pile up and rot because the people cannot consume them all. The smell contributes to their nausea, and they likely also eat tainted meat. Whatever the cause, HaShem's anger flares, the people are stricken with a "mighty blow" and many die. Travel resumes, but once again the peace is shattered, this time through remarks concerning Moses' Cushite wife made by the two people closest to him – his own siblings Aaron and Miriam. HaShem's anger is again kindled, and Miriam, stricken with *tzara'at* (a skin ailment once thought to be leprosy), must quarantine for a week outside the camp. Our sages taught that leprosy was the punishment for slander, linking the word for leper *metzora* with *motzi shem ra* (literally bringing forth a bad name – i.e., slander). Another word for slander is *lashon ha-ra* (evil tongue). Our rabbis considered the tongue to be the most potent instrument of misconduct, comparing it to a snake that is best kept behind the gates of the lips and the teeth. Language has enabled us humans to build great civilizations, but it has also caused tremendous destruction. Used wisely, speech can encourage, but used carelessly or maliciously it can cause hurt as well as anger. When we are hurt, we often cry, and our eyes and noses overflow with water. When we are angry, adrenaline and other "flight or fight" hormones are released, causing increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure. Nostrils flare and breathing becomes faster and shallower. Our parashah offers a case study in both extremes.

*Af* is always extreme: Blazing anger or stony indifference, a runny nose or a nose so dry it bleeds, flood or draught. When we chant the prayer for rain on Shemini Atzeret, we invoke the Angel of Rain *Af-Bri* in a beautiful piyut by Eleazar Kallir. The parts of the name teach us the importance of moderation. *Af* refers to torrential rain, while *bri*, which denotes health, brings the balance necessary for life-sustaining rainfall. The people Moses tries valiantly to lead have not had enough experience with autonomy to have developed a sense of moderation. They are like children, acting on their impulses when their needs are not immediately met, incurring HaShem's wrath and driving Moses nearly to the breaking point. But let's face it – uncertainty breeds fear, and fear often does lead to impulsive behavior. COVID is showing us how vulnerable we are, not only to the disease, but also to the emotions it evokes. Uncertainty and fear have held the world in thrall for over 14 months, with no clear end in sight. How can we cope? A few deep, cleansing breaths through our very sensitive noses have the power to restore calmness and allow us to enjoy the world's pleasant smells in peace.

Shabbat shalom!