



What the Manna Teaches about Life in the Land of Canaan

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One of the verses I find most moving in the book of Joshua describes the ceasing of the manna upon the Israelites' entry into the land of Israel:

יהושע, ה, י"ב
"וַיִּשְׁפֹּת הַמָּן מִמֶּחֳרַת בָּאֲכָלָם מֵעֵבִיר הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא־הָיָה עוֹד לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִתְּבואַת הָאָרֶץ
כָּנְעַן בַּשָּׁנָה הַהִיא"

Joshua 5:12

And the manna ceased on that same day, when they ate of the produce of the land, and the Israelites got no more manna; that year they ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.¹

I picture the people of Israel, who rose each and every morning to find their food waiting for them outside, waking up one morning in the land of Canaan to a new reality, in which food is, supposedly, absent. The description is quite neutral and does not communicate any emotional reactions—not upon receiving the manna, nor during the first days after the manna ceased falling. Moreover, we are not told what occurred among the people of Israel upon shifting from a reality with manna to a reality without manna. Our Torah portion, our

¹ With thanks to my father, Shaul Hochstein, who pointed out the verse to me at *minha* on the 9th of Av.

parashah, reveals a particular approach towards the manna experience, from which one can also derive an outlook towards living in the land of Israel during a post-manna period.

In the book of Devarim, Moshe sets his eyes on the future. However, on more than one occasion, he does so by studying the past. In our *parashah*, Moshe recalls the daily routine of the last forty years in the desert:

דברים, ה, ב' – ה'

וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־כָּל־הַדָּרֹךְ אֲשֶׁר הוֹלִיכָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר לִמְעַן עֲנֹתְךָ לְנִסְתָּךְ לֵדַעַת
אֶת־אֲשֶׁר בָּלָבָבְךָ הִתְשַׁמֵּר מִצֻּוֹתָיו אִם־לֹא: וְיָעֻזְךָ וְיִרְעַבְךָ וְיִצְאָךְ אֶת־הַמֶּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדָעְתָּ וְלֹא
יָדָעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לִמְעַן הוֹדִיעָךָ כִּי לֹא עַל־ הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל־כָּל־מוֹצֵא כִּי־ה' יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם:
שְׁמִלְתָה לֹא בָלִיתָ מַעֲלִיךְ וְרִגְלֶךָ לֹא בָצָקָה זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה: וְיָדָעְתָּ עִם־לִבְבְּךָ כִּי כֹאֲשֶׁר יִסֵּר
אִישׁ אֶת־בְּנוֹ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִיִּסְרָךְ:

Devarim 8:2-5

²Remember the long way that YHVH your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, that He might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep His commandments or not. ³He subjected you to the hardship of hunger and gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your fathers had ever known, in order to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but that man may live on anything that God decrees. ⁴The clothes upon you did not wear out, nor did your feet swell these forty years. ⁵Bear in mind that YHVH your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son.

The description is grim. The journey through the desert is portrayed as a tortuous and tormenting trial. The eating of manna is not portrayed in a positive light, despite what we may expect in a reality in which all of our needs are met. The opposite is true—eating the manna consists of suffering and starvation. I would like to focus our attention to the description of the manna, to ascertain its torturous nature, and consider an alternative reality,

contrary to the manna experience, in order to grasp the potential found in the shift from the desert to the land of Israel.

The *Tannaim* and the *Amoraim*, the sages of the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* periods, offer different interpretations of the element of torture mentioned in these verses. One interpretation is that the manna, albeit nutritious, left those who ate it hungry. This interpretation draws on the comparison between the word “torture,” affliction, *inuy*, as it appears within the *Yom Kippur* context—where “torture” is understood to mean a fast, and therefore, translates into hunger—and its mention in the manna context:

תלמוד בבלי יומא עד:

"דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: נאמר כאן (בהקשר של יום כיפור) ענוי, ונאמר להלן ענוי. מה להלן ענוי רעבון—אף כאן ענוי רעבון"

Talmud Bavli Yoma 74b

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: The word affliction, *inuy*, is stated here with regard to Yom Kippur, and the word affliction, *inuy*, is stated further on in a different place, concerning the Jews in the desert: “And He afflicted you, *va-ya’ankha*, and caused you to hunger” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Just as further on the meaning of affliction is hunger, so too, here, the meaning of the word affliction is hunger.

In the name of Rabbi Ami or Rabbi Yossi, an alternative explanation is suggested:

תלמוד בבלי יומא עד:

"המאכילך מן במדבר למען ענותך' ... אינו דומה מי שיש לו פת בסלו למי שאין לו פת בסלו"

Talmud Bavli Yoma 74b

“And he afflicted you, *va-ya’ankha*, and caused you to hunger, and fed you with manna” (Deuteronomy 8:3)...There is no comparison between one who has bread in his basket and one who does not have bread in his basket.

The manna fell from the sky every day—and the people of Israel were not allowed to save manna from one day to the next. Storing manna in this way was not only forbidden, it was impossible, since manna that was kept for the following day turned stale and rotten. As a result, the people of Israel lived in a reality in which the manna was given to them on a daily basis. However, at the end of each day they were left with empty baskets, and had no way to ensure the manna would indeed be present the following day. They were completely dependent on an external entity to provide them with food.

This interpretation is understood by some as the reason for the people of Israel's incessant hunger, even though they ate from the manna: because they lived in a reality of constant dependency. Their hunger was not purely a physiological state, but an expression of their anxiety and fear. On the other hand, there are those who read this interpretation as a depiction of the torture endured by the people of Israel: the dependency was in itself torture. Either way, a reality of dependency and complete reliance is, according to the author of this *midrash*, tormenting. What is most surprising is that the latter seems to apply to the relationship between people and their God as well.

In *midrashim*, Talmudic interpretations, that refer to the manna, it appears the manna is perceived to have several varying attributes. However, these attributes create a growing reality of dependency—not only concerning nutritious needs, but other realms as well. For example, as described in the following source, the manna served as a judicial means:

בבלי יומא עה.

תניא, רבי יוסי אומר: כשם שהנביא היה מגיד להם לישראל מה שבחורין ומה שבסדקין, כך המן מגיד להם לישראל מה שבחורין ומה שבסדקין. כיצד? שניים שבאו לפני משה לדין, זה אומר: עבדי גנבת, וזה אומר: אתה מכרתו לי. אמר להם משה: לבוקר משפט. למחר אם נמצא עומרו בבית רבו ראשון - בידוע שזה גנבו, אם נמצא עומרו בבית רבו שני בידוע שזה מכרו לו

Talmud Bavli Yoma 75a

Rabbi Yosei says: Just like the prophet would tell the Jewish people what was in the holes and what was in the cracks of their souls, (highlighting the sins of the people), so too, the manna clarified for Israel what was in the holes and what was in the cracks. How so? If two people came before Moshe for a judgment, one saying: You stole my slave, and the other one saying: I did not steal him, rather you sold him to me, Moshe would say to them: In the morning there will be a judgment. How was the matter resolved? If on the following day the slave found his omer of manna in his first master's house, it would be clear that he was stolen, (because the manna still came to the first owner). And if on the following day he found his omer of manna in his second master's house, it would be clear that he had been sold.

Even though these descriptions may depict an ideal reality that offers complete certainty regarding judicial proceedings and rulings, according to the author of the *midrash*, Moshe, who speaks upon entering the land of Israel, views these attributes, which detach the judicial act from human discretion, as elements of torture.

What alternative relationship between people and God does Moshe offer? What does an alternate relationship, which is not utterly dependent, look like? The verse merely alludes to such an alternative. The words of Moshe in the book of Devarim present the manna's educational purpose as well:

דברים ח, ג'

וַיִּעַנֶּה וַיִּרְעֶבְךָ וַיֹּאכְלֶךָ אֶת־הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֲךָ כִּי לֹא עַל־הַלֶּחֶם
לִבְדּוֹ יִתְיַהֵא הָאָדָם כִּי עַל־כָּל־מוֹצֵא פִי־ה' יִתְיַהֵא הָאָדָם

Devarim 8:3

³He subjected you to the hardship of hunger and gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your fathers had ever known, **in order to teach you that people do not live on bread alone, but that people live on what comes forth from God's mouth.**

The manna itself teaches that like other foods and bread, it itself is insufficient, when offered alone it leaves people in a state of hunger and suffering. People need that which comes forth from the mouth of God as well.

What kind of relationship does a reality based on “what comes from God’s mouth” have to offer? Supposedly, that is the manna’s essence: it falls from the sky, God is its source, it is collected by human beings, who live according to God’s words. If so, what is the difference between the manna and what comes from God’s mouth?

In the book of Isaiah, we find a depiction of a reality based on “what comes forth from God’s mouth”:

ישעיהו נה, י' – י"א

כִּי כַאֲשֶׁר יֵרֵד הַגֶּשֶׁם וְהַשֶּׁלֶג מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשֶׁמָּה לֹא יָשׁוּב כִּי אִם־הִרְוָה אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהוֹלִיכָהּ וְהַצְמִיחָהּ
וְנָתַן זֶרַע לְזֹרַע וְלֶחֶם לְאֹכֵל: כֹּן יִהְיֶה דְבַרִּי אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִפִּי לֹא־יָשׁוּב אֵלַי רִיקָם

Isaiah 55:10-11

¹⁰For as the rain or snow drop from heaven and do not return there, but soak the earth and make it bring forth vegetation, yielding seed for sowing and bread for eating, ¹¹So is that which comes from My mouth: It does not come back to Me unfulfilled, but performs what I purpose, achieves what I sent it to do.

What comes from God’s mouth is compared to rain and snow that fall from the sky. Indeed, this image reminds us of God’s words falling from the sky, similar to the manna, but what I find interesting is the condition stated in the verse: the rain and snow do not return to the sky. Instead, they saturate the earth, which in turn cultivates and provides. The sky provides rain that is absorbed by the earth, consequently vitalizing the earth. The saturated earth goes on to produce trees and vegetation, which grow skyward.

Now, let us return to that which is issued forth from God's mouth, it too does not return to God, but rather is absorbed by people who are motivated by it. They are motivated to take action, advance, grow and maintain a mutual ongoing relationship with God. Consequently, we find a different depiction of reality than the one of manna: a reality in which what people receive from God does not create a lack of independence, but rather generates action, productivity and creativity that aim skyward. Living in response to what comes forth from God's mouth creates a reality of independence and maturity.

As an epilogue, I will add that the verses in Isaiah also describe the prevalent emotional state when what is issued forth from God's mouth is successful. Then, people and nature all rejoice: "You shall leave in joy and be led home secure. Before you, mount and hill shall rejoice aloud, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12).