



Faith and Torah in Abundance and Scarcity

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It should not be surprising that of the six times the Torah obligates us to “remember”¹ one is a food memory. A food memory may seem trivial compared to remembering standing at Sinai, remembering the Golden Calf, or remembering the war with Amalek, but food memories are quite powerful in their own right. When Moshe tells us to forever remember eating manna in the desert, he lands upon the power of food to cement formative experiences and conjure a strong affective response.

What is the power of the food memory of manna supposed to catalyze within us? What was the experience of eating manna in the desert like, and what was it meant to forever enshrine in our religious lives?

The Torah’s description of eating manna in the desert is a complex interweaving of scarcity and suffering on the one hand, and attentiveness and care on the other hand.

Devarim 8:2-3, 15-16

וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת-כָּל-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הוֹלִיכְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר: לְמַעַן עֲנִיֶּךָ לְנִסְתָּךְ לִדְעוֹת
אֶת-אֲשֶׁר בִּלְבָבְךָ הִתְשַׁמֵּר מִצֹּו יְיָ אֱמ-לֹא. וְיַעֲנֶךָ וְיִרְעַבְךָ וְיִאֲכַלְךָ אֶת הַמֶּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעוֹת וְלֹא יִדְעוּ אֲבֹתֶיךָ
לְמַעַן הוֹדְעֶךָ כִּי לֹא עַל-הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יִתֵּן הָאֱדֹם כִּי עַל-כָּל-מוֹצֵא פִי-יִהְיֶה יִתְיָה הָאֱדֹם: ...

¹ There is some debate about how to count the instruction to remember, some traditions have ten remembrances and some early traditions had four.



הַמִּוֹלִיכְךָ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַגָּדֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא נְחֹשׁ שָׂרָף וְעִקְרָב וְצִמְאֹן אֲשֶׁר אֵין-מַיִם; הַמוֹצִיא לְךָ מַיִם מִצּוֹר הַחֲלָמִישׁ. הַמֵּאֲכִלְךָ מִן בַּמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּ אֲבֹתֶיךָ: לְמַעַן עֲנֹתְךָ, וְלְמַעַן נִסְתָּךְ לְהִיטִיבְךָ בְּאַחֲרִיתְךָ.

²Remember the long way that the Lord your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, that [God] might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep [God's] commandments or not. ³[God] subjected you to the hardship of hunger and gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order to teach you that a person does not live on bread alone, but that a person may live on anything that the Lord decrees... ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; ¹⁶who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your ancestors had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end.

There are two ways to read the three part sequence that opens this passage:
“*God afflicted you, starved you and fed you manna...*”

1) Manna as a response to a state of being afflicted.

After bringing us to the desert where we were starved and we suffered, Moshe instructs us to remember that God offered respite by providing manna and we were no longer hungry or afflicted, just as God offered water from a rock. God had to bring us into the desert with all of its hardship in order to escape from slavery, but was ready to “do good for us” by providing water and food. While there was by necessity some hardship, the primary role of God in the desert is depicted as a provider, responding to hardship and giving us our needs.

In the view of one midrash, this picture of manna as a response to daily need in the desert paves the way for a theological approach centered in our awareness of our fragility and dependence, and the opportunity to strengthen our sense of God’s loving abundance through daily relationship with God around our needs:

Mekhilta de-Rashbi BeShallah (Exodus 16) (~3rd c)

ר' שמעון אומר: מפני חִיבְתָן שְׁלִישְׁרָאֵל נִיתֵן לָהֶם דָּבָר יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ.
מוֹשֶׁה מִשַּׁל לְמָה הַדָּבָר דּוּמָה – לְמֶלֶךְ בָּשָׂר וְדָם שֶׁכַּעַס עַל בְּנוֹ וְאָמַר "אֵל יִרְאֶה פָנַי אֵלָּא מִתְחַלֵּת הַשָּׁנָה יָבוֹא וַיִּטּוֹל פְּרִנְסָתוֹ!"
הִיא מִתְפָּרֵס כָּל הַשָּׁנָה וְהוּא מִתְבַּלְקֵט "הַלּוּוֹי אֵרְאֶה פָנַי אָבָה וְלֹא אֶתְפָּרֵס" כִּיּוֹן שֶׁנִּתְרַצָּה לוֹ אָמַר "יָבוֹא בְּכָל יוֹם וַיִּטּוֹל פְּרִנְסָתוֹ." אָמַר הֵבֵן "כְּדָאִי אִם אֵין בִּידֵי אֵלָּא רֵאִיִּית הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכָל יוֹם כְּדָאִי הוּא."
כִּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִפְּנֵי חִיבְתָן נִיתֵן לָהֶן פְּרִנְסָת יוֹם יוֹם כְּדִי שִׁיְהִיּוּ מַחְלִין וּמִקְבִּילִין פָּנֵי שְׂכִינָה בְּכָל יוֹם.



R. Shimon says: Out of the love of Israel a day's portion was given on its day.

They made a parable, to what is this matter similar?

To a king of flesh and blood who became angry at his son and said, "He shall not see my face except at the beginning of the year he shall come and take his [yearly] provisions!" He would get his provisions each year and wait expectantly, "If only I could see my father's face and not be provided for."

When he had been appeased he said, "Let him come and take his provisions." The son said, "It is adequate if I only get to see the King each day—it is adequate."

So Israel, because of their love, provisions were given them each day so that they would wait expectantly and greet the presence of the Shekhinah each day.

In R. Shimon's view, manna in the desert is a love story. In the midst of a literal food desert where we had nothing, God and Israel could cultivate a sense of deep relationship as God provided just enough for each day. Awareness of our own needs and dependence was matched by awareness of God not only as provider in a transactional sense but as *wanting to build a relationship with us through tending to our daily care*.

This view that idealizes a model of receiving only enough for each day is not only a narrative from the past, but carves out our theological path for the future. In the same passage, R. Eliezer explains why it was forbidden for the people to collect a portion for the next day—why they had to have nothing overnight. On the phrase "a day's portion in its day" דבר יום ביומו (Shemot 16:4) R. Eliezer says the following:

Mekhilta d'Rashbi BeShallah 16

ר' אליעזר אומר שלא ילקט אדם מהיום למחר
וכן היה ר' אליעזר אומר מי שיש לו מה שיאכל היום ויאמר מה אני אוכל למחר הרי זה ממחוסרי אמנה
שנאמר דבר יום ביומו. מי שברא יום ברא פרנסתו

R. Eliezer says: That a person should not gather from one day to the next.

And so R. Eliezer says: One who has what to eat today and says—what shall I eat tomorrow?—this is one of those who lack faith as it says: *a day's portion on its day* (Exodus 16:4)—The One who created the day created one's sustenance.

According to Rabbi Eliezer, the rhythm of manna deliberately involved being without food overnight so as to cultivate our sense of faith and trust, to know that ultimately our sustenance comes from God. It wasn't only in the first moments of the development of our relationship with God in the desert that we needed to learn this lesson; it is meant to shape our daily experience even now. R. Eliezer critiques the person who devotes their energy to



“gathering manna” for the next day, who spends too much time concerned with material needs. We have to know that God’s creative power that animates the world day in and day out will also sustain us.

At face value, R. Eliezer’s approach may sound naïve and even irresponsible. Does he really expect people not to tend to their livelihood and live hand to mouth? Does he really think God wants us to live with that level of insecurity? This view has to be paired with R. Eliezer’s later comments in the midrash, where he explains that this state of not being concerned with our physical needs created a particularly conducive context for receiving the Torah:

ר' אליעזר (ר' שמעון בן יוחאי – מכילתא דר"י) אומר לא ניתנה תורה לדרוש אלא לאוכלי המן. הא כאיזה צד? היה אדם יושב ושונה ואינו יודע מאין יאכל וישתה ומאין ילבש ויתכסה. הא לא ניתנה תורה לדרוש אלא לאוכלי המן ושניים להן אוכלי תרומה.

R. Eliezer says: The Torah was only given to expound to those who eat *manna*. How so? A person would sit and learn and have no idea from where they would eat and drink, from where they would wear clothes and be covered. Thus the Torah was only given to expound to those who eat manna, and second to them are those who eat *terumah*.

In R. Eliezer’s approach, the generation who ate manna is best approximated by the priestly class, those who receive food without having to work for it, and are thus able to focus solely on the realm of the sacred. The widespread experience of the generation in the desert becomes a luxury of a privileged minority going forward. In rabbinic tradition, R. Eliezer was a *kohen* himself, and was wealthy, which may contextualize his approach. Perhaps only someone who never had to worry about having enough food could romanticize the dependency of the desert experience. R. Eliezer’s position may be fulfilling exactly what the passage in Eikev demands—that when we find ourselves in situations of abundance we make sure not to get carried away with material wealth and the arrogance that can accompany wealth (“my own strength and power created this wealth” Devarim 8:17). Instead, we can reorient our inner compass through recall of the desert experience when it was so clear that our own wealth is not the ultimate source of providing for our needs.

This approach from a standpoint of abundance, that frames the insecurity of eating manna as a catalyst for a deeper faith, may be a critical and compelling message for some. At the same time, it is difficult to hear of the importance of food insecurity and minimizing time and attention spent on acquiring a livelihood from the standpoint of lack, where a person may



need to spend quite a lot of time and energy to make ends meet. In our own moment, the experience of food insecurity and lack is becoming more pervasive. Is it really only the priestly class that has access to the meaning of Torah? Could the heirs of the desert experience—those who were so close to God and Torah—include the many, or even most, of us who don't have the luxury of neglecting the work of our daily needs?

There is an altogether different picture of the experience of eating manna and its theological significance.

2) Manna as a Form of Affliction

The act of eating manna itself could be enumerated in Parashat Eikev (8:2) as *part of* the experience of affliction. The three initial verbs “*God afflicted you, starved you, and fed you manna*” could be synonyms rather than a narrative sequence, all giving shape to the experience of hardship in the desert. In this telling, manna was *part of* the experience of hardship, rather than the response. The end of the passage (v.16) lends itself to this reading as well: “*Who fed you manna in the desert in order to afflict you...*”

How could the experience of food magically appearing each day be a source of hardship? Two sages in the Talmud expand upon this idea of manna as a source of suffering rather than satisfaction. I will relate to the first statement:

Yoma 75b

...אֵינוֹ דוֹמֶה מִי שִׁישׁ לוֹ פֶּת בְּסֻלּוֹ לְמִי שֶׁאֵין לוֹ פֶּת בְּסֻלּוֹ... (דברים ח)

Who fed you manna in the desert in order to afflict you... One who has bread in their basket is not similar to one who has no bread in their basket.

This statement draws us into the psychology of food insecurity inherent in eating manna. When one has no additional food in their breadbasket, when the shelves are not stocked, eating a meal is synonymous with profound loss. With each bite, instead of feeling more satisfied, one becomes profoundly more aware of their shrinking food supply. It is an act of consumption in its full sense—eating that simultaneously depletes. The anxiety that accompanies each bite leaves no room to enjoy the food. The rhythm of eating manna—only getting enough food for one day—involved an intensity of uncertainty that made it no normal eating experience. The charge to remember eating manna is a demand to relive the profound trauma of food insecurity that the desert experience involved.



Why did God put us in that state? The passage in Devarim provides two answers, one more abstract and one more concrete. Abstractly, the purpose for this scarcity and affliction in the desert was to teach us that the ultimate source of our sustenance is God; we can be sustained by anything God dictates (לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֶךָ כִּי לֹא עַל-הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם—כִּי עַל-כָּל-מוֹצֵא פִי- יִקּוּק) (יחיה האדם).

The concrete application of this memory of food scarcity is to ensure that we won't forget God in the future, even when we may not “need” God if we live in abundance. The difficult memory of manna is a sort of antidote to the sense of self-reliance and arrogance that can emerge from abundance, but it is a dark and foreboding memory.

The love story of R. Shimon's midrash reads more like a horror story in this telling. God deprived Israel of food in the desert to amplify a sense of anxiety regarding themselves and their entire families, that would require Israel to turn to God out of desperation and beg for food:

Yoma 86a

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחי מפני מה לא ירד להם לישראל מן פעם אחת בשנה?
אמר להם אמשול לכם משל למה הדבר דומה
למלך בשר ודם שיש לו בן אחד פסק לו מזונותיו פעם אחת בשנה ולא היה מקביל פני אביו אלא פעם אחת
בשנה עמד עמד ופסק מזונותיו בכל יום והיה מקביל פני אביו כל יום. אף ישראל מי שיש לו ארבעה וחמשה בנים
היה דואג ואומר שמא לא ירד מן למחר ונמצאו כולם מתים ברעב. נמצאו כולם מכוונים את לבם לאביהם
שבשמים

R. Shimon b. Yoḥai's students asked him: Why didn't the manna fall once a year for Israel?

He responded: I will relate a parable to you—to what is this similar? To a king of flesh and blood who had a son. Once, he allotted his sustenance yearly and he didn't greet his father except for that one time in the year. He went and allotted his sustenance daily and he greeted his father every day. So too Israel—someone who had four or five children would be anxious and say: Maybe the manna won't fall tomorrow and they will all die of famine! It ended up that they all directed their hearts to their father in heaven.

This dark side of “our daily bread” when read in its extreme paints a picture of God as manipulative or even abusive. The only way God could get us to be in relationship was to starve us?



R. Yehoshua cannot countenance this interpretation of the manna story. In contrast to R. Eliezer's idealization of one who doesn't worry about the next day's meal, R. Yehoshua cannot imagine that God wanted us to be in a state of dramatic food insecurity.

Mekhilta d'Rashbi BeShallah 16

ר' יהושע אומר שילקט אדם מן היום למחר וכן מערב שבת לשבת...
ר' יהושע אומר שנה אדם שתי הלכות בשחרית ושתי הלכות בערבית ועשה מלאכה כל היום מעלה עליו כאלו קיים כל התורה כולה

R. Yehoshua says: [God provided one portion each day so] that a person should gather from one day to the next, just like from Shabbat eve for Shabbat...

In what seems to be a radical departure from the plain meaning of the story of manna in Exodus chapter 16, R. Yehoshua suggests that the portion of manna people gathered each day was actually for the next day, just like on the eve of the Sabbath. On Friday they collected two portions—for Shabbat and Sunday, while for the rest of the week they collected only one portion, enough for the following day. This seems to fly in the face of the biblical story that describes the manna going rotten if it was left overnight (Exodus 16:19-20). Midrash scholars have struggled to explain R. Yehoshua's position here (perhaps it couldn't be left over if it had already been prepared, but it was meant to be left over in its raw form). Rather than a reason to dismiss this position, the textual difficulty of this view makes it all the more intriguing. R. Yehoshua, who was himself poor according to rabbinic tradition, cannot imagine a God who would leave his people with no food for the next day. "Our daily bread" as the mode for relationship with God results in a naïve and irresponsible approach to the human need to pursue a livelihood. And, it presents a major theological problem: How could God intentionally put us in a state of such anxiety? To the contrary, the people of Israel were being trained to know that they would always go to sleep with the *security* of the next day's meal "in their basket"; they were being trained to make sure to pursue a livelihood and not live recklessly and in fear waiting to get their daily bread each morning. This stance paves the way for an approach to the pursuit of livelihood entirely opposite to R. Eliezer:

Mekhilta de-Rashbi BeShallah 16

ר' יהושע אומר שנה אדם שתי הלכות בשחרית ושתי הלכות בערבית ועשה מלאכה כל היום מעלה עליו כאלו קיים כל התורה כולה



R. Yehoshua says: If a person learns two halakhot in the morning and two halakhot in the evening and works all day it is considered like fulfilling the entire Torah.

Unlike R. Eliezer who scoffs at a person who spends too much time thinking even about the next day's meal, R. Yehoshua believes in a religious orientation that is rooted in spending most of the day tending to our material needs. One doesn't need to be the *kohen* who has meals provided for them in order to receive and expound upon Torah; we may need to spend most of our days tending to our daily bread, and when we frame that day's work with the slow and steady drip of Torah this too is a path of fulfillment.

The Talmud shares two other reasons for why God offered us a daily portion of manna instead of enough for a year:

Yoma 86a

דבר אחר שהיו אוכלין אותו כשהוא חם
דבר אחר מפני משאוי הדרך

Another explanation: So they would eat it when it was hot.

Another explanation: Because of the burden for the way.

In these readings, getting only enough manna for each day did not add to our experience of affliction, nor was it embedded in a complex theological encounter. It was simply considerate, a way to tend to our needs in the most loving and practical manner.

The memory of manna is at once a means to “relive” and thereby confront the intensity of food insecurity, a reality that is skyrocketing nationally and globally in our present moment, and also a means to “relive” and embrace divine love that is rooted in tending to real and practical daily needs. Wherever we each may be on the axes sketched out in retelling the desert story—in a state of relative lack or abundance, finding R. Eliezer's or R. Yehoshua's approach more resonant—may the manna's interweaving of food, faith and relationship, teach us to notice real need in ourselves and others, and tend to the work of sustenance with diligence and care. How we feed ourselves and each other is nothing less than bringing divine words to life, **על כל מוצא פי ה' יחיה האדם** (Devarim 8:3).

