

LIKE MANNA FROM HEAVEN

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Tu BeShvat

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In this week's Torah portion of B'shalach, we read about one of the first difficulties complained of by the nation of Israel during their sojourn in the desert.

"And the whole assembly of the children of Israel complained against Moshe and Aharon in the wilderness; and the children of Israel said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of Hashem in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pot of meat, and when we ate bread to satisfaction; for you have taken us out into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.' And Hashem said to Moshe 'Behold, I will rain down for you bread from heaven; and the people will go out and gather a portion every day, so that I can test them, whether they follow my Torah, or not.' (Shemos 16:2- 4).

The nation of Israel needed sustenance. They complained to their leaders. Hashem told Moshe that the people would be provided with sustenance - and they were provided with the miraculous "man" (manna).

This episode is recounted in Devorim (8:3). We find that Moshe, shortly before he passed away, told the nation of Israel "And He afflicted you, and let you hunger, and fed you the manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; so that he will make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Hashem does man live."

Rav Aharon Kotler (Mishnas R' Aharon, P' Ekev) explained how man lives by the words that come forth from the mouth of Hashem. He quotes the Vilna Gaon's explanation (in Aderes Eliyahu) on the portion of the recounting of the creation of the world where the verses state (Bereishis 1: 29-30) "And Hashem said, 'Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, that has fruit that yields seed; it shall be to you for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the sky, and to everything that moves on the earth, which within there is life, I have given every green herb for food;' and it was so." The Vilna Gaon notes that this utterance,

whereby G-d says He has provided vegetation for food, is itself an expression of creation. Although G-d had already created the vegetation, it did not yet possess the ability to sustain man. G-d, in this pronouncement, endowed fruits and vegetables with the power to provide man with the nutrients needed for him to survive. He enabled them to sustain and satisfy the hunger of man. The provision of this special power to the fruits and vegetables warranted its own pronouncement.

It was this pronouncement, Rav Kotler says, to which Moshe referred when he stated that man lives by G-d's words. Hashem gave the power to sustain life to bread. Hashem gave the power to sustain life to manna as well. Just as the power of manna, a substance that existed only during one period in the history of mankind, stemmed clearly from an act of G-d, the power of bread, of fruits and vegetables, is the same.

What is curious, Rav Kotler notes, is that Moshe said that G-d had to "afflict the nation and let them hunger" so that they would know that "man does not live by bread alone." The provision of manna was miraculous. It came portion controlled, lasted only a day except for that provided on Friday for Shabbos, could change taste, came encased in dew, and produced no bodily waste. One would think that the mere provision of such an amazing, miraculous substance would be enough to alert a person that his sustenance was provided by G-d. Yet, Moshe said the nation had to hunger before the manna came so that they would acknowledge G-d.

Rav Kotler uses a parable provided by Rabi Shimon bar Yochai to explain. The Talmud says (Yoma 76a) "Rabi Shimon bar Yochai was asked by his students: Why didn't the manna come down to Israel once annually? He replied: I will give a parable: This can be compared to a king of flesh and blood who had one son, whom he provided with his nourishment once a year, and he would visit his father only once a year. Thereupon, he provided for his nourishment every day, so that he visited him every day. The same with Israel. . ."

Rav Shimon bar Yochai explained that, notwithstanding the miraculous nature of manna, if it had been provided only once annually, people would not appreciate that their sustenance came from G-d. G-d had to provide it daily so people would need to rely on Him, and recognize that they were dependant on Him for their survival. So too, Rav Kotler writes, the people needed to physically experience hunger, and therefore a need for salvation, before the miraculous intervention could occur. If the people had received manna before they absolutely needed it, they would not have fully appreciated the fact that "man does not live on bread alone." Man, a physical creature, needs physical and mental stimuli to bring it to certain realizations. Man needs the assistance of tangible motivational tools to recognize the full extent of certain truths. The people needed to first experience the feelings of hunger before they were able to appreciate the totality of the gift of manna. They needed to experience the anxiety of not knowing where the next day's food was coming from to fully appreciate G-d's role in providing sustenance.

On Tu B'Shvat, we acknowledge the start of the new year for trees. It is an appropriate time in the

midst of the dry "holiday-free" spell between Sukkos and Pesach to acknowledge the good that G-d gives us. It is an occasion to specifically appreciate the gift of fruit. It is an occasion to more generally appreciate G-d's gift of sustenance. We need to recognize that the fact that fruits provide sustenance is itself miraculous - as miraculous as manna. We need to recognize that it is G-d who gave us this gift that keeps on giving. Keeping these facts in perspective is not easy, as illustrated. The Magen Avraham (on Orech Chayim 131) writes that there is a custom "to increase consumption of different types of fruits on this day." By eating fruits in recognition of this special day, one can provide himself with the tools needed to acknowledge G-d's vital place in our everyday lives.

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