

CLOSER TO THE SOURCE

by Rabbi Label Lam

And Hashem said to Moshe; "Behold I shall rain down to you food from heaven; let the people go out and pick each day's portion on its day so that I can test them, whether they will follow my teaching or not." (Shemos 16:5)

What's the big test about the manna? After it falls every day we know with certainty and confidence that we are on a definite meal plan. As Alfred E. Newman said, "What, us worry?"

The Mishna of Yoma discusses the laws of Yom Kippur and outlines the procedure of the famous scapegoat whose destiny and purpose it was to be thrown off the cliff in the dessert. The person leading the goat had certain designated stops he needed to make along the way and at each tent they told him, "We have bread and we have water." The commentaries ask; "Why does he need to know about bread and water if it's Yom Kippur, a fast day and he's forbidden to eat?" The answer is that because it is a fast day and he is heading out to the dessert where there is no food and water he might get more and more hungry knowing that he's getting farther and farther from a food source. When they tell him that there is food and drink available they are helping to lessen his appetite. This psychological concept is known as "bread in the basket". We generally feel more secure and we are less hungry when we have real food on hand.

The Sanzer Rav, however, used to empty his house of money every night before going to sleep, distributing whatever was there to the local poor before retiring. One night, he was disturbed from his sleep. He searched the house and found that someone (his wife) had hid some money in a jar. He immediately went out and found a poor person to give the money to and was able to sleep that night.

The Chovos Halevavos, in The Gate of Humility, tells us that wealth is a greater test than poverty. For thousands of years, though, people have been crying, "Test me!" It's not so easy. He writes that wealth is given for three reasons; 1) As a reward 2) As a test. 3) As a punishment. He gives symptoms to indicate which of the three categories our personal wealth falls into. 1) If a person has more time to learn and resources to perform mitzvos then the money came as a blessing. It is a reward of a mitzvah that generates more mitzvos. 2) If the person is busy managing and maintaining his money then it is clearly a test. He can neither spend on himself or others. It is there to be protected and managed all day, every day. 3) If someone becomes more indulgent and self-destructive because of wealth then it is certainly given as a punishment.

Once in my life I bought a lottery ticket for 180 Million Dollars from a friend who went to Florida specifically to purchase them and resell them for a charity raffle. I went to sleep that night wondering what I would do if I actually won. By the time my mind had finished wandering, I was totally occupied with trying to expand the amount to meet charity and family commitments and deeply saddened about the portion that would have to go to the government for taxes. I was never in such a poor and needy state of mind before in my life. The next day when I realized that I didn't win, I was greatly relieved. I felt rich again.

Although our natural desire for security drives us to squirrel mass quantities of blue chip nuts, the temptation to rely on that cache may lead to a greater sense of lack. The Sanzer Rav lived as the generation of the dessert. He went out to collect his portion of manna daily. The promise of tomorrow's loaf was as real as "The Giver" and worth more than any crumb or coin of today.

The whole Jewish Nation lived like the Sanzer Rav for forty years in the dessert. Their real life experience tested them on this concept and trained them to trust the hand that fed them daily. How many loaves, then, does one need in the basket? How many guaranteed tomorrows do we need in the bank? How many daily meals must be dutifully delivered to our doorstep before the psychological need for visible security is obviated by an emerging sense that we are moving not farther away from the food basket, as we journey, but closer to the source.

Good Shabbos!

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