

TWO LOAVES, TWO METHODS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Two Loaves, Two Methods¹

You don't need a degree in higher mathematics to do the computation. From the dates given by the Torah for the Exodus and for the Stand at Sinai, we quickly confirm that the holiday of Shavuot coincides with the date that *Bnei Yisrael* stood ready to receive the Torah. You couldn't tell, however, from the Torah's description of the holiday. It just doesn't say anything about the giving of the Torah. More frustratingly, perhaps, the Torah highlights a different event, while bypassing the Revelation.

"And you shall offer a new *minchah*-offering to Hashem. From your dwelling places you shall bring bread that shall be waved, two loaves of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour, baked as *chametz*, *bikurim* to Hashem." [2] Replacing *matan* Torah at front-and-center of the Torah's description of Shavuot is the two-loaves offering.

Equally disturbing is the insistence on *chametz* in the composition of this offering. It is as if the Pesach we are told to count from has receded so far in our memory, that we now embrace what was shunned so absolutely during the previous holiday. It was only a matter of weeks before that we were instructed to ferret out every last morsel of *chametz*; on Shavuot it makes a dramatic and unexpected comeback. When we remember that we explained away our preoccupation with *chametz* crumbs as symbolic of the *yetzer hora*, whose every last vestige we wished to banish, the turnaround on Shavuot is all the more surprising.

We round out our list of difficulties by noting that something about the Torah's description of the offering seems a bit off. Why does the Torah refer to it as a "new *minchah*-offering?" There is nothing new about the offering as a *minchah*. It obeys rules similar to other *menachos*. What makes it new is the use of the new crop of grain. We would expect the Torah to call it a "*minchah* of new grain."

Chazal make a puzzling assertion about the generation of the wilderness. "The Torah was only given to those who ate the *man*." [3] Our *mesorah* regarding the *man* is that it was a gourmand's delight: you could taste in it whatever you fancied. While this may be attractive to us, it flies in the face of what we are taught about the necessary sacrifices one must be prepared to make in order to acquire Torah. The Mishnah in Avos[4] tells us that the way of Torah is to eat plain bread, flavored only with salt. A passage in the Gemara [5] argues that Torah gains a firm foothold only with those who kill themselves over it. Why would the Torah be given to those who dined on a table of earthly

delights?

We might find a solution in a comment of the *Peri Ha-aretz*.^[6] The rabble that complained about the *mon*, clamoring for meat, is described by the Torah as *hisavu ta'avah*. Literally, this can be taken to mean that they desired to desire.^[7] The *mon*, he explains, may have tasted like anything one wanted, but eating it was a very different experience from all eating that we know. The *mon* was spiritual food; it lacked the properties of foodstuffs we are familiar with. Consuming it did not stimulate any physical desire whatsoever. Those who complained yearned for their previous existence, when food delighted the senses and aroused them to eagerly look towards their next nibble. When the Mechilta says that Torah was given only to *mon*-eaters, it means that those who first received it had to live on a plane in which it did not have to compete with the pursuit of physical pleasures and delights. Those who threw themselves into its study in that first generation needed to be free of the desires that animate the rest of us.

We haven't been privileged to eat Heavenly food for well over three millennia, nor can we delude ourselves regarding our complex desires. We understand just how important they are to us, and how they wield enormous influence upon our behavior. We are expected, however, to control these desires, and then some. That is where the Shavuot offering comes in.

Bread stands as a symbol for two kinds of human need. Bread easily works as a code word for our greater sustenance. It also, however, serves as a euphemism for a very different need. When Yosef attempted to reason with his seductress, he spoke of the great trust his master Potiphar had shown towards him. Nothing in his household had been held back from Yosef's supervision, save for "the bread that he ate,^[8]" a polite reference to Potiphar's wife. The two loaves of bread in the offering brought on Shavuot stand for these two desires that grip us so strongly and firmly.

How does the devoted servant of Hashem deal with the desires that often interfere with his goodness, and certainly with his focus on higher pursuits? One strategy that comes to mind is limiting and curtailing them. The more spiritually-oriented personality will train himself to get by with simpler needs; he will shun any involvement with them that is unseemly.

While this approach seems obvious, people on a higher spiritual plane can do better. They can take their desires and their objects and elevate them. Rather than crush them or hide them, a person can turn them into pure spirituality. (Think of *korbanos*: atonement is won for the owner of an offering by the eating of the *kohanim*.)

This second, higher option is not an alternative open to everyone. Having just escaped the clutches of that fatal, fiftieth level of degradation, the Jews who left Egypt were not able to employ it. They needed a strong dose of taming their inner wants and desires, of learning to limit, curtail, and do without. That process is expressed by the search for, and the destruction of, *chametz* - the symbol of the *yetzer- hora* induced flaws within us.

After eight weeks of successful curbing of our baser instincts, we were ready for something more -

for a new kind of offering to Hashem, literally a new *minchah*! Our *avodah* is no longer symbolized by banishing *chametz*, but by elevating it.

This newness - the ability to sanctify and elevate, and not merely discipline and curb - is the essence of the fiftieth day we count towards from the second day of Pesach. We engage in self-elevation throughout the *Sefirah* period; if successful, we find ourselves positioned so that as elevated souls, we can elevate the ordinary materials around us.

It is therefore not surprising at all that Shavuos, of all holidays, is the one that halachically demands that we incorporate earthly pleasures like eating and drinking.[9] Initially, we regard this as counterintuitive. If anything, Shavuos is a holiday in which the very lack of any special mitzvah to perform suggests that it is a time for spiritual contemplation and inner service. Even if the pleasures of the world are incorporated in other holidays, we would have thought that Shavuos is the exception. Instead, we learn that according to one opinion,[10] all holidays offer a choice of *avodah* in which a person can spend his time in more spiritual pursuits and eschew any special holiday meals and the like. All holidays, that is, with the exception of Shavuos, where the merriment is mandatory.

We can now understand the reason. The embrace of the physical is not a concession to our lesser physical selves, but to the elevation that we have gained in the seven weeks since Pesach and the specialness of the fiftieth day, which contains within it all the gains of the previous forty- nine. Being elevated people, we can and we must practice on Shavuos our new skill of raising high everything around us.

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1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 2 pgs. 359-361
 2. Vayikra 23:16-17
 3. Mechilta, Beshalach, beginning
 4. Avos 6:4
 5. Bamidbar 11:4
 6. The Shev Shematesa in his introduction (letters zayin and ches) cites this thought in the name of the Alshich, and fully develops it
 7. Bereishis 39:6; Rashi
 8. Berachos 63B
 9. Pesachim 68B
 10. Albeit one that is not halachically accepted
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