

Manna

Despite leaving Egypt with vast herds of cattle and sheep, and witnessing one of the greatest miracles at the start of this Sedrah, the crossing of the Red Sea, within 6 weeks of the Exodus the children of Israel are demonstrating against death by famine. There is anger and frustration in God's reply although he does listen to their complaint - he will *rain down* (ממטיר) bread from the heavens. In the past God had rained down (המטיר) fire and brimstone on Sodom and Amorah and more recently rained down (וימטר) hail upon the Egyptians. So perhaps the Israelites expect something more problematic than just 'bread'.

They called it manna, but at first they had no idea what it was. Knowing I work in pharmaceuticals, friends ask me if they should take a medicine after the expiry date. But the shelf life for manna was a real problem – 24 hours. By the next morning it was unfit to eat, wormy and stinking. Except that Friday's manna had a 48 hour shelf life. And the manna that Aaron was commanded in Chapter 26 to place inside a jar in the Mishcan survived for centuries.

It isn't surprising that the Israelites were perplexed by manna. It looked like coriander seed, white and flaky, and lay on the morning dew. It tasted like wafers dipped in honey, (think granola) although in Bamidbar it tastes of oil, and later midrash explained that it could taste of whatever the person desired. It wasn't a convenience food though, it needed to be ground and baked, but midrash did envisage a form of door-to-door delivery. The Talmud (Yoma 75a) explains that in a dispute between two Hebrews about stealing a slave, Moses would wait until the next day to deliver his ruling. The next morning he'd visit the houses of the two disputants; the amount of manna in each house would tell him how many people were in the house, and therefore who was harbouring the slave.

What may have been most perplexing was why God was making them collect this manna each day. If it could last 2 days, then why not one week? The disciples of R. Shimon b. Yochai asked him this, and he answered with a parable (Yoma 75b). A king ordered that his son's rations should be issued just once a year, so the son came to see his father only once a year. The king became angry, and also a bit sad, and ordered that the rations should be issued daily, so that the son was compelled to see his father every day. So it was with the Israelites. Whoever had a family worried for them and said 'perhaps no manna will descend tomorrow, and we will all starve', so they prayed to Heaven every day, which R Shimon b Yochai presumably thought was good for the Israelites and for God.

But there was a downside. This sense of fear – would there be food tomorrow – and dependency - having to rely totally on God for their food - sapped their spirit. In a few months, after the 12 spies returned from their mission, there were going to be some big decisions to make on whether they could take on the Canaanites in battle. They went with the opinion of the majority of the spies, voted to return to Egypt, failed that challenge, and ironically sentenced themselves to another 39 years of manna.