

MIRACULOUS MANNA FROM HEAVEN

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Manna from heaven—there’s actually a light-hearted, feel-good film by that name; it’s a fable about what happens when a group of people get a “gift from God” (i.e., a financial windfall), but many years later find out it was simply a loan. On some level, this film implicitly reflects our modern view that miracles, like that of the *manna*, ought to be unalloyed, ought not to entail any quid quo pro. Windfall, something that simply falls out of the wind, is the right word; we want no obligations—no limits on our freedom to do completely as we please, no rein on our autonomy—in exchange for any of the gifts we receive from the Creator.

If one is living a more or less secular life, it’s easy to trivialize the gift of the *manna* described in the Torah, to imagine that it’s of a piece with what many regard as biblical nonsense, wonders and miracles they find incomprehensible in the context of history and modern science.

Although this view is seemingly harmless, it’s inherently problematic, even spiritually poisonous, for those who seek in the Torah a vision and path for their lives. This is true because the trivialization of any part of the Torah, often from ignorance, has the predictable effect of incrementally alienating us from conviction that the Torah has any compelling usefulness as an uplifting lifelong vision and path.

As we are increasingly alienated from that vision and path, we become ever more distanced from its elevating purpose—to bring every moment of our day-to-day existence in contact with the holiness of the Shechinah, making God palpably present in all our earthly affairs—moving us ever closer to the devaluing and demoralizing effects of secular life. To the extent we become more secularized, our capacity to create meaning and fulfillment—to do more than satisfy our sensory appetites—diminishes into nothingness. And, most troubling, our inability to guide the lives of our children towards meaning and fulfillment based on the Torah’s vision and path—an alternative to the popularly shared conviction that fulfillment in life is to be derived from the acquisition of position, prestige, power, possessions, and physique—marks the virtually certain demise of their prospects to create and sustain lives of moral spirituality for themselves and future generations.

All of which argues for making the investment necessary to understand and apply the wisdom of the Torah in all things—and, certainly, nonetheless in the matter of *manna* from heaven. To do so, however, requires that one jettison the misguided notion that the Torah should be judged by the standards and methods of science, because doing so makes no more sense than to judge science by

the Torah’s standards and methods. Were we to take up the latter cause, we would—nonsensically, to be sure—reject science because it teaches us virtually nothing about justice and compassion, without which human social life would be no more than pointless chaos. Science and religion in our view are not incompatible, but their usefulness depends in large measure on comprehending their unique objectives, methods, and limitations.

What, then, does our tradition teach us about the *manna* from heaven?

The people had experienced the extraordinary crossing of the Reed Sea, which was particularly miraculous, because their arrival at the sea and its opening occurred simultaneously, allowing them to escape Pharaoh’s army.

It was less than two months since they had left Egypt, and they were in the wilderness between Elim and Sinai. The food they had brought from Egypt was running out. So they were no longer assured of sustenance, as they had been in Egypt, which was provided there by masters who had an interest in their continuous work for the state. Presumably their consciousness was dominated by fear that they would starve in the wilderness.

Then God said to Moses: “Look, I am about to make it rain bread [לֶחֶם] from heaven for you; the people shall go out each day and gather the amount for a day, so that I may test them whether they will walk in My Teaching or not.” (Exodus 16:4)

Our commentators teach that the *manna* was a cake-dough, like fine flour mixed with honey (צפירית בדבש). The scripture (Numbers 11:7) tells us it was like coriander seed, which immediately removes both its character and means of delivery from the realm of the *supernatural*. That is, seeds are commonly picked up by the wind and carried distances before being dropped back to earth. And since *midbar* (מדבר) is not a wilderness or desolate place per se, but an expanse of uncultivated land, including grassy pasturage, it could certainly serve as a continuing source of seeds. Moreover, as a single source of nutrition, seeds have very high food value. So the miracle is not that the seed-like *manna* rained from the sky, but that it continued to do so except for one day in the week, and that the Israelites were always at the right place at the right time to benefit from such an extraordinary gift.

Certainly, if one was entering the desert with no prospect of a reliable source of food, nutritious seeds falling from heaven would seem like a gift—so the Hebrew name for *manna*, מן, from the root מ-נ-ה, makes sense, because it’s related to מ-נ-ה, a cognate descended from the same ancestral root,

meaning to give something willingly. Incidentally, the women first recognized it as a gift from God.

What does the tradition understand to have been the “nature” of the gift?

Enough was received each day to satisfy that day’s needs, and it was gathered according to the needs of one’s household. If one tried to gather more than a day’s requirement to keep it for the following day, the surplus putrefied. On the sixth day one could gather a double portion, because it could not be gathered on the seventh day.

Apart from the obvious purpose of the *manna* to feed the people, we might ask: What did the *manna* come to *teach* the people—including us?

The *manna* confirmed that Moses and Aaron had *not* misled them; by following their lead the people found themselves in the right places at the right times to benefit from an unimaginable gift in the wilderness. Ironically, however, the gift of the *manna* also taught *kavod Adoshem* (קבודת ה',), the infinite power and glory of the One masterminding creation, and thus that Moses and Aaron were not essential to the miraculous events themselves. As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches, the people came to understand the *manna* as a gift from God of that which was due and sufficient to each *law-abiding* person. In effect, if they followed the law, they would miraculously find themselves at the right places at the right times to ensure their survival against all odds.

But what might the people think of the God whose laws, if accepted and followed, would lead to such wondrous outcomes in nature, outcomes that would seemingly offer assurance, however dim, of their own future history?

Here was a God capable of providing precisely what was required to fulfill their daily food needs, with the ability to deliver *every day* the most basic necessities of their continued existence. But it was the *manna* delivery schedule that revealed the most compelling lessons about their own deliverance in the unseen future.

The *manna* only came on six days; there was no *manna* on the seventh day. That the *manna* was not provided on the seventh day confirmed it was a *free-will* gift by God on the other six days, because it demonstrated that God not only had the power to start creation, but to stop it as well. So the sole reason for working ceased on the seventh day—recall that Shabbat was introduced to the people before *mattan Torah* (giving and receiving of the Torah)—revealing the seventh day not as a burden, but a gift from the Creator: six days work would do it—they could rely on God on the seventh day.

Their national deliverance was ensured, since by observing God’s law they could transform the wilderness (or any other future place of habitation) into a paradise, a return to *Gan Eden* (Garden of Eden—גן עדן), which had been lost to humankind through the loss of its moral spirituality.

So in providing the *manna* we see an instance of Adoshem’s *wonderworking*—the *feleh* (פלא) or revelation of God in directing the laws of nature. While it may arguably be true that seed falling from the sky is itself not beyond the laws of nature and observable natural phenomena, that following the laws of God places a people at the right places and right times for 40 years to benefit from such gifts would hardly be described as anything but miraculous. It may be seen to presage all the subsequent history of the Jewish people—from the return to the land following the Babylonian exile to the reestablishment of the state of Israel after the Holocaust—in which, surely, abandonment of the Torah would have undermined survival.

We have here a teaching moment showing the Creator’s free will transforming the world through the laws of Creation, which confirms the power of God over both nature and history. It was then and remains now a model for humankind—we are to use our free will, in the image of God, to similarly perform acts that transform the world, confident that the Law of God is connected to our experience of nature and our history.

Shabbat was introduced by the daily miracle of the *manna*. It was the first in a series of lessons showing that Divine Providence continues up to the present moment and far into the unseen future, a potentially infinite uplifting and perfecting of humankind’s spiritual and social condition—which requires nothing more for its full realization than using the bread we’ve received as a gift to sustain us in the vision and path of the Torah.

The *manna* storage container (צנצנת המן) and the *luchot* (Tablets of the Testimony—לוחות) were kept in one location in the wilderness, possibly to serve as a continuing reminder that we are given our daily ration of what we need to survive—all the means of our sustenance—to sustain us for *God’s* objectives. From this we may learn that our possessions—that which may serve to fuel our godliness, which in turn is the means of sanctifying our possessions as more than mere material objects for our individual gratification—are to further our national mission as a *mamlechet kohanim* (nation of priests—ממלכת כהנים) and a *goy kadosh* (holy nation—גוי קדוש).

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