

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BESHALACH

What?! By Rav Ezra Bick

Let us ask the question the Jews asked in the desert, when they first encountered the manna:

The Israelites saw, and they said to each other, "WHAT ('mann') is it," for they did not know what it was (16,15).

I would like to change the meaning of the question slightly. What precisely is the point of having manna fall from the sky, with its special quality of being unhoardable? What is the reason that the manna is connected to Shabbat observance? What is the meaning of the manna, within the context of the narrative of Parashat Beshalach?

A. Some questions

Parashat Ha-man is contained in chapter 16 of Sefer Shemot. Let us first examine the verses and list the apparent anomalies and difficulties.

1. 16,1: "They traveled from Eilim, and the entire congregation of the children of Israel came to the desert of Sin, which is between Eilim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month of their exodus from Egypt." Why are the location and the time here spelled out so extensively? If we compare this stop on their way with the previous two, we will not find a comparable specificity - "They came to Mara" (15,22), "They came to Eilim" (15,27). In neither case is there a date, or an attempt to exactly locate the station within the larger, and presumably better known, geographic picture.
2. 16,2: "The entire congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moshe and Aharon in the desert." There is something missing here. This verse should have been preceded by a statement that there was no food in Midbar Sin, or that their original stores ran out. When they complained in Mara, the Torah first explained that "they could not drink the water in Mara, for it was bitter" (15,23). Similarly, in Refidim, we first find "there was no water for the people to drink" (17,1), and only then, "And the people argued with Moshe and said, give us water" (17,2). Why is the reason in our case for the complaint not explicated?
3. What is indicated by "... Israel complained... IN THE DESERT?" We already know that the location is "the desert of Sin." Naturally, if the complained, they complained in the desert. Why does the Torah append this geographic location to the complaint?

4. 16,4-13: The complaint of the Jews is followed by a confusing list of speeches of God, Moshe and Aharon. This is the order as described in the verses:
 - a. God tells Moshe that He will send down "bread from the heaven" to be collected each day, except for Friday, when there will be a double portion (4-5).
 - b. Moshe AND AHARON tell the Jews that in the evening and the morning they will witness that God will hear their complaint, "but what are we that you should complain about us?" ((6-7).
 - c. Moshe then - well, he seems to say exactly the same thing again (8).
 - d. Moshe tells Aharon to gather the Jews before God (9).
 - e. God tells Moshe that He will give the Jews meat in the evening and bread in the morning (11-12).
 - f. After the manna falls, Moshe explains to the Jews what the rules for collecting manna are, without mentioning Shabbat (15-16).
5. God promises meat by evening, and indeed the camp is covered with quail (13). But there is no further reference to the quail, nor are we told of the reaction of the people to this event, even though previously Moshe had predicted that "in the evening, and you shall know that God has taken you out of Egypt." What is the status and the meaning of the quail, especially in relation to the manna, which is described at length and clearly is at the center of the story?

There are more questions, but that will do for now. (See the Ramban for some discussion of each of these questions).

B. No food?

Let us start from the second and third question. The Ramban already suggests that the answer to the second is found in the third. The reason the Jews complained was because they were in the desert. They "complained... in the desert" means that their complaint was formed and caused by their being in the desert. Now, you might understand this to be no more than a shorthand way of saying that they had no food, since the desert is associated in our minds with a shortage of food. But that is not what I am suggesting, for had that been the case, I still would expect the Torah to state that "there was nothing to eat" just as when there is no water, that is explicitly stated. Rather, I am suggesting that there was, at least for the moment, plenty of food. It was the fact that they were entering the desert, a place where there is no assured supply of food IN THE FUTURE, that led to the complaints. It was not hunger, but uncertainty, that caused the unrest.

In fact, the desert is not necessarily a place where there is no food. More importantly, the Jews were only a few weeks from Egypt, and they had originally planned a trip that would have to take at least that long. Even the short route ("the way of the land of the Philistines") would have necessitated a trek of several weeks. If we assume that their immediate goal is Mt. Sinai (as God had promised Moshe in Shemot 3,12), they have yet some distance to go, and presumably they should have prepared food. We know that they had

their flocks with them, and there is, as yet, apparently no shortage of water. So why are they complaining about imminent death from starvation?

The answer is not that they are feeling hunger but that they are scared. In the desert, it is difficult to know where your food will come from. They are no longer sure of the path (since they are not on the "way of the land of the Philistines"), and they are now "in the middle of nowhere" (between Eilim and Sinai). They lack not food but faith.

This is indicated by the picturesque language used to describe Egypt – the pot of meat. The contrast between the desert and Egypt is between a land of unknown resources and a full pot. They remember not the fullness of their bellies but the fullness of the pot; in other words, the assurance of food tomorrow. This is what they find so disturbing in the present – not the lack of food per se, but the lack of a pot brimming with an abundance of food. What was so special about Egypt was that there was more food than they could eat, and THAT is what they miss now.

In fact, we can not be sure that they always ate well in Egypt, for, as slaves, they might well have been deprived by their masters. But they undoubtedly had enough to survive and continue working, and, since this was Egypt, they had no fear for the future in that respect.

This situation, the assurance of tomorrow's meal without necessarily being richly fed now, is in fact the essence of being a slave. The slave has no riches of his own, but he relies on his master, who is rich. The complaint of the Jews when they reach the desert is a direct expression of their slave mentality, and their memories of Egypt are a form of nostalgia for the security of enslavement. To a slave, whose meal comes every day at the same time from the hands of his master, the desert is truly a terrifying place, even if at the moment he still has food in his hands.

We now understand the answer to the first question. The geographic location is "the desert of Sin, which is between Eilim and Sinai;" in other words, halfway between a place of abundant food (seventy palms and twelve springs) and their direct goal, Sinai. The time frame is "on the fifteenth day of the second month of their exodus from Egypt;" in other words, halfway between the crossing of the sea and the revelation of Sinai. (Actually, they were 24 days from the sea and 21 days from the giving of the Torah, but I think it is close enough. In fact, the midpoint here may be not in the number of days but in the count of the months. They left in the first month, the Torah is given in the third, and they are now precisely in the middle of the second, intermediate, month). The Torah is stressing to us the feeling of "being in the middle" – away from Egypt, but not yet at their goal. The open-ended future, cut off from their origin but not yet in sight of their destination, between worlds, as it were, is the background to their situation. The actual distance from Egypt is not great, nor is the time that has transpired sufficient to actually exhaust their food-supply, but mentally, psychologically, they are halfway from everywhere.

C. What is it?

The manna is God's answer to this complaint. We all know the special conditions of the manna – it fell every morning, but could not be stored for the next day. Everyone received the same amount. The attempt to hoard resulted in its becoming wormy and ruined. God explicitly tells Moshe that this is not merely a blessing but a "test" (nisayon) – "will they follow My Torah or not" (16,4). Rashi explains this test as referring to the laws associated with the manna. I would suggest, following the Ibn Ezra, that it refers not to any specific law but to the entire relationship of the Jews to God in the desert. "In order to test them' - because they will need Me every day" (Ibn Ezra 16,4). The Manna is, in a sense, a recreation of the assured dependence of the slave on his master, only that God has replaced the Egyptian master. On the other hand, because God is not a natural cause, and His bounty cannot be seen with the same sense of natural assurance that the overflowing Nile gives to the population of Egypt, this is a test of faith. The manna will fall daily without failure, God promises, and you will be totally dependent on that promise, because it is impossible to accumulate manna and save it for a rainy day. The experience of the manna is a kind of education, training the Jews to have faith in the providence of God, weaning them from a dependence on hoarding, which would have been, perhaps, a natural reaction to their separation from the fleshpots of Egypt.

This helps us to understand the deep connection between the manna and Shabbat. One of the messages of Shabbat is that everything has to be prepared beforehand. On Shabbat one does not accumulate anything at all, but relies only on what has been prepared. This message is explicated in our parasha - "On the sixth day, they shall prepare that which they shall bring" (16,5). Shabbat is, for all generations, a small trial of dependence, where one enjoys what one has without gathering for the morrow. Imagine the feeling of the recently released slave, when finally, on the sixth day, he has managed to put aside a small nest-egg, a small security for the rainy day he knows in his Jewish heart will surely come - and then, on the next day, Shabbat, he has to eat his savings and go back to living on the edge of penury! Naturally, he can barely resist and goes out and tries to gather on the Shabbat, in order to protect his savings. "On it came about on the seventh day, some of the people went out to gather, but they did not find" (27).

This lies at the heart of the mysterious unknown nature of the manna as well. Were the manna to be any form of a familiar food, no matter how unexpected it were initially, the Jews would have come to view it eventually as the natural food found in this particular desert. It would have become a natural resource, a form of security for the inhabitants of the desert. But God wishes the Jews to remain on the edge of insecurity, with the desert remaining a land that does not provide assured food. Hence, manna is not the food of the desert but "bread from the heavens" (4), and the only thing the Jews can say when they encounter it is "what!?" What is it - its name is a question. "Mann hu?" - what is it? Therefore "The house of Israel called it mann" (31).

D. Manna and Quail

In the initial speech of Moshe to the Jews, he tells them that there will be meat in the evening and bread in the morning. Indeed, that is what takes place - quail covering the camp in the evening and the manna in the morning. We do not find the quail mentioned again except in exceptional circumstances (the episode of Kivrot Hataava, Bamidbar 11). This parasha itself concludes with the statement, "The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they arrived at an inhabited land, they ate manna until they arrived at the edge of the land of Canaan" (35). While this does not necessarily mean that they ate nothing else, it definitely seems to imply that their only regular food was manna. (See Ramban v.12, who states that the quail fell for forty years). What happened to the quail, and what was the purpose of its falling in the evening?

To answer this, we have to follow very closely the multiple speeches of God and Moshe in the beginning of the story (question 4). When God first responds to the complaint of the people, He does not mention the quail. "Now I am going to rain down bread from the heaven, and the people shall go out to gather every day's amount" (4). At this point, God already mentions that on the sixth day there will be a double portion. Immediately afterwards Moshe and Aharon speak to the people, and, for the first time and without apparent command from God, tell them that

in the evening, you will know that God has taken you out of Egypt; and in the morning, you will see the glory of God, when He hears your complaint against God, but who are we, that you should complain against us (7,8).

Moshe then makes explicit the meaning of "evening and morning," telling them,

when God gives you meat in the evening and bread in the morning in satiation, when God shall hear your complaints which you complain against Him, but who are we; your complaints are not against us but against God (8).

Only after Aharon gathers the people do we find God saying to Moshe:

Say to them, you shall eat meat towards evening and in the morning be satiated with bread, and you shall know that I am HaShem your God" (12).

What is happening here? Apparently, there are two different issues. One is the faith issue I described above. God's answer to that is the manna, with Shabbat emphasized. But Moshe and Aharon have seized on another issue. The Jews, in their complaint, have complained to Moshe and Aharon and placed the responsibility for their plight squarely on their shoulders. "Would that we had died by the HAND OF GOD in the land of Egypt... for YOU have taken us out to this desert, to kill all this congregation by hunger" (3). Moshe perceives a basic error of religious knowledge here. The Jews fail to see the guiding hand of God in the exodus and in the path in the desert.

Moshe therefore speaks to the people and admonishes them, telling them that their complaint is not against him and Aharon, but against God. Moshe emphasizes that when they see the miracles of the quail and the manna, they will "know that God has taken you out of Egypt" (6). It appears to me that the manna is the basic answer to the slave mentality of the Jews, which is not so much a sin as a condition. God does not give the manna as a punishment or a rebuke, but as a gift. The quail, on the other hand, although food, carries within it a rebuke, similar to what happens in Parashat Behaalotekha, when the Jews rebel against the regimen of the manna and God bombards them with quail (Bamidbar 11). The purpose of the quail is directly to correct the theological transgression and to show them that God is in charge of their destiny. Precisely because the quail is a natural solution (though miraculous in its appearance in this place and time), it demonstrates God's mastery over NATURE, and therefore His responsibility for their fate. The manna, on the other hand, shows that those who are God's servants are completely out of the bounds of nature and are fed directly from "His table."

How could Moshe and Aharon have promised the quail if God did not first tell them? The answer presumably is that God DID tell them, since it is inconceivable that they made it up on their own. Nonetheless, the Torah gives the impression that God is initially only concerned with the manna and its message of dependence on God, whereas Moshe and Aharon are interested in the problem which concerns them directly, the misplaced "blame" and responsibility which the Jews place on their shoulders.

This difference between the message of the quail and the message of the manna is hinted at even in the language with which Moshe introduces the double miracle.

Moshe and Aharon said to all the Israelites: Evening, and you shall know that God has taken you out of Egypt.
And morning, and you shall see the glory of God, when He hears your complaints against God.... (6-7)

As Rashi points out (quoting the Sages), the first verse contains a note of displeasure, especially when compared to the second. The evening is directed only to correcting their theological error. The morning, by contrast, contains an element of religious excitement and uplifting - you shall witness the glory of God! The Sages state that the evening is "not with a shining face" and the morning is with "a shining face." Their complaint in terms of food is met graciously by God in the morning. The evening is not an answer to their complaint, but only a lesson in who is in charge.

Since there is a difference between God's main concern and Moshe's, the conversations between them and between them and the people become rather convoluted. First God speaks to Moshe about the manna (and Shabbat), then Moshe and Aharon speak to the people, stressing the proper address for their complaints, then, after they bring the people to the proper address, gathering them to hear the word of God, God appears and adopts their double plan. Once, however, the morning dawns and the Jews

experience the manna, the primacy of God's plan is manifest, as the rest of the parasha deals exclusively with the manna and its ramifications.

I think there are two reasons for the primacy of the manna issue over the quail issue. The first is that it is genuinely more central, pointing, as it does, to the main purpose of the exodus - to turn the nation of slaves into the servants of God. At least in the immediate future, this is crucial, as it is a precondition for receiving the Torah. The recognition of God's leadership of Jewish destiny can wait - perhaps until they are about to enter the Land of Israel and begin political life.

The second reason, which admittedly at least partially contradicts the first, is that the message of the quail was not absorbed in the short run. The Jews continued to turn to Moshe as the source of their problems and to accuse him of responsibility for what happens on the way through the desert. In the case of the golden calf, this is especially evident -

The people saw that Moshe was tardy in descending from the mountain, and they gathered on Aharon and said to him: Arise and make us a god, for this man Moshe, WHO TOOK US OUT OF EGYPT, we do not know what has happened to him. (32,1)

... he made it into a molten calf, and they said: THIS IS YOUR GOD ISRAEL, WHO TOOK YOU OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT. (32,4)

This perception of Moshe as the actual leader and decision-maker in the desert continues to be expressed throughout the events in the desert, throughout the complaints of Sefer Bamidbar, until the original generation has disappeared. God's plan turns out to be correct. First one must take Egypt out of the soul of the Jews; only then can they reach full recognition of God's mastery of nature and their destiny.

Further points for study:

It was a long shiur, but did you notice I neglected to answer part of question 4? Why does Moshe repeat (v. 8) what had been said one verse earlier by Moshe and Aharon (6-7)? What is the difference between the two verses and what is the reason for the second?