

A Taste of Torah - Nourishment in the Parasha

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Parashat Beha'alotcha - The Soul that Felt Empty Amidst Miraculous Food Why Can We Feel Unnourished Even When Surrounded by Blessings?

How Can I Shift from Gobbling Down Food to Eating in Holiness?

I have always been fascinated by the manna – this spiritual food described as a translucent, white crystal or pearl-like substance, suggesting that it was not only white but also radiant and luminous. Its taste, furthermore, resembled the sustaining richness of mother’s milk mingled with oil (*Bamidbar* 11:7-8). How could such nourishment be anything but purely satisfying?

In my ongoing struggle to eat in holiness rather than simply gobbling down food, I have noticed that sometimes, no matter how much I consume, I remain hungry, craving more, whereas at other times, I can eat very little and feel completely satisfied. I am keenly aware that it is not only a lack of physical sustenance that leaves me hungry. When facing hardships, insults, or interpersonal challenges, I instinctively open the fridge and reach for food.

For years, I have taught eating meditations using mantras such as “A tzaddik eats to satisfy his soul” (*Mishlei* 13:25), encouraging people to chew each bite 32 times and recite Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk’s prayer for eating in holiness. Nevertheless, I remain far from the level of the tzaddikim who experience Divine awareness with every chew and eat solely for the mitzvah of elevating holy sparks.

I’m inspired by my husband, who sits down to eat each meal with focused awareness. Yet I pray for the day when I will be able to heed his advice to eat without doing anything else, not writing emails or checking my phone, simply focusing on eating to satisfy my soul. For the Israelites in the desert, multitasking while eating was not the problem that made them complain about the heavenly manna. Rather, it was a spiritual disconnect from which I myself may also suffer.

How Could the Soul Feel Dry While Receiving Heavenly Nourishment?

The complaint of the Jewish people in the wilderness is surprising because they do not say, “We are hungry,” but rather, “Our soul is dried up:”

ספר במדבר פרק יא פסוק י וְעַתָּה נִפְשֵׁנוּ יְבֹשָׁה אֵין כָּל בְּלִתֵּי אֵל הַמָּן עֵינֵינוּ:

“But now our soul is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes” (*Bamidbar* 11:6)

The Torah directs us immediately toward an inner emptiness rather than physical deprivation. This is astonishing because the generation of the wilderness experienced nourishment unlike any other generation. Their food descended directly from Heaven. They did not sow, harvest, or depend upon rainfall. Yet despite receiving miraculous sustenance, they felt an inner dryness. The Israelites mistakenly believed ordinary foods generated moisture and vitality within their body, while they perceived the manna as drying their soul internally. Yet the Torah later emphasizes that the manna tasted “like rich oil” precisely to demonstrate the opposite – that the manna refreshed and revived those who consumed it, making the soul “like a watered garden” (Ramban, *Bamidbar* 11:6).

The Torah, therefore, hints that people may experience emptiness even when surrounded by blessing. External abundance alone does not guarantee inner nourishment. We may possess everything needed for life and still experience a sense of inner dryness if our soul remains unfed.

How Did the Manna Lose Its Wonder?

Chazal teach that the manna contained every imaginable flavor and nourishment. If one wished to taste

fish, bread, or another delicacy, the manna could provide that experience (Rashi, Bamidbar 11:5; Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 75a). Yet despite this extraordinary gift, the Israelites became dissatisfied and complained because they did not see the variety of colors, textures, and forms normally associated with different foods. No matter what flavor they experienced, the manna still appeared as manna. Since their eyes perceived only one appearance, all its richness gradually disappeared from awareness. Therefore, despite receiving miraculous nourishment, “it appeared to them as nothing” (Pesikta Zutarta, *Bamidbar* 11:6).

This teaching reveals something profound about human nature. Nourishment does not depend only upon what enters the mouth. Visual experience also contributes to satisfaction. The same food may feel more nourishing when prepared with beauty, color, and care. Even a simple presentation can awaken appreciation and make nourishment feel more complete. For example, I enjoy arranging a circle of red pepper around an olive dip with a shiny olive placed in the center. The ingredients remain unchanged, yet the visual presentation transforms the experience of eating.

The generation of the wilderness received miraculous sustenance, yet because the manna looked the same day after day, its wonder gradually faded. *Parashat Beha'alotcha* suggests that one of the greatest causes of dissatisfaction is not actual lack but becoming blind to the richness already before us.

The greatest blessings in our lives often lose their ability to nourish us once they become familiar. What begins as extraordinary slowly becomes ordinary, not because it has diminished, but because familiarity has dulled our appreciation.

Although the manna descended every morning, the clouds of glory surrounded them continually, and water flowed from Miriam's well, daily miracles eventually lost their ability to inspire wonder.

How often does this occur in our own lives that miracles become routine while expectations replace gratitude? Health, Torah learning, family, community, meaningful work, or even simple daily meals may gradually become expected rather than cherished. Perhaps one of the greatest causes of spiritual hunger is the gradual loss of awareness of the blessings that already nourish us.

What Were the Greatest Challenges of Receiving Food from Heaven?

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin suggests that the people's deeper struggle was not truly about taste or variety, but uncertainty. The manna descended only for one day at a time, forcing Israel to continually depend upon Hashem without visible reserves or guarantees (HaEmek Davar, *Bamidbar* 11:6). The challenge of living with such dependence also helps explain the Jewish people's longing for Egypt.

סַפֵּר בַּמִּדְבָּר פֶּרֶק יֵא פְסוּקֵי הַ זְכָרְנוּ אֶת הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חִנָּם:

“We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt for free...” (*Bamidbar* 11:5).

Rashi questions how anything in Egypt could have been free. If straw was not even provided without cost, how could fish have been free? Rather, “free” refers to being free from mitzvot – free from the obligations and responsibilities accompanying closeness to Hashem (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:5). Nourishment became intertwined with *bitachon*. Physical sustenance depended not only upon gathering the manna, but also upon maintaining an ongoing relationship with Hashem and living according to His mitzvot.

Moreover, the manna descended only one day at a time. The Jewish people could not gather long-term reserves, guarantee tomorrow's sustenance, or secure their future. Living with such dependence upon Hashem can feel uncomfortable because it means accepting the uncertainty of trusting that sustenance remains in Hashem's hands.

The manna trained the Jewish people to continually lift their eyes toward Heaven because tomorrow's sustenance had not yet arrived (Ramban; HaEmek Davar, *Bamidbar* 11:6). The *Siftei Kohen* adds that this

continual dependence was not a deficiency but a spiritual gift. The manna strengthened their inner vision because their eyes continually remained fixed upon Hashem's provision. Physical nourishment itself became a means of nourishing emunah.

The challenge of receiving nourishment without certainty was one of the wilderness generation's greatest tests. Many of us imagine that enough planning, savings, or visible guarantees will finally calm our fears. Yet *Parashat Beha'alotcha* suggests that certainty is not necessarily what nourishes the soul. The manna cultivated another form of nourishment entirely – learning to live while continually depending upon Hashem. Deeper nourishment is nurtured through our willingness to trust G-d even before tomorrow's provision appears.

How Can Hidden Nourishment Seem Insufficient?

Rabbi Aharon HaKohen of Lunel teaches that every food contains concealed Divine vitality. The body receives physical food while the soul is nourished by its concealed inner life force. When eating with holiness and awareness, we can elevate these hidden sparks toward their Source. Whereas physical pleasures eventually cease to satisfy, spiritual nourishment makes us feel satisfied while simultaneously yearning for deeper closeness to the Divine Source. Just as Torah learning often awakens the desire to continue learning, spiritual nourishment expands the soul's yearning for greater connection (*Orhot Chayim*).

While ordinary food generally conceals its spiritual vitality beneath tangible taste and sensation, the manna embodied revealed spiritual nourishment extending beyond physical satisfaction.

The generation leaving Egypt had spent centuries immersed in a world sustained by the Nile, where nourishment was experienced primarily through physical satiation and immediate gratification. Their longing for meat may therefore reflect more than appetite. Physical craving seeks stronger sensations and denser satisfaction. Yet spiritual nourishment produces another response entirely – not fullness that extinguishes desire, but fullness that awakens deeper yearning.

Since the Israelites were more accustomed to physical nourishment, they were not yet attuned to subtler spiritual layers. Although they received extraordinarily elevated nourishment, they still experienced inner dryness because they longed for foods whose satisfaction felt heavier, more immediate, and more tangible.

Parashat Beha'alotcha raises a difficult question extending beyond the wilderness generation. Physical abundance alone rarely resolves deeper emptiness because the soul was never designed to survive on physicality alone. When we experience emptiness, are we truly lacking nourishment, or have we lost sensitivity to the more subtle nourishment already sustaining our soul?

What is the Connection Between Cravings and Spiritual Disconnection?

Rabbi Shemuel Bornsztain explains that the Israelites' complaint about the manna reflected a prior inner rupture. Their dissatisfaction emerged through spiritual separation from Moshe Rabbeinu. Once disconnected from the higher source through which Divine sustenance flowed, the manna no longer felt nourishing. He further connects the manna to Shabbat. Just as Shabbat offers a taste of existence beyond physical striving, the manna sustained while preserving attachment to a higher reality (*Shem MiShemuel, Parashat Beshalach* – 5673).

This understanding suggests that our strongest desires do not always arise from lacking food, pleasure, or comfort. At times, they may emerge from disconnection – from Hashem, Torah, purpose, rest, or meaning. A soul deprived of connection may continue searching for substitute forms of nourishment, as many emotional eaters can testify.

Immediately after recording the people's complaint, the Torah carefully describes the manna's richness, beauty, and preparation. It is almost as though Hashem gently redirects attention toward what they failed to perceive. Nourishment itself had not diminished. The capacity to receive it had.

Parashat Beha'alotcha reminds us that the soul can feel dry even amidst miracles. Yet true nourishment begins when we once again learn to recognize the blessings, connection, and subtle forms of sustenance already flowing into our lives each day.

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