

Parashat Beshalach, 5774, 2014:

*Bread from Heaven*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our *parasha* is preeminently the *parasha* of explicit miracles. Herein *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He):

- Takes us out of Egypt “*b’yad ramah*” (in a high-handed, i.e., totally public fashion, 14:8)
- Splits the Sea of Reeds (colloquially known as the “Red Sea,”) and allows us to pass through on dry land (14:21-22 and 14:29-31)
- Drowns the pursuing Egyptian horde (14:23-28)
- Provides us with fresh water from brackish undrinkable water at Marah (15:25)
- Provides us with the *mann* (English, “manna” 16:4-36)
- Provides water for us literally “from a rock” (17:6)
- Enables our forebears, fresh from physical slavery and still shackled by a slave mentality, to defeat Amalek - even though they were totally lacking any manner or degree of military prowess (17: 8-16)

All of these wonders and miracles were overwhelming and amazing. They were almost beyond description in their manifestation of the Divine presence (*HaShechinah*) among us. Each one was an act of undeserved love (*ahavat chinam*), perhaps for no other reason than *zechut Avot* (the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Jacob). Collectively, they enabled us to stand shoulder to shoulder in our finest hour at *Har Sinai*, and to achieve the purpose for which the world was created: *Kabbalat HaTorah* (the Receiving of the Torah).

I would like to focus upon one of these *nisim* (miracles) mentioned in our *parasha*, the *mann*. The *mann* was a paradox for *B'nai Yisrael* from the moment of its creation. This is because, while it was spiritual and metaphysical in its essence and inception, its existence was wholly physical. In other words, it was simultaneously bread from Heaven (*lechem min hashamayim*) and food on earth. By definition, its very presence in the terrestrial sphere was a contradiction in terms and, therefore, beyond human apprehension and comprehension. The mysterious, ephemeral, and otherworldly nature of the *mann* is first found in the *pasuk* (verse) wherein our forebears interrogatively declare to one another in wonderment: “*Mann hu*” (“What is this?”). The Torah tells us the reason for their amazement in a phrase that characteristically conceals far more than it reveals: “*ki lo yadu mah hu*” (“for they did not know what it was,” *Sefer Shemot* 16:15). Rashi (1040-1105) opines that, “they did not know what it was,” really meant that they did not know “so that they could [not] call it by its name.” (Translation, Rosenbaum and Silverman, brackets my own)

Rashi’s comment underscores the completely new status of the *mann*. It was so utterly different in kind and degree from any earthly substance previously encountered that our forebears could not even give it a name. Indeed, the Torah’s description of the physical properties of the *mann* continues to defy our understanding: “The layer of dew went up, and behold, on the surface of the desert, a fine, bare [substance] as fine as frost on the ground.” (*Sefer Shemot* 16:14, this, and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Unfortunately, the closely parallel *pasuk* from *Sefer Bamidbar* 11:7: “Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance was like the appearance of crystal,” does little to add to our understanding of its constitutive nature. Little wonder,

then, that even though Moshe explicitly told them: “It is the bread that the L-rd has given you to eat,” (*Sefer Shemot* 16:15) and could, therefore, have been called “*lechem min hashamayim*,” it has retained its title of *mann* forevermore. In essence, its very being remains an eternal question and, consequently, a miracle.

While the *mann* itself remains an impenetrable mystery, we can nonetheless ask a simple and straightforward question: “Why did *B’nai Yisrael* merit the *mann*?” The answer to this question is far from clear. Many of us are familiar with the legitimate arguments and complaints of Uzzah, the angelic representative of the Egyptians, in his dispute with G-d that took place on the evening prior to *kriaat yam suf* (the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds). He bitterly complained to the Almighty that He was saving the Jewish people while the Egyptian hordes were drowning. To Uzzah, this was patently unjust, and a violation of Avraham’s famous question and theological premise: “Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:25)

I do not understand why You [G-d] support Your people, the Jews, and are angry at my people, the Egyptians. Your people do exactly what my people have been doing. These worship idols and these worship idols. They dress and look alike. So what is the difference really? What do You want from my children? You, *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*, are just and truthful, so why do You want to punish my children? (*Midrash Tehilim* 15, Buber edition, translation by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* in *The L-rd is Righteous in all His Ways: Reflections on the Tisha be-Av Kinot*, p. 189)

We are now in a particularly strong position to reiterate our earlier question: “Why did *B’nai Yisrael* merit the *mann*?” The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter *zatzal* (1847–1905), known as the “Sefat Emet” after the title of his most famous work, offered the following answer to our query: “Beyond question [even given their past history], the entire Jewish people’s most heartfelt desires were [now] devoted solely to

heaven; therefore, bread from heaven [i.e. the *mann*] was given to them.” (Translation and brackets my own) In other words, according to the Sefat Emet, a kind of *middah keneged middah (quid pro quo)* was set in motion between G-d and the Jewish people: We dedicated our spiritual beings (our *neshamot*), to Hashem and He, in turn, enabled us to live physically in this world via the *mann*. Thus, for Rav Alter, our newly found commitment and allegiance to Hashem became the preeminent factor in our salvation at the Sea of Reeds, and the reason He decided to sustain us with the miracle of the *mann*.

I believe that it is the ideal time to emulate our ancestors of old and rededicate ourselves to *Avinu b'shamayim* (to our Father in heaven), in order that we may once again receive His *lechem min hashamayim*, His complete spiritual blessing. As the prophet Yirmiyahu stated so beautifully so long ago: “Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.” (*Megillat Eichah* 5:21) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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