

## “WHAT BRACHA DID THEY SAY ON MANNA?”

BY RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, Associate Rabbi of Kehilath Jeshurun, delivered the following sermon on Parshat Beshalach, February 11th, to a packed Main Synagogue:

I was pondering the subject of this week's sermon when I happened upon a startling story in *The New York Sun*, with the headline “Chicken Tastes Supreme After 50 Years in a Can.” The article, picked up from the British press, describes an English couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Lalley, who got married in Feb. 1956. For their wedding, they prepared a hamper of what was then the height of post-war luxury: sandwiches, hams, cheeses and shortbread biscuits. Topping it all off was: a whole roast chicken preserved in its own jelly and sealed in a tin. The Lalleys and their guests gobbled up everything but left the chicken, which moldered for half a century in the Lalleys' cupboard. In Feb. 2006, on the occasion of his golden wedding anniversary, Mr. Lalley celebrated in the best way he knew: you guessed it. “Our grandchildren were appalled, begging me not to eat anymore,” he told the reporter; “but I knew that if it smelled ok, it wouldn't do me any harm.” Mr. Lalley's children, now all adults, remember a childhood punctuated by threats from their father that he would take the chicken out from the cupboard and feed it to them. The tin “disappeared” briefly when the Lalleys moved, but then, to his relief and the family's consternation, Mr. Lalley found it behind some beans. Canning experts interviewed by the reporter explained that because the preservation process for canned meats occurs at 120 C, all microbial causes of botulism are killed and the food can in theory last forever. In fact, a can was recently recovered from Capt. Scott's explorations in Antarctica in 1901, and it was still deemed safe. Mr. Lalley now plans to auction the empty can on ebay.

Our *parsha* also depicts a singular case of food preservation. Moshe and Aaron are instructed to take some manna and place it in the Ark in a *tzintzenes*, an earthenware jar, to preserve it for generations. This, then, is the first and perhaps only case of canned foods in the

entire corpus of the Jewish cannon. Millenia before canned soup, there was canned manna; you might say that before Campbell's there was... Manna-shevitz. Of course, it was not the canning process that provided for the manna's preservation; after all, this was the very same substance that when left overnight, the Torah tells us, quickly became wormy and rotten. Rather, this preservation of manna in the Ark occurred miraculously, and when the *aron* was hidden before the destruction of the First Temple in the 6th century BCE, the canned manna inside went with it and is there to this day. And the question is: why was Moshe commanded to preserve this one of the myriad of miracles from the *midbar*? Why, upon entering *Eretz Yisrael*, was it deemed so important to retain this reminder of the way in which Israel found sustenance in the desert?

The answer, I think, is that as the Jews entered the Holy Land, as the miracles so necessary in the desert providing for their every need ceased, and as the Jews began to provide for themselves - tilling the soil, planting seed, harvesting grain - they needed a reminder that it is the Almighty that is the omnipotent provider and sustainer, that the God who caused the manna to fall is the same God who causes crops to grow, herds to increase, and wealth and possessions to accrue.

Over the past 500 years, *poskim* have pondered a critical halakhic question, a confounding conundrum: what *bracha* did the Jews in the dessert say on the manna? You might say, *shehakol*; after all, this miraculous manna did not grow from the ground, nor from a tree, and usually foods that do not grow require the recitation of *shehakol*. But our *parsha* describes the manna as *lehem*, bread, and the Talmud insists that the beginning of our *bentching* was composed by Moshe *misheyarad lahem man*, when the manna began to fall. It is surely

inappropriate to recite *shehakol* over something deserving of *bentching*! What *bracha*, then, ought to have been said? *Hamotzi lechem min haaretz*? How can we thank God for taking bread out of the ground when the food that we are eating never grew in the ground?

The enigma is relevant whenever we consider the halakhic status of food that did not grow in its usual way; tomorrow during our breakfast *shiur* we will consider the implications of this question regarding the *halakhic* status of hydroponics. And of course, any of us who watches Star Trek knows that in the twenty-fourth century, none of our food will come from the ground; rather it will come from replicators: all we'll need to do is tell the computer, “tea - earl grey, hot,” and the molecules needed will instantly materialize according to our own culinary specifications. So in considering this question, I'll have you know, we are not only resolving a historical halachic conundrum, we are also laying the halakhic groundwork for Orthodox life on the Starship Enterprise.

So not quite *shehakol*, not quite *hamotzi*? What *bracha* did they say on the manna? It was the *Rama Mi-Pano*, Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Pano, one of the Italian *rishonim*, who famously suggested that the Jews recited the following: “*baruch ata Hashem... hamotzi lehem min hashamayim*. Blessed are you, O God, who brings forth bread out of Heaven.” It is a witty suggestion, but it is also profound in that it is the key what the manna symbolizes: that all sustenance ultimately is by God's grace. For whether we are consuming grains grown from the ground, or meat or milk obtained from an animal, or fruit plucked from an orchard, whether we are drinking water, or wine, or whiskey, it is *min Hashamayim*; we would not be eating at all were it not for the gracious hand of heaven.

The Shulchan Arukh interestingly states, in a little-known *halakha*, that

whenever somebody says *hamotzi* on bread he ought to grasp the loaf with all ten fingers, paralleling the ten-word verse in Ashrei: "*Einei kol eilecha yisabeiru ve-ata notein lahem et achlam be-ito* - The eyes of all are turned to You for sustenance, and You give them their food in its proper time." And the point is pedagogical, not mystical, in nature: when we are eating food that has not fallen from the sky, food that we ourselves have harvested, or purchased, with our own two hands, we are all too apt to assume that we alone have provided this abundance, that, in the words of the Torah, *kochi ve-otsem yadi asa li et hachayil hazeh*, the power of my own hands has created this wealth, and therefore we must consciously and deliberately remind ourselves that it is not so. It is God that has bestowed upon us the health to create wealth, and the fortune to be able to afford food for our family, that it is the help received *min ha-Shamayim* that has allowed us to be *motzi lechem min haaretz*.

God in *Sefer Devarim* tells us that the Land of Israel is not, for an agrarian society, optimally situated: Unlike Egypt, it is not naturally, annually and cyclically irrigated by the Nile. And this is deliberate, the Almighty explains; he does not want the Jews to forget that they are reliant upon God for their every successful harvest.

If living in an Egyptian agricultural society was conducive to forgetting about God, then that it is all the more spiritually perilous to live in the time and place in which we find ourselves today. For if dwelling in Pharaoh's Egypt was considered luxurious, then we Americans live in an age of astonishing abundance. I love David Brooks' description of the shrine of American material wellbeing: Price Club, where you can get "laundry detergent in 40-pound tubs, 30-pound bags of frozen Tater Tots, and packages with 1,500 Q-Tips." And the shoppers, in Brooks' description, walk around reveling in the ability to stock up and store food forever, saying things like, "If you use a lot, it

really does pay...", or "...these never go bad, you can keep them forever...", or "...it's nice to have this many popsicles, and someday we plan on having more kids anyway." If fifty years ago, in England, a tin containing an entire chicken was considered fit for a wedding feast, just think about how lucky we are to live in this time and place.

A writer for The New Republic, Gregg Easterbrook, recently published a book called *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. George Will, in a column, sums up some of Easterbrook's most striking statistics: Life expectancy in America has increased from 47 to 77 years. Our great-great-grandparents all knew someone who perished of some disease that no longer endangers us; a third of America's families own at least three cars. The U.S. is fast transforming itself into the first society in which over fifty percent of its adults hold college degrees. And one would assume that if today we have so much more wealth, and such improved health, so many more years added to our lives, then we must have something to show for it; we must have learned so much more Torah, performed so many more *mitzvot*, lived lives of so much more sanctity than our ancestors. But I'm not so sure that's true. The progress paradox of which Easterbrook writes is that despite extraordinary American prosperity, people do not feel happier, or think that their lives are especially meaningful. And this is understandable, for even as the Torah encourages human beings to earn a *parnassa*, and admires the human ability to create wealth, it warns that this *shefa*, or bounty, can never become an end in itself.

In his article on Easterbrook's book, Will quotes Henny Youngman, who once famously reflected, "What good is happiness? Happiness can't buy you money." The manna is meant to discourage against just such an attitude. The Talmud tells us that when the Jewish people, at the end of the First Temple period, claimed that they were too busy

earning a livelihood to set aside any time to engage in Torah study, the *navi Yirmiyahu* showed them the jar of manna as a reminder that it is God who is the source of our sustenance, that prosperity cannot become an end unto itself, that if God were so kind as to allow us to provide for those we love, to have a house and food for our family, then we must return the favor by creating a household filled with *kedusha*, and by taking out time from work for the work that God commands us to perform.

When the Messiah arrives, Chazal tell us, he will prepare a feast celebrating the redemption, a banquet in which a choice of two entrees will be available: the *shor habor*, the primordial ox that existed at the time creation, and the *livy-atan*, the leviathan, the primordial specimen of marine life. Of course, as the joke famously tells us, the fish option is for those too *frum* to trust the Mashiach's *shechitah*. But the *Rama MiPano* suggests that at the beginning of the meal, perhaps as an appetizer, the Messiah will take the millennia-old manna out of the *aron* for us to eat. And this, I think, can now be understood. For by then we will no longer need the manna as a reminder; by then it will be abundantly clear that we rely upon God's benevolence for everything. At that time, all of us here will look back on the lives we led, and judge for ourselves whether we lived them wisely and well; whether we utilized the abundance provided in twenty-first century America to merely satisfy our every desire, or instead to build homes and societies suffused with sanctity, with Torah and with *mitzvot*. We will deeply regret the opportunities we squandered, and we will rejoice in those that we seized. The manna will be thousands of years old, but I'm looking forward to having some just the same; and I'm betting that it will taste just as fresh as it did on the day that it first miraculously fell. And anyway, how often do you get a chance to say the brakha *hamotzi lechem min hashamayim*?

