



Back to Eden

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Parashat Eikev 5785

Of course the Jews thought that they would starve when they left Egypt.

In Moshe's retelling of the story of the *mann* (manna), that is deliberate. There is something about the *mann* that is inextricably linked to hunger—or, at least, our fear of it.

דברים ח:ג

וַיַּעֲנֶה וַיִּרְעֲבֶה וַיֹּאכְלֶה אֶת הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדָעַתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֶךָ כִּי לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יְחִיָּה
הָאָדָם כִּי עַל כָּל מוֹצֵא פִי ה' יְחִיָּה הָאָדָם:

Devarim 8:3

So he afflicted you and made you hungry, and had you eat the *mann* which you had not known and which your fathers had not known, in order to make you know that not by bread alone do humans stay alive, but rather by all that issues from HaShem's mouth do humans stay alive.

The Ramban explains that the words “afflicted you and made you hungry” refer to the anxiety that the Jewish people experience because of the *mann*. The Jewish people are not in fact



hungry: they have the *mann* to eat. Instead, they are afflicted because of their fear that they will be hungry. There is something about it that they do not trust to nourish them:

רמב"ן שם

וְטַעַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ, כִּי לֹא יָדַעְתָּ בְּמֶן שֶׁתּוֹכְלוּ לַחֲיוֹת בּוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים וְלֹא הִגִּיעַ אֲלֵיכֶם כֵּן בְּקִבְלָהּ מֵאֲבוֹתֵיכֶם.

Ramban on Devarim 8:3

And he fed with you *mann* which neither you nor your father knew:. The meaning is that you did not know about the *mann* that you could live by it for many years, nor did such a tradition reach you from your fathers.

Perhaps it is not just the *mann* itself that the Jewish people are unfamiliar with that makes them afraid that they will starve. Perhaps it is the way the *mann* arrives: without the need for suffering or degradation.

Those were the terms of the world that they lived in: terms that had been introduced impossibly long ago, when God first cursed Adam in Eden and told him that from that moment on food could only be procured through exhausting toil:

בראשית ג:יז-יט

¹⁷וְלָאָדָם אָמַר כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתֶּךָ וַתֹּאכַל מִן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבְדוֹךָ בְּעִצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ: ¹⁸וְקוֹץ וְדִרְדֹּר תַּצְמִיחַ לָךְ וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה: ¹⁹בְּזַעַת אָפִיךָ תֹאכַל לֶחֶם עַד שׁוֹבְךָ אֶל הָאֲדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָקַחְתָּ כִּי עֹפֶר אֶתָּה וְאֵל עֹפֶר תִּשׁוּב:

Bereishit 3:17-19

¹⁷To Adam [God] said, “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed be the ground because of you; by hard

labor shall you eat of it all the days of your life: ¹⁸thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; ¹⁹by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground—for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

Like all descendants of Adam, the Jewish people had inherited the curse that basic sustenance could only be attained by enduring back-breaking labor and sacrificing dignity. Like all descendants of Adam, the Jews who left Egypt understood that food had once been a basic guarantee—but that that reality was long gone, part of a mythic pre-history they could only dream of. It is a dream that, as Moshe says, is something neither they nor their ancestors have known.

And so, the Jews were baffled when they first saw the *mann*:

שמות טז:טו

וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו מֶן הוּא כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ מֶה הוּא

Shemot 16:15

When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” (*mann hu*)—for they did not know what it was.

Mann hu, they asked—what is this?—a distant echo of God’s question to Adam in Eden so long ago—*hamin*.

בראשית ג:יא

וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הָגִיד לְךָ כִּי עִירַם אֶתְּהָ הָמָן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵבִלְתִּי אֲכָל מִמֶּנּוּ אָכַלְתָּ:

Bereishit 3:11

“Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which (*hamin ha-etz*) I had forbidden you to eat?”

Hamin, did you eat from the tree, introduced a reality in which food and dignity were first divorced. *Mann hu*, what is this, reintroduced a reality in which human beings would not be forced to choose between the two.

God’s gift of the *mann* was not simply sustenance necessary to allow the Jews to live in the desert. God’s gift of the *mann* was a promise that a different reality was possible: a reality in which Adam’s curse no longer reigned, in which human beings would no longer need to toil like slaves in order to live.

We are told that a jar of *mann* was preserved, stored in the *aron* (ark) in the most sacred part of the *mishkan* (tabernacle)—well before either set of *luhot* (tablets) which would eventually share that sacred space was first carved. This is the first testimony that the Jews carried out of the desert: that before God is a Lawgiver He is a Nourisher, and that before human beings are to be commanded in sacred covenant they are to be fed in dignity.