

The Manna Episode: Principles for Providence¹

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¹ Much of this essay is based on *Sermon XVI* of Rabbi Benjamin Artom's *Book of Sermons*. I have attempted to maintain the core message of that wonderful essay, while expanding on it with my own understanding of the manna episode and what it can teach us.

Throughout human history, our species have utilised communication in order to achieve connection. Words help us connect with one another, and humans seek connection naturally. A common form of communication is complaining.

The art of complaining has been part of human life for millennia, with the earliest known record of a complaint dating back to c. 1750 BC Babylon.¹ Prior to that and since then, humans have tended to search for reasons to complain! After all, the human brain is geared for survival, so it needs to focus on negatives (which appear more threatening to survival) more so than on positives (less vital for survival). Our brains perceive negatives at an approximated ratio of 5:1, so there seems to be more to complain than to be grateful for.² In many ways, complaining signals the complainer's need for attention and connection.

This psychological baggage from evolutionary development can even influence many to look around at their circumstances and challenge the Providence (*hashgaha*), and even the Existence, of God. They question the possibility that a Creator would ignore His creation's complaints, leading to a denial of Providence. As the Psalmist states³, "The fool said in his heart there is no God."

This evolutionary tendency to complain as a bid for

¹ The complaint tablet to Ea-nasir is a clay tablet that was sent to ancient Ur, written c. 1750 BC. It is a complaint to a merchant named Ea-nasir from a customer named Nanni. Written in Akkadian cuneiform, it is considered to be the oldest known written complaint. It is currently kept in the British Museum, London.

² William Berry, "The Psychology of Complaining," *Psychology Today*

³ Psalms 53:2

connection was prevalent among our ancestors too, especially after they left Egypt:

“In the wilderness, all of the Children of Israel complained to Moses and Aaron.”

Exodus 16:2

[Previously], they complained about water. Now, they complained about a lack of bread and meat because they had already consumed most of their cattle, for thirty days had passed since they left Egypt.

Abraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on the Torah

“The people were looking to complain.”

Leviticus 11:1

As the people entered the desert, they experienced a variety of uncomfortable sensations. These complaints were very displeasing in the ears of the Lord, seeing they were caused by the fact that instead of marching joyfully towards their destiny and the Holy Land, the people marched only grudgingly.

Bahya Ibn Paquda, Commentary on the Torah

Among the many Providential elements of the Pesah narrative, there is none more sublime than the provision of manna, “the bread of Heaven.”⁴ Ironically, this wonder occurred directly after Israel’s complaint:

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you

⁴ Psalms 105:40

have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.

Exodus 16:13

Advance toward the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.

Exodus 16:9

To begin to appreciate the meaning behind this astonishing episode of our people's journey to physical and mental emancipation, we must explore the context and content of the manna story to see if there are principles to be uncovered.

The Background

When our ancestors left the shackles of Egypt behind them, they were nevertheless deeply imbued with the superstitious and ignorant ideas of that land. Their Egyptian masters practiced and promulgated the most unfortunate corruption of the human mind — idolatry.

Under the rigours of an oppressive subjugation like that of Egypt, it was natural to expect retrogression. Slavery always demoralises man, cramps his intellect, debases his sentiments, and checks the aspirations of his soul.

Rabbi Abraham Pereira Mendes, Book of Sermons, IX

To purge themselves of such thoughts and habits, Israel required much change and, as it were, a total re-wiring, both physically and mentally. To undergo the mental change that is required to 'know God,'⁵ Israel would soon be given food for the psyche –

⁵ See *Moreh Nebukhim*, I, chapter 34. Although one can never know the essence of God, one can still know Him through His ways and expressions (*derakhim*) such as His Word (Torah) and His world. Similarly, one can never know the essence

the Ten Commandments. However, before this challenge could be undertaken, God granted them food for the body – manna.

God acted as does a loving mother toward her son, when before letting him undertake a great mental work, she provides for the satisfaction of his material wants, so that, by the strength of his body he may be prepared for the exertions of his mind.⁶ Just before this manna is to appear for the first time, God speaks to Moses:

And the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day’s portion — *that I may therefore test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not.*”

Exodus 16:4

The following questions naturally arise after reading the last sentence of this profound verse: In what way does this Heavenly food constitute a proof of Israel’s commitment to God? What exactly is God testing?

As we explore this manna episode further, I propose the following answer: God is ready to grant what we reasonably demand, but we must never expect God to exercise His Providence without our own involvement. *Berit* – like all meaningful relationships – requires responsibility and action from both partners.

Therefore, as we recite the *pesuqim* dedicated to the manna episode, we can start to sense certain principles of Providence, and these include (1) labour, (2) moderation, (3) faithfulness, and

of another person, but can ‘know’ that person through their expressions, persona, and works.

⁶ Rabbi Benjamin Artom, *Book of Sermons*, XVI

(4) gratitude. As we discover and expand on each principle, we can enhance our understanding of what was required of our ancestors then, and what is required of us today.

Labour

As the early morning dew lay on the ground, the manna appeared for the first time. The people were exhorted to “go out and gather.”⁷ Rather than command the appointment of officers to collect for the community and avoid potential confusion, God demands that Israel go out and gather the manna themselves. What a lesson! This great law of labour was therefore proclaimed to all future generations, teaching us that Providence will not allow those whom it protects to be idle:

Wise people never remain idle; they fill their life with useful tasks, with virtuous actions; they consider labour as the friend of man, as the first of his duties, as his consoler when gloomy thoughts haunt his mind.

Rabbi Benjamin Artom, Book of Sermons, XVI

Man has not been created to sit idle with his hands folded in his lap.

Rabbi Yiṣḥaq Moshe Arama, Aqedat Yiṣḥaq, 55:1:6

When the Psalmist states⁸ that “you shall enjoy the fruit of your labours,” it is reminding us that God assists us if we assist ourselves – God gives us bread if we labour for it!

To broaden this primal principle, we come to learn that the manna was to be made available only “early in the morning.”⁹

⁷ Exodus 16:14

⁸ Psalms 128:2

⁹ Exodus 16:21

If this early opportunity was missed, “the sun was hot, and the manna melted.”¹⁰ This reality ensured that laborious activity begins when the day begins, with no time for extended slumber.

Morning sleep is a cause of man’s death.

Pirque Abot 3:10

The rule is that one should engage his body and exert himself in a sweat-producing task each morning.

RaMba”M, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot De’ot 4:3

Moderation

Moderation is the second condition which Providence imposes. This second observation can be deduced from what Moses proceeds to say to Israel, on behalf of God:

This is what the Lord has commanded: “Gather as much of it as each of you requires to eat, an *omer* for every man.”

Exodus 16:16

Therefore, the Providence of God demands that man should avail himself, according to his needs and wants, with moderation.¹¹ As we can all appreciate, this is not as simple as it seems. The ever-increasing accessibility to abundance has led to the increasing hubris of Western man, yet the laws of Israel are careful to curb such insatiable desire:

A person should never eat unless he is hungry, nor drink unless thirsty...One should not eat until his stomach is full.

RaMba”M, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot De’ot 4:2

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Moderation or ‘the golden mean’ is expressed in a variety of forms in both Biblical and Rabbinic works, including Proverbs 4:27, Ecclesiastes 7:16, *Hullin* 58b, and throughout *Hilkhhot De’ot*.

It is easy to imagine just how charmed our recently enslaved ancestors would have been by the palatable taste of the manna, and how tempted they would be to accumulate great quantities of it. This is why they were commanded to only take that which was their mandated portion, and not more. As our sages tell us: “Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion.”¹² Epictetus concurs when he states that, “He who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has, is a wise man.”¹³

Faithfulness¹⁴

After gathering their entitled portion of *manna*, our ancestors are ordered not to “leave any of it over until the morning.”¹⁵ As Abraham ibn Ezra clarifies, they were not to keep *leftovers* of the manna to eat on the next morning. Rather, they were to go and

¹² *Pirqa Abot* 4:3

¹³ Epictetus, *The Encheiridion*, no. 129

¹⁴ There is much misunderstanding today concerning the term *emuna*. The root of the word *emuna* lies in Biblical and Rabbinic literature, where it connotes “faithfulness,” “trust,” “reliance,” and “acceptance.” Later philosophers use this terminology with additional meanings. Due to the lack of technical philosophical terms in Hebrew, *emuna* was first used in rendering the Arabic term *itiqad*, used by RaMBa”M (See *Moreh Nebukhim* 1:50), which refers to reason-based belief. The word *emuna* continued to be used in this original sense in the Jewish philosophical literature through the 13th and 14th centuries as many scientific works were transmitted to the west and translated from Arabic to Hebrew. Later, as scholasticism began to influence Jewish thought, *emuna* took on the meaning of “faith” in the sense of blind acceptance, authority-based assent, or *fides*. For an analysis, see Charles H. Manekin, *Hebrew Philosophy in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: an Overview*, p. 353. For an example of the term *emuna* used by Ḥazal in its original connotations of “faithfulness” and “trust”, see *Shabbat* 31a. For an example of the term *emuna* used in Scripture, see Exodus 17:12, Psalms 92:23, Isaiah 33:16, and Jeremiah 15:18, among others.

¹⁵ Exodus 16:19

gather their portion that falls from Heaven each day. The people “paid no attention”¹⁶ to this order, and many proceeded to keep such leftovers. This led to the manna becoming “infested with maggots” and “stinking.” The irony! What was received as a wondrous sign from Heaven above was suddenly exposed to the normal decay of physicality on earth.

The Talmud addresses this matter as it questions why God chose to provide the manna each day, rather than provide it all at once:

The students of R. Shimon ben Yoḥai asked him: “Why didn’t the manna fall for Israel just once a year to take care of all their needs, instead of coming down every day?” He said to them: “I will give you a parable: To what does this matter compare? To a king of flesh and blood who has only one son. He granted him an allowance for food once a year and the son greeted his father only once a year, when it was time for him to receive his allowance. So, he arose and granted him his food every day, and his son visited him every day.”

Yoma 76a

By not keeping leftovers, Israel would “focus their hearts to their Father in Heaven,”¹⁷ and show their faithfulness (*emuna*)¹⁸ in God, by trusting that the manna would descend on the following day. The only other outcome would be relentless hoarding driven by a mistaken perception that the gift of manna was no more than a fluke. Such faithlessness destroyed their food, and such faithlessness would ultimately destroy Jerusalem in the future.¹⁹

¹⁶ Exodus 16:20

¹⁷ *Yoma 76a*

¹⁸ See above footnote concerning *emuna*.

¹⁹ *Shabbat 119b*: “Jerusalem was destroyed only because there were no trustworthy people left there.”

Gratitude

As much as labour, moderation, and faithfulness are prerequisites to its reception, Providence cannot persist upon a thankless heart. Rumi beseeches us to “wear gratitude like a cloak,” and Cicero reminds us that “gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.”²⁰ Our own cherished sages incorporated gratitude in our daily worship when they enjoined us to declare: “We give thanks to You, that You are the Lord our God, and God of our ancestors, forever and ever.”²¹

In the manna episode, the Children of Israel are to demonstrate their gratitude by devoting one day in the week to cease work, as the manna was not to be found on the Sabbath: “Six days you shall gather [manna]; on the seventh day, there will be none.”²²

Although this command was eventually abided by, it was initially ignored by some of our stiff-necked ancestors: “Yet some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather...but they found nothing.”²³

Just as our ancestors found no manna when gathering on the Sabbath in their day, we find no blessing from labouring on the Sabbath in our day:

Alas! Even today, many Israelites who can gather plenty of manna during the week, whose labour and speculations are so fruitful, are not satisfied and will go out on the Shabbat to gather. They deny

²⁰ Cicero, M. TVLLI Ciceronis Pro Cn. Plancio Oratio, 80

²¹ *Modim* blessing of the *Amida*: מודים אנחנו לך שאתה הוא ה' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו. לעולם ועד.

²² Exodus 16:26

²³ Exodus 16:27

Providence that small token of gratitude. They set a bad example to their brethren, and call upon themselves the contempt of other nations by their scandalous disobedience to the law of Sinai.

Rabbi Benjamin Artom, Book of Sermons, XVI

Engaging in creative work on the Sabbath tramples the entire Covenant. It completely dissociates oneself from the concept of partnership and the endeavour in creating and developing our very own existence and everything around us, as partners with God. If one is not concerned with that partnership, then the Sabbath does not matter. But if one is concerned with that partnership, then the Sabbath is everything. And everything rests on guarding it.

Rabbi Joseph Dweck²⁴

Conclusion

In the Torah's description of the manna episode, we have been able to discover and explore four conditions by which our people can secure the blessings of God's Providence. The outcome of our efforts in garnering such Providence by opposing a happenstance, lazy, or distant attitude to God and His world is clearly undeniable. After all that our People have been through in history, what were the odds that we would survive? That our identity would persist? That our wisdom would be shared? That the topic of this very book would garner interest?

It is our labour, moderation, faithfulness, and gratitude to God's Word and world that have secured us such Providence. Every year, the manna can serve as a reminder for us all to fulfil these four conditions imposed by God's Providence, so that we

²⁴ *Shabbat: God's Bond with Israel*, lecture at the London School of Jewish Studies (5779)

can accept God's invitation to enjoy our own version of Heavenly bread in our own times...

Come, eat my bread...that I have formed.

Proverbs 9:5

