

PARASHAS BEHA'ALOSCHA**A Taste of Heaven**

It didn't cost anything. They didn't have to work for it. They didn't even have to go anywhere to pick it up. For the entire forty years the Jewish people spent in the desert, they did not have to worry about where their next meal was coming from. It fell from the heavens in the form of manna. When they stepped out of their tents in the morning, there it was, covering the fields like a shimmering crystalline blanket on a bed of moist dew.

And what a food it was! King David called it “the bread of angels.” Our Sages tell us it provided perfect nutrition, every last molecule being absorbed into the body, with no wastes whatsoever. Our Sages also tell us that this wonderful manna contained the tastes of all the foods.

It seems the Jewish people enjoyed an ideal situation in the desert. They were free to pursue intellectual and spiritual goals without being distracted by such mundane concerns as making a living. What more could a person ask for? And yet, in this week's Torah reading we find a significant group of people complaining to Moses about the food situation. What in the world was bothering these people? What could be more desirable than a superbly nutritious food that could duplicate the tastes of just about every delicious food in existence?

Perhaps we can find the answer in the well known Midrashic analogy which compares the Torah to water. Why water? Surely there are more delicious and exciting drinks than plain water. Why wasn't the Torah compared to fine wines or other richly flavored beverages?

The commentators explain that while many beverages provide pleasure for the palate, water is the penultimate thirst quencher. When a person is thirsty, nothing compares to a drink of cool, crystal clear water. At the moment those refreshing waters cascade down his throat, there is no beverage in the world is more delicious and flavorful. But when a person is not thirsty, when he only wants to drink to stimulate his taste buds, water is quite a bland, unexciting beverage. The same holds true for the Torah. If a person is not seeking spiritual awareness and growth, he will not find the Torah especially appealing. But when he is thirsty, when he yearns to expand his spiritual horizons and discover the divine truths of the universe, there is nothing more exhilarating and fulfilling than the Torah, the divine water of creation.

In this light, we gain new insight into the manna. This “bread of the angels” was more than just a simple physical food. It was a piece of

heaven, sparks of spirituality captured and transformed into a physical form, but spiritual in its essence nonetheless. Those who sought spirituality, who were attuned to the spiritual pulse of the universe, were able to connect with this angelic food and experience the most exhilarating and fulfilling tastes imaginable. But those focused completely on the physical world could not relate to the singular nature of the manna; they were completely oblivious to the taste of heaven it delivered. To them, the manna was a bland and boring substitute for a good piece of steak.

A scholar brought a friend to a discourse delivered by a great sage. The sage spoke for only fifteen minutes, during which his audience listened in absolute silence. Afterwards, the two friends compared notes about what they had heard.

"I never heard a more fascinating talk in my entire life," said the scholar.

"Really?" said his friend. "I didn't find it fascinating at all. In fact, I found it boring and dull. All he spoke about was water carriers, wagon drivers and broken down horses."

The scholar looked at his friend in amazement. "My dear friend," he said, "you missed the entire point. Everything was an analogy to the deepest mysteries of the universe. He opened up a mystical world which was incredibly fascinating. But if all you heard was a story about a wagon driver and his troubles, it must have been very boring indeed."

In our own lives, we encounter numerous occasions which can provide a fascinating experience or a boring one, depending on our point of view. Every *mitzvah* we do, every act of kindness holds the potential for such ambivalence. If we are focused completely on the physical, we may find these activities tedious. But if we thirst for spirituality, if we yearn to connect with Hashem, each *mitzvah*, each good deed we do becomes a transcendent experience which is incredibly exciting and fulfilling. Each one provides us with another taste of heaven.