



# Carnegie Shul Chatter

May 27, 2021



## Kvetching... Again?

So our ancestors were not satisfied by the life-sustaining manna from heaven even though it could taste like anything they wanted it to taste like? Sounds like a bunch of ingrates to me. And how can these people continue to protest and complain? Why didn't they learn their lesson after the Golden Calf?

But wait, you might ask me, "Would you be happy with soy-based foods that taste like burgers or steak but are really plants?" Nope, I wouldn't, although I would take them with gratitude rather than starving. And I would certainly not complain about God giving me food to sustain me during my journey.

And what about all of the cattle that the Israelites took from Egypt with them? Why didn't they eat beef if they didn't like the manna?

And why would Miriam complain about her very own brother, when she knew better than perhaps anyone else all that he had done to help deliver the people from bondage?

Do we Jews have to complain about everything? Do we never get tired of kvetching?

## Behaalotecha in a Nutshell

### Numbers 8:1–12:16

Aaron is commanded to raise light in the lamps of the menorah, and the tribe of Levi is initiated into the service in the Sanctuary.

A "Second Passover" is instituted in response to the petition "Why should we be deprived?" by a group of Jews who were unable to bring the Passover offering in its appointed time because they were ritually impure. G-d instructs Moses on the procedures for Israel's journeys and encampments in the desert, and the people journey in formation from Mount Sinai, where they had been camped for nearly a year.



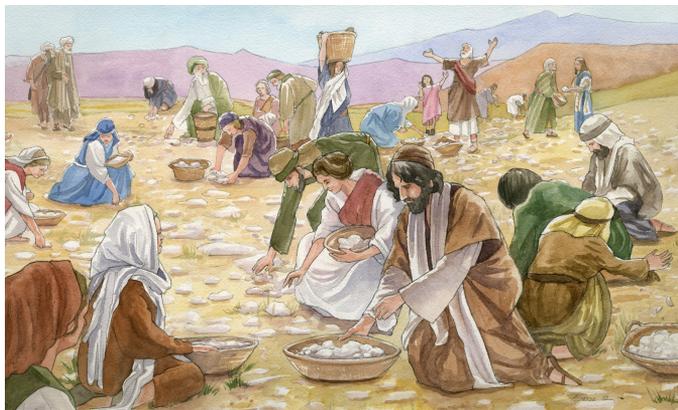
The people are dissatisfied with their “bread from heaven” (the manna), and demand that Moses supply them with meat. Moses appoints 70 elders, to whom he imparts of his spirit, to assist him in the burden of governing the people. Miriam speaks negatively of Moses, and is punished with leprosy; Moses prays for her healing, and the entire community waits seven days for her recovery.

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One part of this week’s Torah portion that has always bothered me is the dissatisfaction of the Children of Israel with the manna that was provided to them by God as they journeyed through the wilderness. What was this manna? Here is what *thejewishencyclopedia.com* says.

## Manna

The miraculously supplied food on which the Israelites subsisted in the wilderness. Its name is said to have originated in the question ("What is it?" Ex. xvi. 15, R. V.; comp. Rashi ad loc.), asked by the Israelites when they first saw it. According to George Ebers ("Durch Gosen zum Sinai," p. 236), the name comes from the Egyptian "mennu" (= "food"). The manna is also designated "bread" (Ex. xvi. 4); it is called "the corn of heaven" and "the bread of the mighty" in Ps. lxxviii. 24-25, R. V., and, in a depreciative sense, "the light bread" in Num. xxi. 5. The manna descended in the night in the form of coriander-seed of the color of bdellium (Num. xi. 7), so that in the morning the ground looked as if it were covered with hoar frost. The grains were ground or pounded into flour, and then the flour was prepared and baked in the form of cakes, the taste of which was like that of "wafers made with honey" or "as the taste of fresh oil" (Ex. xvi. 31; Num. xi. 8).



The gathering of the manna was connected with several miracles: it was collected before sunrise, for, in spite of its hard substance, it melted in the sun. The quantity collected made exactly one omer for every person, whether one collected much or little. On Friday morning the portions were double, for the manna could not be found on Sabbath. The manna was eaten the day it was gathered; if it were left until the following morning it corrupted and bred worms, though the manna gathered on Friday and kept for the Sabbath remained fresh. It continued to descend during the forty years the Israelites were in the wilderness, but when they arrived at Gilgal, on the 14th of Nisan, and began to eat the grain grown there, the manna ceased to fall. In order to perpetuate the memory of this providence, Aaron was told to put an omer of manna in a vessel and lay it "before the testimony" (Ex. xvi. 17-35; Josh. v. 10-12). Num. xxi. 5 makes it appear that manna was the only food of the Israelites while they were in the wilderness, although references to provisions of fine flour, oil, and meat are met

with elsewhere. It may be either that the manna constituted their main but not only food-supply during the whole forty years, or that it became their exclusive food after the provisions they took with them from Egypt were exhausted.

Certain modern scholars attempt to identify the manna of Exodus with the exudation of the tamarisk-trees (named by Ehrenberg the "Tamarix mannifera") of the Sinaitic peninsula. The Arabs call it "mann al-sa-ma" (= "heavenly manna"), and collect it and sell it to pilgrims. It has been identified also with the exudations of other trees found in those regions. A more recent view identifies the Biblical manna with lichen and allied species of plants found in Arabia and other parts of western Asia. The reports of modern travelers, however, are contradictory in regard to "manna."

## —In Rabbinical Literature:

Manna was one of the ten things created on the first Friday of Creation, in the twilight (Abot v. 9; comp. Targ. pseudo-Jonathan to Ex. xvi. 4, 15). According to Zabdi b. Levi, the manna which fell near the camp of the Israelites in the wilderness covered an area two thousand cubits square; it remained on the ground until four hours after sunrise, when it melted. It fell to a depth of sixty cubits, or, according to Isi b. Akiba (Midr. Teh. to Ps. xxiii.), of fifty cubits, and the quantity which fell every day would have sufficed to nourish the people for two thousand years. The question why was it necessary that the manna should fall every day is answered by the Rabbis in different ways: the Israelites could not be encumbered with its burden; they needed warm food every day, and the manna was warm when it fell; they needed that their hearts should be turned to God for their daily bread. It was so conspicuous that all the kings of the East and West could see it from their palaces (Yoma 76a; Tan., Beshallah, 21).



In order that the manna might remain clean, a north wind first swept the ground, and then rains washed it. Then, after the ground had been covered with a layer of dew, the manna fell upon it, and was itself then covered with dew (Mek., Beshallah, Wayassa', 3; comp. Sifre, Num. 89). It so fell that the righteous had no trouble in gathering it, finding it at the doors of their tents; those of less firm belief had to go farther for it;

the wicked had to go far from the camp to gather it (Yoma 75a). A very different statement, but of the same nature, is given in Tan., Beshallah, 22: The diligent went out into the field to gather the manna; the less diligent went just outside their tents; but the indolent lay in their sleeping-places while the manna fell into their outstretched hands. Created only for the children of Israel, the heathen could not secure the smallest quantity of it, for when one stretched out his hand to pick it up, it slipped from his grasp (Sifre, Deut. 313; Midr. Abkir, in Yalk., Ex. 258); according to another opinion, it tasted bitter to the heathen (Tan., l.c.).

The melting of the manna formed streams which furnished drink to many deer and other

animals, and when those animals were afterward killed by heathen, the latter recognized in the meat the taste of the manna (Tan., l.c.; comp. Targ. pseudo-Jonathan to Ex. xvi. 21). It was only in this way that the heathen could know the true taste of the manna, for the water itself was bitter to them (Tan., l.c.). With the manna precious stones fell every morning (Yoma l.c.). The manna was adapted to the taste of each individual; to the adult it tasted like the food of the adult, while to the sucking child it tasted like the milk of its mother's breasts. By wishing, one could taste in the manna anything desired, whether fowl or fruit; thus the statement that the people ground it, or pounded it, and then baked it (Num. xi. 8), is only figurative, for if one so wished it tasted like food made of flour ground or pounded, baked or cooked. According to a different interpretation, the wicked were compelled to grind it and prepare it until it was fit for food, while for the righteous it was ground by angels before it fell from heaven.

## Characteristics

The manna exhaled a fragrant odor, and during the forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness it served the women as perfume. Being a heavenly food, the manna contained nutritious matter only, without any waste products, so that during the whole time the Israelites lived upon it the grossest office of the body remained unexercised. The Israelites, nevertheless, complained of it (comp. Num. xi. 6): "Shall a human being not discharge of what he eats? our bowels will surely be swollen"



(Yoma l.c.; Sifre, Num. 87-89; Tan., l.c.). A miracle attended the collecting of the manna, in that the number of omers gathered by each family was found to correspond to the number of its members. This rendered the manna useful in solving most difficult problems. For instance, when two people came before Moses, one accusing the other of having stolen his slave and the other claiming to have bought the slave, Moses deferred his decision to the following morning, when the number of omers of manna in their respective houses showed to whom the slave belonged. In this way many otherwise inextricable complications could be unraveled (Yoma 75a).

The Rabbis disagreed as to the period of time for which the pot of manna was placed by Aaron "before the testimony." It was placed there only for the following generation; it was placed there for all future generations; it was to be kept there until the coming of the Messiah. It is one of the three things which will be restored by Elijah. Jeremiah, when remonstrating with the children of Israel for their neglect of the Torah, showed them the pot of manna: "See how God nourishes those that occupy themselves with the study of the Law." There is also a disagreement between the Rabbis with regard to the length of time after Moses' death in which the Israelites ate the manna—whether for forty days, seventy days, or for the fourteen years during which the land of Canaan was conquered and divided among the tribes. According to R. Joshua, the manna ceased to descend immediately after Moses' death, and the Israelites were compelled to eat what they had gathered previously (Mek., l.c.). The manna is reserved as the future food of the righteous, for which purpose it is ground in a mill situated in Sheḥaḳim, the third heaven (Ḥag. 12b; Tan., l.c.).

And here is a very interesting commentary about the manna from Rabbi Michael Gold.

# Parshat Behaalotecha (5779)

## The Taste of Food

“But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes.

And the manna was as coriander seed, and its color as the color of bdellium.” (Numbers 11:6,7)

Finally, the Israelites are beginning their journey through the wilderness. As the travels begin, they react as Jews often react. Almost immediately they complain about the food. As the old Jewish joke goes, “The food was terrible, and the portions were too small.” We seem to love complaining about food; I hear it week in and week out about our kiddushes. The food was better back in Egypt. There was cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. And of course, there was meat and fish. Bring us back the fleshpots of Egypt.

What did the people eat as they wandered through the wilderness? God sent manna every morning, with a double portion for Shabbat.

The Torah said it tasted like cake with honey. But Jewish tradition said that the manna tasted like anything a person wanted it to taste like.

If they wanted it to taste like cucumbers and melons, or like fish and meat, that is what it tasted like. In a sense it is like the tofu we eat today, which can be made to taste however we want it to taste. If the manna tasted like anything people liked, why did they complain about the food?

Perhaps there is something psychological about how we relate to the taste of food. I have a memory of my childhood, visiting my parents’ relatives in Detroit, Michigan. My parents did not believe in giving us butter, so I grew up on margarine. In Michigan, like Wisconsin, the dairy industry was very powerful. Stores could sell margarine but they could not color it yellow to look like butter. Margarine in Michigan was white. Somehow white margarine was not the same, even if it tasted the same. My parents gave in and bought us real butter, to the joy of the dairy industry.

Around the time I was growing up, Al Capp’s comic Li’l Abner was very popular. Capp invented a character for his comic known as a Shmoo. A Shmoo was a funny looking animal that was eager to be eaten, and could make itself taste like any food one desired. The

Shmoo became the hit of Dogpatch, until an effort was made to eliminate them. I guess they competed with the food manufacturers.

There is a Jewish side to this idea of making food that tastes like something else. By Jewish law one cannot eat meat together with milk. If one is serving a kosher meat meal at a banquet, can one put out non-dairy creamer for the coffee? At first the rabbis ruled that it



was forbidden. There was the idea of *marit ayin*, “for the sake of appearances.” If one ate a hamburger and drank a cup of coffee with non-dairy creamer, it would appear as if they are breaking the law. Today non-dairy creamer is so prevalent that most rabbis have ruled it can be served.

However, this raises other issues. Can one who observes kosher eat artificial crab that tastes like real crab? (Crab is not kosher.) Artificial crab has become popular at kosher banquets. What about artificial meat? With the growth of vegetarians and vegans, more and more companies are making plant-based products that taste like meat. Our local newspaper, the Sun-Sentinel, recently ran an article by its food critic comparing different vegetarian burgers. Some of them were deemed excellent. None quite matched the taste of a burger made with real meat. But like the manna in the wilderness, we are getting closer and closer to making food that tastes like anything we wish. I do not know if I am ready to walk into Burger King and order an Impossible Burger, strictly vegetarian, but perhaps soon.

Recently scientists have moved beyond plant based vegan burgers. They have invented cultured meat. Stem cells are taken from an animal and grown in a laboratory into real meat cells. No animals are killed to make this meat, but it is the same as flesh. Would it be kosher to put a slice of cheese on this cultured meat and make a kosher cheeseburger? Rabbis are discussing it, but the verdict is still out. If the rabbis say it is kosher, will I eat it? Maybe, but the whole endeavor reminds me of white margarine.

