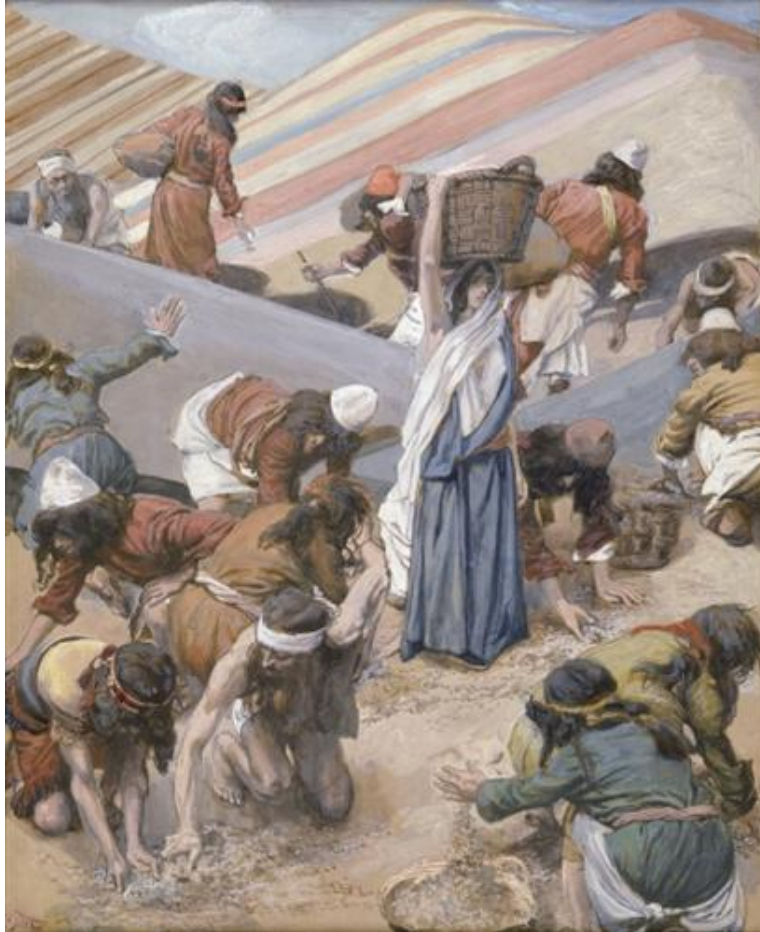


## Heaven's bread

## לחם שמים

Avner Ramu



James Tissot: The Gathering of the Manna. c.1896 - c.1902

In a historical survey found in the Book of Nehemiah we read:

**ולחם משמים נתתה להם, לרעבם, ומים מסלע הוצאת להם, לצמאם;**

“And (You) gave them bread from heaven, for their hunger, and brought forth water for them out of the rock, for their thirst” (Neh 9:15).

**ואתה ברחמיך הרבים לא עזבתם במדבר; את-עמוד הענן לא-סר מעליהם ביוםם להנחתם בהדרך, ואת-עמוד האש בלילה להאיר להם ואת-הדרך אשר ילכו-בה. ורוחך הטובה נתת להשכילם; ומנך לא-מנעת מפיהם, ומים נתתה להם לצמאם. וארבעים שנה כלכלתם במדבר, לא חסרו;**

“And You in Your manifold mercies forsook them not in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud departed not from over them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to show them light, and the way wherein they should go.

You gave also Your good spirit to instruct them, and withheld not Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst.

**And forty years did You sustain them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing” (Neh 9:19-21).**

Similar historical reviews appear in the Book of Psalms:

וינחם בענן יומם ; וכל-הלילה באור אש.  
יבקע צרים במדבר ; וישק, כתהמות רבה.  
ויוצא נוזלים מסלע ; ויורד כנהרות מים.  
ויוסיפו עוד לחטא-לו-למרות עליון בציה.  
וינסו-אל בלבבם- לשאל-אכל לנפשם.  
וידברו באלהים : אמרו, היוכל אל-לערך שלחן במדבר.  
הן הכה-צור, ויזובו מים- ונחלים ישטפו:  
הגם-לחם יוכל לתת ;

**“By day also He led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire.  
He cleaved rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as out of the great deep.  
He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers.  
Yet went they on still to sin against Him, to rebel against the Most High in the desert.  
And they tried God in their heart by asking food for their soul.  
And they spoke against God; they said: Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?  
Behold, He smote the rock, that waters gushed out, and streams overflowed; Can He give bread also?” (Ps 78:14-20).**

ויצו שחקים ממעל ; ודלתי שמים פתח.  
וימטר עליהם מן לאכל ; ודגן-שמים נתן למו.  
לחם אבירים אכל איש ; צידה שלח להם לשבע.

**“And He commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven;  
And He caused manna to rain upon them for food, and gave them of the corn of heaven.  
Man did eat the bread of the mighty; He sent them provisions to the full” (Ps 78:23-25).**

ולחם שמים ישביעם.  
פתח צור, ויזובו מים ;

**“And (He) gave them in plenty the bread of heaven.  
He opened the rock, and waters gushed out” (Ps 105:40-41).**

There are several elements in the Psalmist’s historical review that do not appear in the Book of Nehemiah. One such detail is: **וינסו-אל בלבבם- לשאל-אכל לנפשם** - **“And they tried God in their heart by asking food for their soul” (Ps 78:18).**

Yet in the Book of Deuteronomy it is God who is trying the people:

וצמאון, אשר אין-מים ; המוציא לך מים מצור החלמיש.  
המאכלך מן במדבר, אשר לא-ידעון אבתיך : למען ענתך, ולמען נסתך-להיטבך באחריתך.  
**“And thirsty (ground) where was no water; Who brought you forth water out of the rock of flint;  
Who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers knew not, that He might afflict you, and that He might try you, to do you good at your latter end” (Deu 8:15-16).**

It appears that it was not only the Psalmist that was unhappy with such an argument (and therefore changed it to: people trying God), but also a late scribe of the Book of Deuteronomy who inserted another explanation about this trial of the people:

וזכרת את-כל-הדרך, אשר הוליכך יהוה אלהיך זה ארבעים שנה-במדבר: למען ענתך לנסתך, לדעת את-אשר בלבבך התשמר מצותו-אם-לא ויענך, וירעבך, ויאכלך את-המן אשר לא-ידעת, ולא ידעון אבתיך: למען הודיעך, כי לא על-הלחם לבדו יחיה האדם-כי על-כל-מוצא פי-יהוה יחיה האדם.

“And you shall remember all the way which *YHWH* your God had led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might afflict you, to try you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments, or no.

And He afflicted you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man do not live by bread only, but by everything that proceed out of the mouth of *YHWH* does man live” (Deu 8:2-3).

However, in the Exodus’ description of the journey of the Hebrews out of Egypt, the connection between the manna and the trying of the people by God appears as early as in the second month:

ויסעו מאילם, ויבאו כל-עדת בני-ישראל אל-מדבר-סין, אשר בין-אילם ובין סיני-בחמשה עשר יום לחדש השני לצאתם מארץ מצרים. וילינו (וילונו) כל-עדת בני-ישראל, על-משה ועל-אהרן-במדבר ויאמרו אלהם בני ישראל, מי-יתן מותנו ביד-יהוה בארץ מצרים, בשבתנו על-סיר הבשר, באכלנו לחם לשבע: כי-הוצאתם אתנו אל-המדבר הזה, להמית את-כל-הקהל הזה ברעב.

“And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt.

And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness;

And the children of Israel said to them: Would that we had died by the hand of *YHWH* in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, when we did eat bread to the full; for you have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex 16:1-3).

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן-השמים; ויצא העם ולקטו דבר-יום ביום, למען אנסנו הילך בתורתו אם-לא.

“Then said *YHWH* to Moses: I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in My law, or not” (Ex 16:4).

The next verse seems as an incomplete version of the directives regarding the collection and use of the “heavenly bread” (Ex 16:5). Therefore, it is not surprising that soon after this verse we read that Moses delivered to the people the following detailed instructions:

זה הדבר אשר צוה יהוה, לקטו ממנו איש לפי אכלו: עמר לגלגלת, מספר נפשתיכם-איש לאשר באהלו תקחו.

“This is the thing which *YHWH* had commanded: Gather you of it every man according to his eating; an omer a head, according to the number of your persons, shall you take it, every man for them that are in his tent” (Ex 16:16).

ויאמר משה אלהם: איש אל-יותר ממנו עד-בקר.  
ולא-שמעו אל-משה, ויותר אנשים ממנו עד-בקר, וירם תולעים ויבאש; ויקצף עליהם משה.  
“And Moses said to them: Let no man leave of it till the morning.

Notwithstanding they hearkened not to Moses; but some of them left of it until the morning, and it bred worms, and rotted; and Moses was wroth with them” (Ex 16:19).

ויהי ביום הששי, לקטו לחם משנה-שני העמר, לאחד; ויבאו כל-נשיאי העדה ויגידו למשה.  
ויאמר אלהם, הוא אשר דבר יהוה-שבתון שבת-קדש ליהוה מחר: את אשר-תאפו אפו, ואת אשר-תבשלו בשלו, ואת כל-העדף הניחו לכם למשמרת עד-הבקר.

“And on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one; and all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses.

And he said to them: This is that which *YHWH* had spoken: To-morrow is a solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to *YHWH*. Bake that which you will bake, and seethe that which you will seethe; and all that remains over lay up for you to be kept until the morning” Ex 16:22-23).

ראו כי-יהוה נתן לכם השבת-על-כן הוא נתן לכם ביום הששי לחם יומים; שבו איש תחתיו,  
אל-יצא איש ממקמו-ביום השביעי.

“See that *YHWH* had given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide you every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day” (Ex 16:29).

It appears odd that the Psalmist and the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy did not realize that it was the manner of use of the manna by the Israelites (and not the manna itself) that was the people’s trial. God never stopped supplying the manna to the Israelites in the wilderness, but rather observed whether they would follow the instructions about its use, in particular in regard to the holy Sabbath. Furthermore, this narrative indicates that the sanctity of the Sabbath predates the deliverance of the Ten Commandments.

In the Book of Joshua we read:

ויחנו בני-ישראל בגלגל; ויעשו את-הפסח בארבעה עשר יום לחדש בערב-בערבות יריחו  
ויאכלו מעבור הארץ ממחרת הפסח-מצות וקלוי: בעצם היום הזה.  
וישבת המן ממחרת באכלם מעבור הארץ, ולא-היה עוד לבני ישראל מן; ויאכלו מתבואת ארץ  
כנען בשנה ההיא.

“And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal; and they kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month at even in the plains of Jericho.

And they did eat of the produce of the land on the morrow after the passover, unleavened cakes and parched corn, in the selfsame day.

And the manna ceased on the morrow, after they had eaten of the produce of the land; neither had the children of Israel manna anymore; but they did eat of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year” (Jos 5:10-12).

Yet in the Book of Exodus we read:

ובני ישראל אכלו את-המן ארבעים שנה-עד-באם אל-ארץ נושבת: את-המן אכלו-עד-באם  
אל-קצה ארץ כנען.

**“And the children of Israel did eat the manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited; they did eat the manna, until they came to the borders of the land of Canaan”** (Ex 16:35).

It is more than likely that this verse was added many years after the events described in the Book of Exodus had happened. Yet as we read in the Book of Numbers that the Israelites reached several “Inhabited lands” prior to their arrival at Canaan, we may assume that the second part of this verse **“they did eat the manna, until they came to the borders of the land of Canaan”** is an even latter addition, that probably was inserted after the Book of Joshua had been written.

In the Book of Numbers we read: **“And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it”** (Num 11:9).

**והמן כזרע-גד הוא; ועינו כעין הבדלח. שטו העם ולקטו וטחנו ברחים, או דכו במדכה, ובשלו בפרור, ועשו אתו עגות; והיה טעמו כטעם לשד השמן.**

**“Now the manna was like coriander seed, and the appearance thereof as the appearance of bdellium.**

**The people went about, and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in mortars, and seethed it in pots, and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was as the taste of a cake baked with oil”** (Num 11:7-8).

Similarly, we read in the Book of Exodus:

**ובבקר היתה שכבת הטל, סביב למחנה. ותעל שכבת הטל; והנה על-פני המדבר, דק מחספס-דק ככפר על-הארץ. ויראו בני-ישראל, ויאמרו איש אל-אחיו מן הוא-כי לא ידעו מה-הוא; ויאמר משה אלהם, הוא הלחם אשר נתן יהוה לכם לאכלה.**

**“And in the morning there was a layer of dew round about the camp.**

**And when the layer of dew was gone up, behold upon the face of the wilderness a fine, scale-like thing, fine as the hoar-frost on the ground.**

**And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another: What is it? - For they knew not what it was. And Moses said to them: It is the bread which YHWH had given you to eat”** (Ex 16:13-15).

**ויקראו בית-ישראל את-שמו, מן; והוא כזרע גד לבן וטעמו כצפיחת בדבש. “And the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna; and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey”** (Ex 16:31).

It is not certain how the Greeks (and English) translators determined that the manna resembled to the coriander seed (~ 4 mm in diameter). It is also possible that **כזרע גד** (*kezera' gad*) is a ק (q) - ג (g) velar exchange and metathesis error of **כזרע דק** (*kezera' daq*) - “like a thin seed.”

Furthermore, the Biblical description of the manna suggests that it was made of pollen of certain types of plants. Among the non-flowering plants (e.g. certain types of grasses) there are several species that produce small pollen grains (< 0.1 mm in diameter) that are light enough to be carried by the wind. For this type of wind pollination (Anemophily), which is inherently

inefficient, these plants have to produce very large quantities of pollen, and their presence in the air may even give it a dusty appearance. In areas where there is significant precipitation of dew, much of this pollen is brought down to the ground. As the heat of the day cause the dew to evaporate, a thin dry layer of the pollen covers the ground. The pollen of many species of such plants, contain various nutrients (including sugars) necessary for the survival of the male gamete of the pollen seed.

This description returns us back to the Book of Exodus:

ותעל שכבת הטל; והנה על-פני המדבר, דק מחספס-דק ככפר על-הארץ.

“And when the layer of dew was gone up, behold upon the face of the wilderness a fine, scale-like thing, fine as the hoar-frost on the ground” (Ex 16:14).

It is not known how the English translator determined that the Hapax legomenon: **מחספס** (*mekhuspas*) means: “**scale-like thing**” and such an understanding is not shared by the Greek translator.

However, if the manna is indeed dry pollen, then **דק\_מחספס-דק ככפר** (*daq mekhuspas daq kakphor*) may be a letter-insertion and mis-division error of **קמח פס-דק ככפר** (*qemakh<sub>h</sub> pas daq kakphor*) - “flour, a thin layer like frost.”

Furthermore, with the change in season and region, diverse types of plants produce pollen and it is therefore not surprising that sometimes the manna tasted as: **כצפיחת בדבש** - “**like wafers made with honey**” (Ex 16:31), while at other times it tasted as: **לשד השמן** - “**a cake baked with oil**” (Num 11:7-8).