



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Beshalach: The Test of Freedom

What challenges do a slave-people face after they are free?

This week, we read of Israel's journey through the hostile wilderness, and the complaints of the Israelites regarding the scarce food and water. God responds with the Manna, introducing it in the following manner:

Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, **that I may test them**, whether they will walk in My law or not.

Think about these questions and read the commentaries below:

- If the Manna is a test, what is this "test"?
- How does the Manna test "whether you will walk in My law or not?"

Here we offer several approaches of the medieval commentators:

1. **Rashi:** Will they fulfil the laws that are associated with it; not leaving the food overnight and not collecting the Manna on the Sabbath

למען אנסנו הילך בתורתִי - אם ישמרו מצות התלויות בו, שלא יותירו ממנו ולא יצאו בשבת ללקוט

2. **Rashbam:** Every day, [the Israelites'] eyes will be looking towards Me, dependent upon Me. This reliance and faithfulness will engender a commitment to following the Torah.

למען אנסנו - מתוך שבכל יום ויום עיניהם תלויות למזונותיהם אלי, מתוך כך יאמינו בי וילכו בתורתִי, כמו שמפורש בפרשת והיה עקב ויענך וירעיבך [וגו']

3. **Sephorno**: Will they walk in my Torah when they gain their sustenance effortlessly

למען אנסנו הילך בתורתי כשיהיה מתפרנס שלא בצער, כאמרם ז"ל לא נתנה תורה אלא לאוכלי
המן

For Rashi, the test is halakhic. Can Israel fulfill all the God-given laws of the Manna, like not leaving food overnight, or not going to collect the Manna on Shabbat. This is quite simply a test of obedience to God.

Rashbam talks about building a relationship of trust. The fact that the Manna had to be consumed on a daily basis leaving nothing overnight, sounds simple, but I wonder if it was. We sometimes hear of Holocaust survivors who still, to this day, keep some bread in their pocket, just in case! Could these people, newly liberated, finish all their food daily, leaving nothing for tomorrow? Could they resist going to forage for Manna on the Shabbat?

Instead of self-reliance, God provides day after day. Now, every evening, every morning the nation is forced to trust God, developing a sense of trust in Him. And later, when God comes to give them the Torah, they will appreciate that this God only seeks their good! For Rashbam, the Manna puts Israel in a process that changes the nation, generating a dependence that fosters a deep connection between Israel and God.

For Sephorno, the test is very different. He sees the life of the Manna as a world of plenty. When a person has everything he needs – he is not in a foxhole, life is good – will he need God? This is a test precisely because the life of the Manna was a life of ease. People seek God in distress, but will they retain their commitment amidst a sense of needs fulfilled? That is the challenge.

Which is the greatest challenge in our religious lives: The challenge of obedience to laws that we don't always identify with (Rashi), the challenge of trying to fully secure our own comfort and security (Rashbam), or the sense that in an environment of material comfort, we take God for granted (Sephorno)?

Our final interpretation comes from Rabbi Yaakov Medan of Yeshivat Har Etzion:

We do not know how much manna descended each day, but even if there was a great abundance, no one could know in advance what quantity would be needed to feed the millions of hungry mouths. Clearly, the manna had to suffice for everyone. People who took more than they needed would cause their neighbors to suffer a shortage. ...this was a test presented to free people who were not receiving their set rations from their masters, but rather were able to gather it themselves, and could – were it not for the commandment, and had they so wished – take more for themselves.

They gathered; some more and some less. And when they measured the *omer*, he who had taken more had none left over, and he that had gathered less was not lacking; they gathered - each according to his eating. (16:17-18)

The newly liberated slaves ... faced their first test of mutual respect, consideration for others, and especially, discipline. All of these are fundamental elements on the road to building a properly run society and nation; they are basic to freedom. The test of freedom is not whether a person is able to do whatever he wishes, but rather whether he is able to act in accordance with his will, out of free choice, but at the same time - to remain a human being, in the moral and cultured sense of the word. Therefore, this is also the test of a free society and of a free nation.

For Rav Medan, the test is a national one. It is the even sharing and distribution of limited resources, and the ordered manner in which a slave nation may become a free society with an orderly civic culture guided by fairness and mutual respect. The test for Israel was the building of an equitable society. Only once Israel had built that society could they be ready to move to their next challenge at Mount Sinai.

Shabbat shalom!