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THE DONUTS OF EDEN: BAKED, FRIED, OR JUST RAINED FROM HEAVEN?

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A little-known Midrash Peliah claims that Abbott and Costello were the jesters identified by Eliyahu HaNavi as destined for the World to Come (Ta'anit 22a). G-d had presumably shown Eliyahu an original clip of "Who's On First" during one of his depressions. A commentary on this midrash reports that the wicked are made to watch a succession of amateur renditions during the eleven months following their death. (Advisory for younger readers: The routine assumes a basic familiarity with "baseball", which was once a popular sport in the United States.)

The naming of the manna somehow reminds me of that routine. ("מן הוא". "That's what I was asking – who is man?" "I already told you מנה הוא" "But you said מן הוא – isn't 'What' playing shortstop?" Ok, that one's going on the playlist for the wicked.) Why does the Torah tell us that the bread falling from the heavens was named with a not-name?

Here's an interpretation in the manner of Rabbi Forhman. (Imitation is sincere flattery). Humankind in the Garden of Eden establishes its likeness to G-d by NAMING all the animals in accordance with their essence. So this failure to come up with a meaningful name demonstrates how far the Jews are from Eden when they emerge for Egypt. They are on the 49th level of tum'ah and completely alienated from the truth of existence. That explains why G-d rushes to give them a taste of Shabbat. Shabbat is the extension of Eden in this world.

I say "taste" advisedly, because of course the manna is also a taste of Eden – that's what Chazal mean when they say it can taste like anything. The question though is: which Tree is it the fruit of? Chavah fell for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because it was visually attractive, "a source of desire for the eyes". Fruit in a plain white wrapper must therefore be from the Tree of Life. The problem is that the fruit's powers may be effective only in those who recognize it. (Think of Homer Simpson rejecting an otherwise perfect universe because his lovely family has never heard of donuts, and leaving just as it begins to rain . . . donuts.)

What we end up with is a remembrance of Eden in a box, next to the Ark which is the entranceway to Eden.

Moving backward several centuries, K'li Yakar ([R. Shlomo Efraim, Luntschitz, 1550-619](#)) offers an astonishingly contemporary reading of the manna. A source of universal puzzlement is how Benei Yisroel could complain about the manna when it was capable of assuming any flavor. Here is his answer:

They said to each other: "Man hu" –

Some say:

Because the letters Mem and Nun are the letters of the nose,

since a person who closes their nose cannot speak a mem or a nun clearly,

and the manna had the aroma of all foods in the world,

but visually – all they saw was the manna,

as they say (Bamidbar 11:6) "*our eyes are not (drawn) to the manna*".

So they called it "*m-n*" to say that

just as those two letters cannot be articulated recognizably if the nose is closed,

so too the manna, which has only the aroma of all foods –

its perfection is nullified by closing the nose.

K'li Yakar picks up on the absence of visual appeal. But where we would expect a contrast between appearance and essence, this interpretation contends that the manna's flavoring depended entirely on smell – and then Benei Yisroel got COVID, turning manna into unflavored tofu, or worse.

Now I recognize that for Aristotelians, smell is superior to the other senses because it seems less physical. That's probably why we're a little more comfortable even metaphorically with G-d "smelling the pleasant odor" of sacrifices rather than tasting them. But I'm astonished at the implicit understanding that the taste of the manna was extrinsic artifice that failed. Even more radically, Kli Yakar reverses our previous interpretation – Benei Yisroel in fact named the "M-N" properly, because it had no essence, only deceptive aroma.

Would Eve have done well to eat a sweet-smelling fruit?

One possible approach focuses on the manna being named twice.

*Benei Yisroel saw
They said, each man to his fellow
“MN hu(?)”
because they did not know what it was (MH hu)
Moshe said to them:
This is the bread which Hashem has given you for
eating. . . .
The House of Israel called its name “MN”
It was like a zera gad, white
and its taste was like a tzapichit in honey.*

The first “naming” seems to be an accidental pun, based on no data other than confusion, whereas the second is deliberate, based on sense-data, and attributed to Beit Yisroel.

Ibn Caspi attempts to explain both namings as deliberate and data-based:

*The House of Israel called its name “MN” –
Ibn Ezra said this means “they had already
called”.*

But this is not true, rather there were two callings.

This because it is known that a thing can be categorized by its class (meaning similarity to other things), and also by what distinguishes it (from other things)

It was previously mentioned that before they knew that it was the bread given to them from Hashem,

they called its name MaN (meaning “Gift”),
on the basis of having tasted it
that it was something good to eat that reached them not by the sweat of their brow
but now that they ceased-from-labor on the Sabbath day – they returned to calling it MaN,
as if saying “Now it is truly MaN”,
and we have no need to collect it today,
and we prepared it yesterday by baking and cooking it for today as well.

It was like a zera gad, white, and its taste was like a tzapichit in honey –

This description relates to the Sabbath day, meaning that even after it had lain overnight, after baking and cooking, its appearance had not gone stale,
and perhaps it was even improved in color and taste,
which is the opposite of “It generated worms and rotted” (16:20).

In Ibn Caspi’s reading, both namings are meaningful. The first naming – which he asserts occurs after they taste it – correctly recognizes it as an undoing of the curse “*by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread*”. But for a reason opaque to me, despite naming it “gift”, Benei Yisroel don’t recognize it as “the bread which Hashem has given them to eat” (even though the preceding verses seem pretty clear that G-d will make it rain bread in the morning. Homer Simpson at least left without seeing the rain.) It is only after Moshe informs them of this, and explains about Shabbat, and a double portion falls on Friday, and they prepare it for Shabbat, and eat it over Shabbat, that they truly understand the significance of the name they had previously given, which is not gift but rather “thing prepared”. The description of the manna which follows is not about its essence but rather about its endurance, contrasted starkly with what happened to leftovers during the week.

I suspect that Ibn Caspi is hinting toward allegory, along these lines:

a. There is no difference between a Wilderness/*midbar* and a Garden/*Gan* if G-d provides food

except that G-d put humanity in the Garden “to work and preserve it”

b. meaning that He wanted it to endure, but that it would endure only if humans put in the work

so the *midbar* could become an enduring *gan* only if the entire week became Shabbat, which required preparation

c. except that G-d forbade the Jews from preparing except for Shabbat

d. meaning (perhaps contra Ramban) that the *midbar* was always intended as a transitional state, with the goal being to develop a recognition that all food is really *M-N*,

e. meaning that it is provided by G-d, but supports human growth and stability only when it is also the product of human effort.

But it’s not clear that Benei Yisroel ever take the final step of recognizing that the M-N is an allegory for all food.

I wonder as well whether Adam and Eve actually did any work in the Garden before their sin. Did G-d ever tell Adam why he had been placed there, or was it his task to find his task? If He did, did Adam tell Eve? I don’t know. (“He’s on third, we’re not talking about him.”)

Shabbat Shalom!

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