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WHAT DOES THE MANNA TEACH US ABOUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY?

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A confession: I always thought the Torah's account of the manna falling from heaven made sense. I never noticed the contradiction between "Everyone gets what they want (or need)" and "Everybody gets exactly the same."

זֶה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקֹוֹק
לְקַטֹּף מִמֶּנּוּ
אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ
עֹמֶר לְגֵלְגֵל לְתַתּ מִסֹּפֶר נַפְשֵׁיכֶם
אִישׁ לְאִשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶלוֹ תִקַּח:

This is what Hashem commended:

Glean of it,

each man in accordance with his okhel

an omer per head, in accordance with the number of your souls

each man shall take for those who are in his tent.

One can resolve this contradiction at the price of redundancy by understanding "each man in accordance with his *okhel*" as referring to "each man shall take for those who are in his tent," so that everyone gets the same. But this reading is hard to sustain in the next sentences:

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיִּלְקְטוּ
הַמְרִבָּה וְהַמִּמְעֵיט:
וַיִּמְדוּ בְעֹמֶר
וְלֹא הָעֲדִיף הַמְרִבָּה וְהַמִּמְעֵיט לֹא הֶחְסִיר
אִישׁ לְפִי-אֲכָלוּ לְקָטוּ:

Bnei Yisroel did so.

They gleaned,

the increaser and the diminisher.

They measured as/via an omer.

*The increaser did not get extra
and the diminisher did not lose out.*

Each man in accordance with his okhel they gleaned.

Who are the "increaser" and "diminisher?" To be consistent, we must claim that they are men with larger and smaller households. They must measure an *omer* per person, not an overall *omer*. But then why would we expect the increaser to get extra, and the diminisher to lose out? And overall, why is it necessary for the Torah to explain at such length the

simple idea that the manna was collected and/or distributed proportionally?

Leaving aside the literary issues: Why would it be good and proper for everyone to receive the same, rather than in accordance with their needs or wants?

Ibn Ezra and Avraham ben HaRambam stake out diametrically opposite positions.

According to Ibn Ezra, an *omer* per head was the maximum, but children got less. He does not explain whether **adults** received the same regardless of the size of their body or appetite, and his reading fits very poorly with "The increaser did not get extra and the diminisher did not lose out." (Chatam Sofer reaches Ibn Ezra's outcome by arguing that the term "*omer*" should be understood as a subjective volume measurement, based on each person's fingerwidth. This requires an assumption that fingerwidth directly correlated with bodysize.)

According to Avraham ben HaRambam, "This is one of the wonders of the manna and its wondrous signs, that it fed equally the adult and the minor, the strong and the weak, each one needing exactly an *omer* per head."

Avraham ben HaRambam's position seems to me much better literarily than Ibn Ezra's. The Torah's repetitions and paradoxes are intended to emphasize that the manna miraculously squared the circle by making an equal share satisfy everyone's needs equally.

But I'm not sure what this reading *means*, what its message is. In real life, individual needs and desires differ. Avraham ben haRambam seems to think that the message is that we don't really need more than just enough. (Ralbag adds that we shouldn't think it virtuous to get by with less than enough. The manna critiques both hedonists and ascetics.) This philosophy provides a demand-centric approach to inequality – let's train everyone to recognize their true needs, because true needs are much less unequal than desires.

One can accept this reading but challenge the moral. Even if we all boil our needs down to be conceptually alike, some people's basic needs will consume vastly more resources than others', e.g, if they have certain medical conditions. The manna miraculously matched equality of income with equality of outcome, but what should we do in our world, where they don't match?

So far we've only dealt with two axes – resources/wealth and needs/desires. But any serious treatment of fairness has to consider a third axis: just desserts. Is it obvious that all people deserve the same share of resources, or to have their needs/desires equally met? Even if we assume the propriety of “from each according to their abilities,” perhaps the proper formula is “To each a share of their needs proportional to the share of their abilities that they contribute.”

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch may accept a version of this formula:

“However, it seems that the intent of the gleaners to glean, each in accordance with his quota, was an unalterable condition, because otherwise they would have been able to suffice – once the outcome of the first day became known to them – with collecting a minimal amount, as one way or the other, each person would receive sufficient for their needs, and no one would under any circumstances receive more than their quota.”

One wonders, however, at the psychological impact of this arrangement. This is make-work in the purest sense. In yeshivish terms, it strips away the illusion that human effort/*hishtadlut* has any direct relevance to results.

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai may provide a slightly different approach.

איש לפי אכלו –
דורשי רשומות אומ':
מיכן שהיה בו במן
בזעת אפך תאכל לחם

each man in accordance with his *okel* –

The expounders of reshumot say:

From here we learn that the manna contained within itself

by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread

This may mean that G-d had a principled objection to providing human beings with food that required no effort on their part. If so, maybe a token, minimal effort was sufficient after the first day.

This suggests that G-d used the manna to create an egalitarian utopia. All needs were provided for equally, and with minimal effort. Having one's needs provided for was a human right, not something one needed to earn, and there was nothing one person could do to become more deserving than another of having his or her needs met. In our world, we should strive as best we can to recreate such equality.

What if someone wanted more?

We all know that the manna was an every-flavor bean. What if some people had much greater gustatory imaginations than others, and so they experienced the manna more pleasurably than others?

Ramban plays the Faucian skunk at the egalitarian picnic. He notes that *benei Yisrael* ask to return to Egypt where they “*sat over the fleshpot, and ate bread to satiety,*” and G-d responded with quail and manna – but there is no miraculous equalization with regard to quail.

ויתכן שהיו גדוליהם לוקטין אותן,
או שהיה מזדמן לחסידים שבהם,
וצעיריהם היו תאבים לו ורעבים ממנו,
כי לא יספר בשלו וילקטו המרבה והממעט
כאשר אמר במן,

Plausibly the adult/great/powerful? among them would glean the quail, or the quail would present themselves only to the pious among them, and the youngsters would desire it and be hungry for lack of it, because the Torah does not tell regarding the quail they gleaned, the increaser and the diminisher as it said regarding the manna.

Human beings do not live by bread alone, and the manna did not succeed in creating a society with no desires beyond needs, if that was its intent. G-d did not create a fully equal society – if Ramban's second hypothesis is correct, He seems to have deliberately generated material inequality based on spiritual inequality.

Perhaps G-d deliberately created human beings as too complex for any notion of sameness to yield fairness. Yet the manna still teaches that sameness is part of the equation.