

Beshalach

Nothing is more wonderful than a great surprise ending. In this week's Parsha, the Red Sea splits, the great Egyptian army is drowned, and the Jews rejoice in their newfound freedom. However, soon after the Jews finish their song and dance, they realize that they are stranded in the desert without a kosher restaurant anywhere in sight. Fortunately, G-d did not take the Jews out of Egypt to abandon them in the desert.

G-d sustained the Jews with the Manna for forty years. The Manna would fall daily and the people would collect the amount they needed each day. Friday and Shabbat were exceptions. G-d did not want the Jews to gather the Manna on the Day of Rest. Therefore, on Friday everyone received an extra portion for the Shabbat, and on the Shabbat no Manna would fall (see 16:11-27). This is the Torah's first mention of the Shabbat since the beginning of Bereishit, where we were told that G-d sanctified the seventh day of creation.

Is it appropriate that the first we hear of the Shabbat is simply as an explanation as to why a double portion of Manna would fall on Friday? Doesn't Shabbat deserve a more direct and formal introduction than that? Is Shabbat just a footnote to the falling schedule of the Manna? It seems that there must be a deeper link between the Manna and the Shabbat.

There is more to the Manna than just food. G-d was not only feeding the Jews, He was testing them as well. "G-d said to Moshe, 'I will make bread rain down to you from the sky. The people will go out and gather enough for each day. I will test them to see whether or not they will keep my law' (16:4). What's the test? Rashi understands that G-d was interested in seeing if the Jews would follow His instructions concerning the Manna, namely, not to save any leftovers and not to go searching for Manna on the Shabbat. The Ramban disagrees. In Ramban's opinion, the test here is a test of faith. It is not easy to live dependent on miraculous daily rations, with no food in the pantry. Would the Jews suffer from anxiety or would they feel safe and secure in the Hands of Almighty? This is the test of the Manna.

The Talmud (Yoma 76a) relates the following conversation, "Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was asked by his students, 'why didn't the Manna fall yearly?' 'I'll give you a parable', he responded. 'To what is this comparable? To a human king that has an only son. The king would give the prince his allowance once a year, and the son would come to see his father once a year. So the king decided to give his son a daily allowance and the son showed up to greet his father every day. So it is with the Jews. A Jew in the desert who had four or five children would worry and say, maybe the Manna won't fall tomorrow and my children will all die of starvation. As a result, all hearts were turned to their father in Heaven.'" G-d desires a close relationship with His people. It was G-d's intention to ingrain an awareness of our dependence upon Him into the Jewish psyche. The anxious parent should be calmed by a deep trust in G-d, and not by a stocked pantry.

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Everybody knows that Shabbat commemorates the creation of the world. Less well known, however, is the fact that Shabbat commemorates the Exodus as well. “You must remember that you were slaves in Egypt, when G-d your Lord brought you out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. It is for this reason that G-d your Lord has commanded you to keep the Shabbat” (Devorim 5:15). As we say in the Friday night Kiddush, Shabbat is “zecher l’yitztiat mitzrayim,” a memorial of the Exodus from Egypt. This is strange. What does Shabbat have to do with the Exodus?

The Exodus demonstrates, in no uncertain terms, that G-d did not create this world and walk away. He is quite an active participant in world affairs, particularly when it comes to the Jews. Yes, Shabbat is about creation, but when we talk about creation we cannot refer solely to the original six days of creation found in Bereishit. To do so would be a misunderstanding of the totality of what is meant when we call G-d “Creator.” G-d is still actively sustaining and directing His creation today. This is what we mean when we say that Shabbat commemorates both the Creation and the Exodus. Creation and Divine Providence are not two independent concepts. They are two sides of the same coin. On the seventh day G-d rested; He didn’t leave.

“Understand that G-d has given you the Shabbat and that is why I gave you food for two days on Friday” (16:28). The purpose of the daily Manna is to teach the Jews that they are completely dependent on G-d. However, on Shabbat we do not need concerns about our Manna supply to turn our hearts to G-d. Shabbat itself fills us with faith as we recognize that it is G-d our creator who sustains us. This is why we don’t work on the Shabbat. It is a day off to give ourselves a much needed reminder that ultimately it is G-d who is providing for our needs.

We can now understand one of the mysteries of the Shabbat. There is a concept called, “Menuchat Shabbat,” the serenity of Shabbat. What is this serenity? It is the peace of mind that only the recognition of Divine Providence can bring. The knowledge that we are in G-d’s Hands has a tremendous calming effect on a person. We can absorb and internalize this knowledge with the help of the Shabbat. Shabbat commemorates and unites G-d’s creation of the world with His continuing “personal” involvement with each one of us, as demonstrated so clearly by the Exodus.

“Understand that G-d has given you the Shabbat” (16:28). Given? Wouldn’t ‘commanded’ be more accurate? The Talmud (Shabbat 10a) takes it quite literally, “G-d said to Moshe, ‘I have a fine gift in my treasure house. It is called Shabbat. I would like to give it to the Jews. Go tell them.’” Indeed, Shabbat is a gift. As we pray in the beautiful language of the Mincha service, “May your children recognize and know that from You comes their serenity, and through their serenity they will sanctify Your Name.”

Shabbat Shalom
The JSN Team

