



Parashat Eikev

Twice in Parashat Eikev Moshe speaks to *Benei Yisrael* about the heavenly manna that provided them with nourishment during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, and in both instances he mentions a purpose that was served through this miraculous means of sustenance. First, Moshe declares, "He fed you manna that neither you nor your forefathers had even known, in order that you know that a person lives not only on bread, but on whatever the Lord dictates shall a person live" (8:3). According to this verse, the manna experience was meant to instruct *Benei Yisrael* that God can sustain human life even without the standard means of sustenance, that His power extends far beyond the realm of the familiar, natural order.

A bit later, we read that Moshe says of God, "who feeds you manna – which your forefathers had never known – in the wilderness, in order to torment you and in order to test you, to benefit you in the future" (8:16). As Maimonides observes in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:24), this verse appears, at first glance, to support the notion that God brings suffering upon people for the sake of increasing their ultimate reward. Moshe here seems to explain the meager, lackluster diet served to *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness as intended to "benefit you in the future," to render them deserving of greater reward at some later point.

However, Maimonides vehemently opposes this outlook on human suffering. He views this approach as running in direct contrast to Moshe's description of God later in the Book of Devarim (32:4), "He is a God of faithfulness, and there is no iniquity in Him" ("*Kel emuna ve-ein avel*"). God commits no *avel* ("iniquity"); He does not bring suffering upon an individual who does not deserve it. Maimonides cites in this context the rabbinic dictum, "There is no death without sin, and no affliction without transgression." Though we are generally unable to identify the precise sin for which suffering has befallen a person, we must believe in the impeccable justness of divine judgment. As Maimonides writes, "Every intelligent religious person should have this faith, and should not ascribe any wrong to God, who is far from it; he must not assume that a person is innocent and perfect and does not deserve what has befallen him."

How, then, are we to understand Moshe's explanation of the purpose underlying the manna – "to benefit you in the future"?

Maimonides offers two possible interpretations of this verse, which flow from two possible meanings of the word *nasotekha*, which is generally translated as "to test you." Maimonides first suggests translating this word to mean "to prove to you." Moshe here explains to *Benei Yisrael* that the manna served to prove that faith in God is sufficient to guarantee a person his sustenance and source of livelihood. The nation's miraculous subsistence during this period demonstrated that God is capable of assuring the livelihood of His faithful, even under otherwise uninhabitable conditions.

Secondly, Maimonides suggests, the word *nasotekha* can be understood to mean "to accustom you." The purpose of the meager diet was to accustom *Benei Yisrael* to a life of hardship in preparation for the fierce battles they would have to wage upon entering Canaan. Maimonides writes:

The meaning of the above passage would then be: "God has first trained you in the hardships of the wilderness, in order to increase your welfare when you enter the land of Canaan." It is indeed a fact that the transition from trouble to ease gives more pleasure than continual ease. It is also known that the Israelites would not have been able to conquer the land and fight with its inhabitants, if they had not previously undergone the trouble and hardship of the wilderness... Ease destroys bravery, whilst trouble and care for food create strength; and this was the good that ultimately came out of their wanderings in the wilderness.

The future benefit of the difficult period of wandering was not the people's reward for enduring this hardship, but rather the physical stamina and courage the people developed over the course of this experience, which would prove indispensable when they would embark on their campaign to conquer *Eretz Yisrael*.

According to this approach, suffering will not befall a person simply for the purpose of increasing his reward, but God may subject a person to a period of difficulty to help prepare him for a situation he will confront in the future. In these instances, the period of hardship does not render the individual deserving of greater reward, but is intrinsically beneficial to the individual in that it helps enable him to overcome obstacles that lay ahead.