

FEED YOUR BRAIN



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT BESHALACH
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

We are generally aware that what we eat impacts our overall health and eating unhealthily can put us at risk for the development of numerous physical diseases. Yet, there is also mounting research that what we eat also greatly affects our intellectual abilities and our emotional health. Our diets affect the neurotransmitters in our brains which can impact our cognitive functioning and our moods. Diets high in refined sugar impair our thinking abilities and tend to focus us on pursuing even more food with high sugar content. Cognitive decline has also been associated with diets high in cholesterol and saturated fats. In contrast, diets high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and unsaturated fats, like omega-3, are linked with increased cognitive and emotional health.

When introducing the concept of the manna, G-d frames the miracle as a test for Bnei Yisrael to see if they will follow in his laws (*"le-ma'an anasenu ha-yeileich betorati im lo"*). The commentators differ in their understanding of the nature of this test and which laws are being tested. Rashi suggests that the test is whether they will follow the rules specific to the manna, which includes a restriction against leaving any left over or for going out to collect it on Shabbat. Ramban disagrees and writes that the test is not whether they will follow the laws, but whether they will trust in G-d to follow Him through the wilderness, despite the lack of natural food sources. Chizkuni offers a third interpretation: since G-d is providing free food from the Heaven—which does not require a lot of preparation time before eating—the test is whether Bnei Yisrael will use their free time to study Torah.

Elaborating on this last theme, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz suggests that the manna served to counteract each of three broad categories of impediments to learning Torah. One, is that we tend to spend lots of time in the pursuit of securing food for consumption. Since Bnei Yisrael were in the middle of the desert, they would have to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy just to find food, something they did not have to do now that they had the manna. A second impediment is that those who have lots of food (or money) tend to spend a lot of time busying themselves with protecting and growing their savings, which can detract from the amount of time learning. Therefore, there were strict limitations on the amount of manna one could gather, preventing anyone from amassing a distracting amount of food. A third impediment to proper Torah learning is the food itself. Writing in the seventeenth century, Rabbi Luntschitz observed that certain coarse and heavy foods diminished the clarity and effectiveness of people's thinking so that they could not focus properly on intellectual pursuits. The manna did not have any of these detrimental cognitive effects, ensuring Bnei Yisrael's ability to focus on learning Torah. The test, therefore, was whether Bnei Yisrael would use their free time for the pursuit of Torah if all of these impediments were removed.

While we aren't blessed with the miracle of manna now, we would do well to try and incorporate some of the lessons into our own lives. This includes a broad reminder about following G-d's laws and trusting in Him to provide for us. But it also provides for us a moment to reflect on our eating habits and how they affect our general spiritual productivity. Do we spend more time than necessary buying, preparing, and eating various foods that are not necessarily essential to our well-being? Could we cut out some of that time and apply it to learning Torah and doing acts of kindness? Can we prioritize eating foods that help boost our cognitive abilities and stay away from ones that give us brain fog and make us feel sluggish? Perhaps even without the manna we can do our best to replicate the benefits our ancestors were afforded with this powerful, yet challenging, miracle.

**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI
SCHIFFMAN**

www.PsychedforTorah.com
PsychedforTorah@gmail.com
[@PsychedforTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedforTorah)

