

# Be a Popcorn Jew!

Category: Bamidbar, Naso

*What can we learn from the recent food shortages?*

## Shortages

A few weeks ago, parents in the United States discovered that they were facing a crisis: there was a severe shortage of baby formula. Several reasons together brought about a situation in which formula shelves were emptying out, and of course it caused a panic, because no mother can afford to be left without food for her baby.

Now, the news has reported that we are facing a dire shortage of — popcorn!

At the beginning of Covid, popcorn stocks accumulated because locations where popcorn is usually consumed were closed for many months. A huge stockpile of popcorn accumulated in the United States, and there was nothing to do with it.

Now, ironically, with entertainment places open and hundreds of thousands of people streaming into them, the opposite has occurred: there is a fear of a severe shortage of popcorn. A number of factors have led to this — rising prices, shortages of farmers, supply problems, etc., along with a fear that farmers will choose to grow more profitable crops, and so on.

## Learning Lessons

The Baal Shem Tov taught that everything a Jew sees or hears must teach him a lesson in serving G-d. The very fact that we heard about a specific story or idea is proof that it contains a message for us.

A source for this idea is found in this week's parsha: in Parshat Naso, we read about a rare case in which a woman is accused by her husband of infidelity, and the Torah prescribes a very specific procedure for her. This is known as the Parshat Sotah.

Right afterwards, the Torah teaches the laws of the nazirite, a person who

chooses an extra-religious lifestyle, not drinking wine, not cutting his hair, and so on.

Our Sages ask, “Why did Parshat Nazir follow Parshat Sota?”

They respond: “To tell you that anyone who sees a sotah in her perversion should take a vow to abstain from wine.” A person who hears about the case of the sotah will draw conclusions in his own life, and abstain from drinking wine, a source of frivolity.

What connection does the listener have? Did it happen to him? Should he really draw conclusions because he read the story in a newspaper?

Clearly, the Torah is teaching us an important rule: if, by Divine providence, you heard about something, it should not only interest you, but you should learn a lesson from it. If one saw a bad situation, he needs to take the appropriate steps to ensure that he won't fall into the same situation. Otherwise, G-d wouldn't have brought it to his attention.

If we heard about the shortage of baby food, and the potential shortage — heaven forfend — of popcorn, it surely has a message for us.

## **Milk and Honey**

Everyone knows the words, “Land of Milk and Honey,” G-d's promise for the Holy Land. The Torah is likened to milk and honey as well; the verse calls it, “Honey and milk under your tongue” (Shir Hashirim 4:11). Our sages explained this verse as follows: “While they were standing before Mount Sinai, they said, ‘*Naaseh v’Nishmah*, we will do and we will hear.’ G-d responded, ‘honey and milk under your tongue’ (Tanchumah Yashan, Ki Sisa 9). In other words, in merit of their dedication, their Torah study would be pleasant and sweet.

Why “milk and honey”? What sets them apart from other foods?

Milk is an essential food. The formula crisis has proven that milk is extremely essential; this is true mainly for babies, but for many adults as well. Honey, on the other hand, is a food designed to sweeten life. It's not integral; it is possible to live one's entire life without honey at all.

We also find this idea regarding the seven unique species of the Land of Israel.

What are the seven species?

The seven species are wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. The first two species, wheat and barley, are essential foods. We see today that in the wake of the war in Ukraine, there is a shortage of wheat, and as a result, the price of wheat has risen by fifty percent since the beginning of the year; experts are saying that it will lead to a severe crisis. On the other hand, the other unique species of the Land of Israel — grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates — are all foods that are “extras”; it is possible to survive without them, most of them are sweet and bring us pleasure.

The Rebbe says something interesting: “This comes to teach us that we should serve G-d not only in matters of Torah and mitzvot that are obligatory but also by adding in one’s service... In simple terms, when a Jew eats fruit...he knows that fruit is not necessary for his existence (like bread) but is rather a form of pleasure... Therefore, he should recognize that just as there are physical matters which are essential and physical matters which are for pleasure — the same is true for his soul...” (Toras Menachem 5742 vol. 854).

In other words, just as G-d provides us not only with the minimum necessary to survive, but also, like a good father, with all sorts of delights, so too, we should engage in Judaism not only to a bare minimum but rather engage with it enthusiastically and joyfully.

## **Formula vs. Popcorn**

We find this same message in the two food shortages: formula is essential, while popcorn is just for pleasure and we could survive without it.

In Judaism, there is also formula and popcorn:

The formula of Judaism is the basics: most parents send their children to a Hebrew school, where they learn to pray, recite blessings, and sing Jewish songs like “Oseh Shalom” “Hava Nagilah,” and “Hinei Mah Tov.” The basics, the bread and butter of Judaism, is something that many people have. But the popcorn, the pleasure of being a Jew, Jewish pride, the fun that Judaism has to offer — that is,

all too often, entirely absent.

Our job is to make sure that Judaism is not just something that we do out of obligation like a hungry person eats bread — like those who do a bris for their son or come to the synagogue on Yom Kippur because otherwise they does not feel Jewish. Or, as everyone claims, they keep mitzvot out of remorse and guilt.

The goal should be for a Jewish child to enjoy and delight with Jewish observance. It should be fun to be Jewish. It is not enough to be a formula Jew; be a popcorn Jew!