

Most of us are not in the position to grow our own food. There may be tomato plants in a sunny window, or a thriving vegetable garden out back, or a hopeful crop of sprouts on the kitchen counter. But in general, we are a society of manna eaters, eating food that magically appears at our doorstep (wherever we are), and which we've had no role in growing or raising. This text from Avot de Rabbi Natan is remarkable, though, and we think it's a question worth thinking about: What is the connection between satisfaction, a place called home, and growing your own food? Is this something we should strive for? And if growing our own food is in fact impossible, what are some other ways we can feel rooted in a place and satisfied by what we eat?

Background Framework

Grow your own

Rabbi Ahai ben Yoshiya says: One who purchases grain in the market—to what may such a person be likened? To an infant whose mother died, and they pass him from door to door among wetnurses and (still) the baby is not satisfied. One who buys bread in the marketplace—to what may such a person be likened? It is as if he is dead and buried. But one who eats from his own (what one has grown himself) is like an infant raised at his mother's breasts.

He used to say: During the time that a person eats from what he has grown himself—his mind is tranquil. Even one who eats from that which his father has grown or from that of his mother's or son's, his mind is not tranquil—and you do not [even] need to say [food grown] from that of others [non-relatives].

– Avot de Rabbi Natan 31:1

רבי אחאי בן יאשיה אומר: הלוקח תבואה מן השוק, למה הוא דומה? לתינוק שמתה אמו ומחזירין אותו על פתחי מיניקות אחרות ואינו שבע. הלוקח פת מן השוק, למה הוא דומה? כאלו חפור וקבור. האוכל משלו דומה לתינוק המתגדל על שדי אמו: אחרים.

הוא היה אומר: בזמן שאדם אוכל משלו, דעתו מיושבת עליו. ואפילו אוכל אדם משל אביו ומשל אמו ומשל בנו, אין דעתו מיושבת עליו ואין צריך לומר משל אחרים.

Original Hebrew

English Translation

We liked it better in Egypt

⁴And the mixed multitude that was among them had a strong craving; and the people of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us meat to eat? ⁵We remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; ⁶But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes. ⁷And the manna was as coriander seed, and its color as the color of bdellium. ⁸And the people went about, and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of fresh oil. ⁹And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it.

והאִסְפָּסְף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבוֹ הִתְאוּוּ תַאֲוָה וַיִּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר. זָכַרְנוּ אֶת הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֲנָם; אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבִטְחִים וְאֶת הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת הַבְּצָלִים וְאֶת הַשּׁוּמִים. וְעַתָּה נַפְשֵׁנוּ יִבֶּשֶׂה אֵין כֹּל בְּלִתֵּי אֵל הֵמָּן עֵינֵינוּ. וְהֵמָּן בְּזֶרַע גָּד הוּא; וְעֵינֵנו כְּעֵין הַבְּדֹלַח. שָׁטוּ הָעַם וְלָקְטוּ וְטָחְנוּ בְּרַחִים אוֹ דָבוּ בַמַּדְכָּה וּבִשְׁלוּ בַפְּרוֹר וְעָשׂוּ אֹתוֹ עֲגוֹת וְהָיָה טַעְמוֹ כְּטַעַם לֶשֶׁד הַשָּׁמֶן. וּבִרְדַת הַטַּל עַל הַמַּחֲנֶה לִילָה יֵרֵד הֵמָּן עָלָיו.

Discussion Prompt

If manna was ostensibly so easy to collect, and so healthy and versatile, why did the Israelites continue to crave food from Egypt?

– Numbers 11:4–9