



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Terumah

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 21, 2015

Terumah

**The Torah’s High-Carb
Diet Plan**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Bread has seen better days. Carbohydrates are like an endangered species, and the gluten-free craze has reached a manic zenith. Any dieter worth his or her salt – or sugar – would not touch these starchy wonders or steamy loaves with a ten-foot fork.

Perhaps with good reason.

But what if bread was more than simple foodstuff? What if bread held the secrets to the face of existence?

In this week’s Torah reading, the true face of bread is revealed and, along with it, the true face of reality itself.

It is called the *lechem haponim*, conventionally translated as “showbread” but literally meaning “face bread.”

The sages of the Talmud teach that this bread was perpetually fresh, never going hard or stale. The mystics of the Kabbalah teach that this bread represents the face of the world.

When you eat this bread, you gain enlightenment, not weight. Eat and be satisfied.

THE TORAH'S HIGH-CARB DIET PLAN

1. Cafeteria Line (Joke)

The children were lined up in the cafeteria for lunch at a religious elementary school. At the head of the table was a large tray of bread slices, next to which the rabbi had posted a sign, "Take only one. God is watching."

Further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. One child whispered to another, "Take all you want. God is watching the bread."

Does God really watch bread more than cookies?

You bet, as we are about to find out...

2. Bread and Dieting

Let's talk about bread.

Bread has seen better days. Carbohydrates are like an endangered species, and the gluten-free craze has reached a manic zenith. Any dieter worth his or her salt - or sugar - would not touch these starchy wonders or steamy loaves with a ten-foot fork.

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Yup, as crazy - and fattening - as it sounds, a deep truth about your life is embedded in the warm steaminess of a bread loaf.

3. Parshat Terumah

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Terumah*, talks about bread.

First it enumerates the different vessels of the Tabernacle – the precursor of the Temple that would eventually be built in Jerusalem.

After discussing the Ark of the Covenant in which the Tablets of the Ten Commandments and the Torah Scroll were placed, and before describing the Golden Menorah, the Torah describes a rather mysterious vessel called the *Shulchan*, the Golden Table, upon which were placed the *lechem haponim*, loaves of showbread.

Here is what the Torah says:

And you shall make a shulchan (table) of acacia wood ... overlay it with gold and make a gold rim, like a crown, around it ... And you shall place on the table lechem ponim (showbread) before Me at all times.¹

This translation, surely, leaves one scratching one's head as to what exactly is showbread:

Is it a braided challah? Is it a bagel? Is it rye, whole wheat, multigrain or gluten-free? Why is it called "showbread?" What does it show? Does it show up on your waistline?

Secondly ... What does it mean that the showbread should be *before Me at all times*? Why specifically does the showbread have to be on the table before God at all times more than other implements of the Temple?

4. The Face Of Bread

The literal translation of *lechem ponim* is "face bread," *lechem* being "bread" and *ponim* being "face."

¹ Exodus 25:23-24, 30.

The 11th century Torah commentator Rashi,² citing the Talmud,³ states that the bread is called “face bread” because the containers in which the loaves were kept were open on two sides and the bread “faced” both sides of the Tabernacle – showing itself, so to speak, hence “showbread.”

However, the bigger question is: What does the *lechem haponim*, the “showbread,” mean to us today? What does this element of the Temple represent in our personal micro-temples? What lesson can the *lechem haponim* teach us in bettering and refining our modern, everyday lives?

5. The Miracle of the Showbread

The showbread was brought to the Temple every Friday before Shabbat to replace the previous weeks offering. But the week-old bread from the Friday before was still as fresh as the day it was baked.⁴ How could this be?

The mystics explain⁵ the *lechem haponim* by analyzing the very nature of our sustenance: Bread is what sustains us; but what sustains bread? Food is what nourishes us and allows us to nourish the world, but food is really simple matter. What is the source of food?

The mystics teach that all of creation is sustained through many different channels and conduits.

First, there is the channel of human effort: In order to eat, we have to work. To eat bread we have to sow seeds, tend them, water them, care for them, harvest them, separate the wheat from the chaff, grind it into flour, mix it with water, allow it to rise, bake it, and finally eat it.

² Rashi on Exodus 25:29.

³ Menachot 96a.

⁴ Menachot 29a, based on I Samuel 21:7, *And the priest gave him hallowed (bread), for there was no bread there, except the showbread, which was removed from before the Lord, to place warm bread on the day it was taken.*

⁵ See Zohar, Terumah 153a. Rabbeinu Bechai on Terumah 25:23. Ohr Hatorah, Terumah, p. 1476ff; et al.

But this only explains how we, through our work in the field, actualize the earth's power to grow grain. But where does this power to create grain come from in the first place? Who creates the seed? And who ingrained into creation the nature that a seed, if implanted, nurtured, and cultivated can lead to edible bread? Who instituted this system and what is the energy that runs through it?

The answer to this question, say the mystics, is represented by the *lechem haponim*, the "face of bread" – and the face of all creation – itself.

This is the part of the creation that is channeled from the Creator itself, the Source of all of creation, the Power that allows this process of creation to happen. And this core root of creation is called the *Ponim*, the Face of creation, stemming from the world *pnimiyut*, revealing the internal workings of creation and all things.

The Zohar⁶ explains – basing itself on God's command that the showbread must be *before Me at all times* – that the Golden Table was not allowed to be, even for a second, without these twelve loaves of bread.

And now we can understand why. If the showbread was removed from the Golden Table for even a second, the blessing of the chain of creation would cease to be. For if you removed the energy that makes the whole chain of creation work, you remove the whole chain of creation.

When the Holy Temple stood, the face of reality was revealed; all knew that every single molecule of creation was created by and energized by God. The energy in all sustenance is obviously perpetual, lest it cease to be. Like if you cut off the electricity from the light bulb the bulb goes dark.

The *Lechem Haponim* was the electricity and energy of all sustenance. If it ceased to be for even a moment then the light bulb of the world's sustenance would cease to shine as well.

This is also why the bread in the Temple never became stale. Creations, seeds, flour, bread, all stale quickly; the internal expression of the Creator never does.

⁶ Ibid.

Today, without the physical Temple, the face of reality is hidden and thus the chain of creation is concealed from us. We look forward and pray for the day when, through our pure deeds, this face of the showbread will once again be revealed for all humankind to see in the Third and permanent Temple.

6. Penimi Bread (Story)

There's a beautiful, heartwarming story⁷ told about the great 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, better known as the Ari, which explains the blessing of *lechem haponim* in a modern-day context:

In the mid-16th century, a converso Jew from Portugal moved to the holy city of Safed where the Ari resided. Deprived in his youth of the opportunity to practice the religion of his fathers openly, he was overjoyed to finally be able to do so.

Years later, he heard a talk by the rabbi of the synagogue he attended about *lechem haponim*, the "showbread" which was offered in the Temple each Shabbat.⁸ After discussing the various laws and procedures governing the preparation of this offering and touching on its mystical significance, the rabbi bemoaned the fact that we no longer have this ready means to touch the face of all sustenance.

The Jew took these words to heart. When he arrived home, he asked his wife to prepare two special challahs on Friday. He related to her all the details he remembered from the lecture on the showbread. She should sift the flour thirteen times, knead it while she was in a state of ritual purity, and bake the dough very well in their oven. He told her that he wished to present these loaves as an offering to God, hoping that God would accept them and eat them.

⁷ Rabbi Moshe Hagiz, in his *Mishnat Chachamim*, writes that he heard this story from reliable people in Safed who were there when it happened.

⁸ See verses above and Leviticus 24:5-9.

His wife loyally fulfilled his request, and early that Friday afternoon, when no one was likely to be in the synagogue, the man brought the loaves there under his cloak. He prayed and cried that God should look upon his offering with favor, and eat and enjoy the lovely, freshly baked bread. He went on and on, like an errant son begging his father for forgiveness. Then he placed the wrapped loaves in the Ark, beneath the Torah scrolls, and quickly left for home.

The caretaker of the synagogue arrived later that day to complete preparations for Shabbat. One of his duties was to check that the Torah scroll was rolled to the proper place for the reading the next morning. When he opened the Ark, he was surprised to see that a package had been neatly placed inside. He opened it, and there were two fine-looking challah loaves! He had no idea where they had come from, but he didn't think too much about it; he simply decided to take them home and eat them – after all, they looked and smelled delicious!

And they were delicious. The caretaker was delighted with this unexpected fringe benefit of his job.

That evening, the Jew waited impatiently for the end of the prayers. When everyone had left the synagogue, he approached the Ark in great trepidation and swung open its doors. The loaves were not there! He was so happy. He hurried home to share his joy with his wife. He innocently proclaimed that God had not disdained the poor efforts of such insignificant people as themselves. Indeed, He had accepted their two loaves, and eaten them while they were still warm!

“Therefore,” he exhorted her, “let us not be lazy, for we have no other way to honor Him, and we see that He loves our bread. Every week we must try to give Him this pleasure with the same care and devotion that we did this first time.”

His wife was swayed by his wholehearted excitement, and gladly cooperated. Every Friday morning she faithfully prepared two beautiful loaves, paying careful attention to every detail, and every Friday afternoon he delivered them to the synagogue, and earnestly prayed and pleaded with God for their acceptance.

And every Friday the caretaker would come along and happily eat the delicious challahs. And every Friday night the Jew from Portugal ecstatically informed his wife that once again their meager offering had been accepted.

So it went, for many weeks and months.

One Friday, the rabbi of the synagogue stayed much later than usual, until the afternoon. It was the same rabbi who had given the speech about the "showbread" that had so inspired the converso from Portugal. He was standing on the reading platform, reviewing the sermon he planned to give the next day, when, to his surprise, he saw one of his congregants enter carrying two loaves of bread, walk up to the Ark, and deposit them inside. He realized that the man was unaware of his presence, and he heard him utter fervent prayers for God to accept his offering and enjoy the challahs.

The rabbi listened in astonishment. At first he was silent, but as he began to understand what was going on, his anger rose. Finally he was unable to restrain himself any longer, and burst out in fury: "Stop! You fool! How can you think that our God eats and drinks? It is a terrible sin to ascribe any physical qualities to God Almighty. Do you actually believe it is the Lord who eats your measly loaves? Why, it is probably the caretaker who eats them."

At that moment the caretaker entered the synagogue, blithely expecting to pick up his challahs, as usual. He was a bit startled to see the rabbi and another man standing there. The rabbi immediately confronted him. "Tell this man why you came here now, and who has been taking the two challahs he has been bringing each week."

The caretaker freely admitted it. He wasn't embarrassed at all. He couldn't understand why the rabbi was so agitated, and why he was yelling at the other man, whom he knew to be an unlearned but sincere Jew.

As the rabbi continued his rebuke, the man burst into tears. He was crushed. Not only had he not done a mitzvah as he had thought, it seemed he was guilty of a great sin. He apologized to the rabbi for having misunderstood his lesson about the showbread, and begged him to forgive him. He left the synagogue in shame and despair. How could he have been so wrong? What was he to do now?

Shortly thereafter, a messenger from the Ari strode into the synagogue and approached the rabbi. In the name of his master, he told the rabbi to go home, say goodbye to his family, and prepare himself – for by the designated time for his sermon the next morning, his soul would have already departed to its eternal rest.

The rabbi couldn't believe what he had just heard, nor could the disciple explain it to him. So the rabbi went directly to the Ari, who confirmed the message and added, as gently as possible: "I heard that it is because you halted God's pleasure, the likes of which He hasn't enjoyed since the day the Temple was destroyed. That is what He felt when this innocent converso would bring his two precious loaves to your synagogue each week, faithfully offering them to God from the depths of his heart with joy and awe, and believing that God had taken them, until you irrevocably destroyed his innocence. For this the decree was sealed against you, and there is no possibility to change it."

The rabbi went home and told his family all that had transpired. By the time of his sermon the next morning, his soul had already departed, exactly as the Ari had said.⁹

7. The Lesson of Bread's Face (Conclusion)

The lessons of this story are many. In the light of what we just learned perhaps we may take away the following message:

Usually in life, as sophisticated human beings, we connect with the expressions of *matter*, the bread of life, the sustenance of existence. But every once in a while – like that simple Jew in the story – we access the *spirit*, the face of the bread, the source of all the matter and sustenance of existence.

This ability resides in each and every one of our personal micro-temples, and it is called the *lechem haponim*.

⁹ As related by Yerachmiel Tilis.

Each one of us has the pure, innocent place in our hearts. Every so often it would be good to recognize and appreciate this part of ourselves and everyone you meet. Never judge another. Sincerity, above all, is the face of all sustenance.

This is how we keep our life – and our bread – miraculously fresh. And this is how we gain insight, wisdom and enlightenment ... without gaining weight.

Bon Appétit and Shabbat Shalom!

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