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Drinking Manna?

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While we typically think of manna as a food item to consume, there seems to be the possibility that it might be somewhat drinkable, when we read of its description in this week's Torah portion (Num. 11:7-8):

Now the man was like coriander seed,	והמֶן כְּקֹרְעֵגַד הָיָא
and in color it was like bdellium. The	וְעֵינֵי כְּעֵינֵי הַבְּדֵלְיָה: שֵׁטֶף
people would go about and gather it,	הָעָם וְלָקְטוּ וְטָהְנוּ
grind it between millstones or pound	בְּרִחִים אֶו דְּכוּ בַמְדֹלָה
it in a mortar, boil it in a pot, and	וּבְשָׁלוּ בַפְּרוֹר וַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ
make it into cakes. It tasted like rich	עֲגוֹת וְהָיָה טַעְמוֹ
cream.	כְּטַעַם לֶשֶׁד הַשָּׁמֶן:

It would seem to taste like rich cream, but was it drinkable?

Midrash on Drinkability

According to one midrashic description, it would seem that manna was drinkable (*Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) *Beshallah* 22:1):

The peoples of the world were not able	אומות העולם לא היו יכולין
to taste it because in their mouths it	לטעום מנו, שהיה בפיהם
became like bitter wormwood. What	כגידין מרין, ומה היו עושים,
did they do? They caught a deer that	היו צדין צבי שהיה שותה
had drunk of it, and they took from it a	ממנו, וטועמין ממנו מטעמו
taste of manna. Then they said:	של מן, והיו אומרים אשרי
"Blessed be the nation which has this."	הגוי שככה לו.



While this midrash does not depict a person drinking the manna, it still is depicted as drinkable, albeit by an animal. While it is unclear where this deer chanced upon this manna - perhaps some excess manna? - this midrash positions these gentile nations as seeking to taste some of this manna from the deer somehow (maybe by eating of the deer's meat or even from its stomach?). Curiously, the unmediated manna is described as very bitter for the gentiles, yet, through the deer's drinking of the manna, they are able to consume the deer through which they are able to enjoy the taste of manna. Through this tasting, they realize how much of a delicacy it is.

One question that remains, though, is how did this deer drink the manna?

Midrash on Manna as a Beverage

I was thinking the manna that the deer drank had been some leftover manna from some of our ancestors that they had melted down, yet, there is another midrash that describes the provision of manna in drinkable form (*Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) *Beshallah* 21:1):

Zavdi ben Levi said: "Two	זבדי בן לוי אמר שני
thousand cubits (of manna)	אלפים אמה היה יורד
came down each day and	המן בכל יום, והיה
remained for four hours. As soon	עומד עד ארבע
as the sun rose over it, it melted	שעות, כיון שהיה
and became countless torrents	השמש באה עליו היה
as it flooded and ran down.	נימוק ונעשה נחלים
For whom is it destined now? For	נחלים ושטף ויורד,
the righteous in the age to come.	ולמי היה מתוקן
Whoever believes has the right	עכשיו, לצדיקים
to eat of it, but whoever does	לעולם הבא, מי שהוא
not believe, 'may not look upon	מאמין זוכה ואוכל
the streams, [the torrential	ממנו, ומי שאינו

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rivers of honey and cream]' (Job 20.17).
As soon as it ran down in rivers, the peoples of the world came to drink from it; but it became wormwood and gall in their mouths, as stated, 'Now the manna was like bitter seed' (Num. 11.7).
For Israel, however, the manna became honey within their mouths, just as it says, '[and its taste was] like wafers in honey' (Ex. 16.31)."

מאמין אל ירא
בפלגות וגו' (איוב כ"ז),
וכיון שהיה יורד
בנחלים היו אומות
העולם באין לשתות
ממנו, והוא נעשה
בפיהם גד ולענה,
שנאמר והמן כרע גד
הוא וגו' (במדבר י"ז).
אבל לישראל נעשה
בתוך פיהם דבש,
כשם שאומר וטעמו
כצפיחית בדבש
(שמות ט"ז).

As Zavdi ben Levi describes it, the manna was provided in a solid form, yet the sun melted it in such a massive quantity that there were manna rivers coursing through the desert(!), thus enabling deer to then drink from this manna river. Also, as he describes it, instead of the gentiles eating the manna, they, too, drank from this manna river. However, whereas the deer drank from it without problem, when the peoples of the world drank from this manna river, it was not only the bitterness of the wormwood they tasted, but also bile, both of which are not enjoyable to taste.

Another drinkable aspect of this manna, according to Zavdi ben Levi is the turning of the manna into honey in the Israelites' mouths, which is quasi-drinkable.

Midrash on Manna Tasting Differently According to Age

This difference in taste of the manna according to identity is not unique to Zavdi ben Levi, as we read of yet another midrash (*Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) *Beshallah* 22:1 (cf. also *Yoma* 75b)):

Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina said:
"The babies who tasted it were not like the old people who tasted it.
How?
To the babies, it had the taste of milk, as stated, 'And it tasted like rich cream' (Num. 11.8);
to the youths, it tasted like honey, as stated, 'and its taste was like wafers in honey' (Ex. 16.31);
to the old people, it tasted like bread, as stated, 'Behold, I will rain down bread from the heavens for you' (Ex. 16.4);
to the sick, it tasted like fine flour mixed with oil and honey, like barley grits, which they make for one who is sick, as it is said, 'They boiled it in a pot' (Num. 11.8).
And where is it shown that it had the taste of fine flour and honey?
Where it is stated, 'Also my bread, which I gave you: fine

אמר ר' יוסי בר חנינא
לא כשם שהזקן טועם
ממנו התינוקות טועמין
אותו,
כיצד?
התינוקות היו
טועמין אותו טעם
חלב, שנאמר והיה
טעמו כטעם לשד
השמן (במדבר י"ז),
והבחורים היו
טועמין בו כדבש,
שנאמר וטעמו
כצפיחית בדבש (שמות
ט"ז),
והזקנים טועמין בו
כלחם, שנאמר הנני
ממטיר לכם לחם מן
השמים (שם שם ד),
והחולה היה טועמו
כסולת המעורב בשמן
ודבש, כטיסני זו
שעושים לחלולה,
שנאמר ובשלו בפרור
(במדבר י"ז),
ומנין שהיה בו טעם
סולת ודבש, שנאמר
ולחמו אשר נתתי לך



flour, oil, and honey...' (Ez. 16.19).

Each and everyone tasted it according to his physical ability:

Whoever was active went out and gathered it from the field, as stated, 'And the people shall go out to gather' (Ex. 16.4).

Those who were fairly <active> went out to their tent doors [to gather].

And the lazy lay down, stretched out their hands, and it came down right into their hands, as it is said, 'When the layer of dew had gone up...' (Ex. 16.14)."

סולת ושמן ודבש וגו'
(יחזקאל ט"ז יט),
כל אחד ואחד היה
טועם בו לפי כחו,
מי שהיה זריז היה
יוצא ומלקט מן השדה,
שנאמר ויצאו העם
ולקטו (שמות ט"ז ד),
והבינונים היו
יוצאין לפתח אהליהם
[ומלקטים],
והעצלים היו
רובצין להם, ופושטין
ידיהם והוא יורד לתוך
ידיהם, שנאמר ותעל
שכבת הטל וגו' (שם שם
יד). [דק מחספס]
(שם).

While this midrash does not describe manna as drinkable or necessarily as a beverage, it does seem that Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina is describing the manna as tasting like honey for the youth and like milk for babies, so, perhaps, it may have been consumed in drinkable form.

Conclusion

While we don't typically consider manna to be related to drinking, rabbis midrashically described manna as not only meltable, but drinkable in this melted form. While our ancestors could melt down the manna, it was also meltable in the sun and in such volume that, through the bountifulness of these manna rivers, even animals drank from them. Moreover, there was a changing flavor profile of this manna, according to one's demographic, whether tasting bitter and/or of bile for gentiles, or sweet like honey for our ancestors. Wishing you a Shabbat of enjoyable drinking!

L'chaim 

Oneg Shabbas is composed by, edited by, and published by Rabbi Drew Kaplan.

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