

Now the Manna was like coriander seed... and its taste was like the taste of dough kneaded with oil. (11:7,8)

The manna which descended daily from Heaven had varied tastes – as described by the Torah. In Shemos 16:4, it is referred to as bread from Heaven, with a taste “like a cake fried in honey” (ibid 16:31). Here it is described as having the taste of dough kneaded in oil. The Talmud Yoma 75b explains that for the young, it tasted like bread; for the elderly, it was like oil; and for the infants, its taste was similar to honey. These three tastes seem to contradict an earlier statement made by the Talmud (75a) that a person who ate the manna could taste anything he wanted. The taste varied with its consumer. Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, explains that the Torah’s description of the manna’s taste applies to one who ate the manna in order to satiate his hunger. Then the young tasted bread, the elders tasted oil, and the infants tasted honey. One who ate for pleasure, however, could taste to his heart’s content.

The manna had the spiritual ingredients within it to provide the most demanding food connoisseur with whatever taste he so desired. Otherwise, its taste catered to the various stages of life of the individuals. Rav Schwab writes that he had the zechus, merit, to spend Shabbos Parashas Vayakhel-Pekudei 1930, in the home of the saintly Chafetz Chaim. He quotes the sage’s drashah, lecture, that Friday night. “Chazal teach that the manna provided any taste that the individual who consumed it had in mind. If this was the case, we wonder what taste the manna had if, in fact, the individual had no specific desire. He just picked up a plate of manna and ate from it. What taste did it have?’

“The Chafetz Chaim looked around at his guests, expecting someone to give a reply. Everyone remained silent, understanding that the sage was presenting a rhetorical question which he himself would answer. He looked at the gathering and said in Yiddish, Az m’tracht nisht, hat kein taam nisht, ‘When one does not think (specifically), then there is no taste.’ A spiritual entity receives its taste in accordance with the thought applied to it. For example, when one studies Torah, applying his mind to its profundities, going out of his way to understand the depth of the issues, the analytics behind the various logical deductions that are formulated and presented – then – and only then – does he experience the mesikus, sweetness, of Torah. The Chafetz Chaim then placed his fingers to his lips to demonstrate the concept of sweetness. ‘This is why we ask Hashem daily (in our morning blessings) V’haarev na... es divrei Sorascha, And sweeten for us... the words of Your Torah.

“However, when one merely repeats words without delving into their meaning, without proper thought to plumb the depths of the subject matter that he is learning – his studies have no taam – taste.’ The Chafetz Chaim stopped speaking for a moment and then added, ‘This will be the case when Moshiach Tziddkeinu arrives to herald the Final Redemption. Those who apply themselves to the experience will be privy to an unprecedented Revelation of the Kingdom of Hashem. They will sense this Revelation. It will have a taste so sweet, unlike anything else ever experienced.

Otherwise, without thinking, he will feel nothing” (free translation).

Torah study demands consciousness, awareness of what one is studying and Who the Author is. Only then can one appreciate its depth and sweetness. While certainly every great Torah leader experienced the V'harev na, sweetness, of Torah study, one Torah giant whose countenance manifest this euphoric sweetness was Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, Rosh Yeshivah of Telshe. To the Rosh Yeshivah, learning was living. His greatest joy was derived from studying Torah. Indeed, when he was able to explain a difficult passage in the Talmud or in one of the commentaries, his joy was so palpable that he would begin to dance. In the nearly eighteen years that I spent in Telshe, I was privy to the joy that Rav Gifter had from studying Torah. It was evident in his entire demeanor. Recently, I was reading Rabbi Yechiel Spero's wonderful biography of Rav Gifter, and I came across a story that captivated me. Indeed, the story is very telling of the Rosh Yeshivah's abiding love for the Torah.

At the end of second seder, the afternoon session, a talmid, student, waited patiently to speak to Rav Gifter. The student had decided that he was leaving. He had learned “enough.” It was now time to move on. He felt that while during the decision process he had not consulted with the Rosh Yeshivah, he had to at least gezezen zich, say goodbye, to his revered Rebbe.

The Rosh Yeshivah continued learning. The talmid stood a few feet away – waiting patiently for the Rosh Yeshivah to close his Gemorah and prepare to leave the bais hamedrash. He did not look forward to the “goodbye,” since he was acutely aware that his Rebbe would not be pleased with his decision. He felt bad, but it was a decision which he had spent considerable time deliberating. His learning was no longer what it used to be. When one's learning begins to go downhill, it is time to move on – so he felt. Sadly, his learning had become the victim of personal problems which included much self-doubt.

A few moments went by, and Rav Gifter closed his Gemorah. The young man was about to go over when, suddenly, Rav Gifter planted a resounding, love filled kiss on the Gemorah – as if he was saying goodbye to his best friend.

The kiss was magical. The love that exuded from the Rosh Yeshivah in that loving gesture was so palpable that it transformed the student from a spent, downcast young man into a newly-invigorated and rejuvenated person. He never said goodbye, returning to his Gemorah to continue his learning. He never stopped. Rav Gifter's kiss was transformative. As a result of that magical kiss, that talmid continues to learn and teach Torah sixty years later. He was witness to the love of Torah!