5 Ways the Torah Challenges Our Idea of Enough

Your 18Forty Parsha Guide is a weekly newsletter exploring five major takeaways from the weekly parsha. Receive this newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

Picture a financial advisor's office, where the question on the table is deceptively simple: "What's your number?" Everyone who has sat in that chair understands the implicit meaning. They're asking about the retirement number, the specific dollar amount that will finally provide genuine security. The figure varies wildly, but the underlying assumption remains constant: Security is a quantity, and you don't have enough of it yet.

The strange thing is that the number keeps moving. Whatever target you set, reaching it generates a new target just beyond your grasp. Whether someone is scraping by or earning more than they ever imagined, the gnawing feeling of "not enough" persists. Something deeper than mathematics is driving this pattern.

We should distinguish this from actual economic hardship. People genuinely struggling to pay rent or feed their families face a scarcity that is brutally real. The Manna story addresses something different: the psychological architecture of "never enough" that operates even when the pantry is full and the bills are paid.

In Parshat Beshalach, God takes a nation of recently freed slaves and enrolls them in an economic experiment unlike anything before or since. These are people traumatized by survival, conditioned by generations of bondage to treat every meal as potentially their last. Into this anxiety, God introduces the Manna with rules that seem almost perversely restrictive: Gather only what you need for today, save nothing for tomorrow, collect double on Friday because nothing falls on Shabbat. These rules seem arbitrary until you realize what they're designed to accomplish: the dismantling of survivalist psychology and the cultivation of trust that will become foundational to the covenant at Sinai.

1. The Psychology of Scarcity: Diagnosing the Internal Condition

The Israelites had barely crossed the sea when the complaints began: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate bread to our fill." They're romanticizing slavery, remembering an abundance that likely didn't exist as their memory now constructs it.

This isn't simple ingratitude. Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir's *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* documents how prolonged deprivation captures cognitive bandwidth in ways that fundamentally alter decision-making. The mind cannot process long-term planning when consumed by immediate survival. People in scarcity states make worse decisions not because they're less intelligent but because their mental resources have been commandeered by emergency. The Israelites were cognitively impaired by generations of enslavement, their nervous systems trained to anticipate disaster even in its absence.

Ramban notices something subtle: They don't just wish they'd had more food but that they wish they'd died in Egypt "by the hand of the Lord." He reads this as slave mentality projecting catastrophe onto the present. No one was actually starving yet, but trauma had trained them to expect the worst regardless of present circumstances.

Zohar Atkins often explores how rationality and faith intersect in decision-making. Our deepest assumptions about security reveal theological commitments we may not consciously recognize. What we chase, what we fear losing, what we trust to protect us—these expose what functions as God in our lives. The Israelites' panic reveals this dynamic. Their wants had disguised themselves as needs, and the craving for Egyptian meat was really a craving for the psychological safety of the known.

The first lesson: You cannot fix economic behavior without addressing the internal condition that drives it. The scarcity mindset transforms abundance into lack, making hoarding feel like survival rather than excess.

2. Provision, Effort, and the Question of Trust

The mechanics of the Manna violated every principle of market economics. Each person gathered an "*Omer*," roughly three to four liters. Regardless of effort invested, when they measured at day's end, each had exactly one *Omer*. Those who gathered much had nothing extra; those who gathered little had no shortage.

Rashi clarifies that this equalization wasn't redistribution. No one collected extra and shared. The adjustment happened supernaturally. This has no analog in human systems, meaning direct policy prescriptions from the Manna narrative misunderstand its purpose. The Manna offers theological insight, revealing God's values about provision: Basic dignity was guaranteed, effort was required, but differential effort didn't produce differential survival outcomes. Your worth as a person is not determined by where you rank.

Michael Eisenberg argues that the Manna doesn't reject ambition or effort. Active gathering was required; work retained its dignity even when it didn't produce winners and losers. In our world, effort generally correlates with outcome, and that's not inherently unjust. The Manna narrative offers a theological reminder that even our effort operates within a framework of Providence.

Yet some Israelites couldn't follow instructions. They stashed Manna overnight. By morning, it had bred worms and rotted. Sforno identifies the hoarders as lacking *bitachon*, trust that encompasses both belief and embodied confidence. They couldn't believe tomorrow's provision would arrive.

This raises an obvious objection: Isn't saving prudent? The *Chovot HaLevavot* addresses this directly, distinguishing between *hishtadlut*, appropriate effort within a framework of reliance on God, and misplaced trust that treats assets as though they possess the power to save you. Saving isn't the problem. Believing the savings will save you is.

The hoarders weren't wrong to want security. The question the Manna raises is not "how much is too much" but "where does your sense of security ultimately rest?" Someone with modest resources who maintains trust in Providence is in a more secure spiritual position than someone with substantial resources who believes those resources alone stand between them and disaster.

Dovid Bashevkin has spoken candidly about how anxiety makes the future feel perpetually unsafe, turning rational assurances into abstractions that cannot penetrate the body's conviction that disaster is imminent. The hoarders weren't villains but terrified people doing what terrified people do. The worms didn't appear because God was angry but because hoarding in a system of daily provision is inherently self-undermining. If you trust the accumulation to save you, it will fail.

3. Shabbos as Economic Ceasefire

Friday's gathering was different. A double portion fell and didn't rot overnight. The instruction was clear: "Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you would bake and cook what you would cook," and then stop. No gathering on the seventh day, no matter how anxious you feel, no matter how much your conditioning screams that survival requires constant effort.

The Talmud in Beitzah 16a provides the theological framework: "He who created the day created its sustenance." Provision for rest comes through the workday that precedes it. The double portion on Friday proves that God accounts for Shabbos in the structure of provision. Working seven days reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of where sustenance originates.

Some Israelites went out on Shabbos anyway, driven by habits they couldn't break. They found nothing. Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* describes modern workers as "achievement subjects" who exploit themselves more efficiently than any boss could. We cannot stop gathering when we have identified our worth with our output, making rest feel like failure rather than restoration.

Sarah Hurwitz, reflecting on discovering Shabbos after years in high-pressure Washington careers, describes it as liberation from the tyranny of the to-do list. One day a week, the tasks that define her don't exist. She is allowed to exist without earning her existence.

The Shabbos of Manna is economic resistance in its purest form: the weekly demonstration that you are not a machine and your value doesn't derive from what you produce.

4. The Jar in the Ark: Memory as Economic Anchor

The Manna narrative includes a curious instruction pointing beyond the wilderness. Moshe tells Aharon to take a jar, fill it with an *Omer* of Manna, and place it "before the Testimony to be kept for your generations" (Exodus 16:32-34). The Ark hasn't been built yet. Moshe is giving a command for the future, placing the jar in anticipation of something that doesn't yet exist.

Centuries later, according to Yoma 52b, the jar of Manna was housed alongside the Ark. The Talmud in Yoma 76a records that when Yirmiyahu confronted a generation that feared Torah study would bankrupt them, he invoked the Manna: This is what sustained your ancestors for 40 years. Economic survival is not strictly linear to hours worked. Providence operates on principles that transcend marketplace logic.

Jan Assmann's *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* describes how certain objects function as "memory figures," stabilizing group identity across generations by making abstract truths tangible. The jar of Manna is exactly this: a physical reminder that refuses to let us forget. Left to market logic alone, we forget we were ever fed by anything other than our own hustle.

Rabbi J.J. Schacter has explored how Judaism depends on "active memory" that goes beyond historical knowledge. Knowing what happened isn't enough without feeling its claim on you today. The jar isn't nostalgia but a demand that persists across centuries, calling us to remember Providence in the midst of our productivity.

We don't live in the Manna era but in the time of "by the sweat of your brow," where work is required and effort matters. The jar remains, though, sitting in the Ark to temper our hustle and remind us that the ultimate source of provision is not located in our spreadsheets.

5. The Difficult Inheritance

The Manna sits in memory as gift, provision and sufficiency made tangible across generations. But inheritance isn't only the parts we treasure. Beshalach doesn't end with bread from heaven.

In chapter 17, while the Jewish People are still disoriented from the Sea crossing, Amalek attacks. The target selection is deliberate: the weak, the exhausted, the children lagging at the rear. Rashi emphasizes this cruelty as Amalek's defining feature, hunting the vulnerable among refugees who had just escaped bondage. God's response comes in Exodus 17:14: "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

The command that troubles modern readers appears in Deuteronomy 25:19, when the obligation shifts from God to Israel: "You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget." Some read genocide. That reading, though understandable given 20th-century history, isn't what the Hebrew says. The text uses "*zecher Amalek*," the memory or trace of Amalek, not "*am Amalek*" (the nation) or "*zera Amalek*" (the seed). Traditional readings take this language seriously, understanding the command as elimination of an ideology of predatory cruelty. The strange doubling, "blot out the memory" followed by "do not forget," signals the text's complexity: you cannot both erase and preserve a memory unless what you're preserving is the lesson while erasing the ideology.

But honest engagement requires the hardest case, which is not Deuteronomy but Samuel. In 1 Samuel 15, the prophet commands Shaul to strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have. Shaul spares King Agag and the best livestock. He loses his kingship. In Yoma 22b, Rabbi Mani imagines Shaul protesting: "If the Torah requires atonement for one anonymous death, how much more for all these souls? If men sinned, what did animals do? If adults sinned, what did children do?" The response: "Do not be overly righteous." The objection was rejected.

The tradition finds limitations to this command. Maimonides rules that even Amalek must first be offered peace. The Talmud in Berakhot 28a and Mishna Yadayim 4:4 declares that Sancheriv's deportations mixed the nations, making Amalekite identity unknowable. For 2,500 years, no Jew has been able to act on this command. That trajectory may itself be revelatory.

None of this erases what Samuel 15 says. Rabbi Norman Lamm acknowledged: "Our discussion of the Halakha on Amalek … has not solved all the moral problems to our satisfaction as believing Jews." The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre defined a living tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks invoked this definition to describe Judaism itself. A tradition that has stopped wrestling with its own texts is no longer living. The discomfort you feel is not a sign you're outside the tradition but inside it.

The Torah doesn’t offer only passages that comfort. Receiving this tradition means receiving the parts that resist easy resolution alongside the parts that nourish. The Manna was a gift. Amalek is the harder inheritance, the portion that demands you decide how to hold a text that troubles you without either pretending the difficulty doesn’t exist or discarding everything else because one passage disturbs. Both are in Beshalach. Both are part of what you inherit if you inherit this at all.

Questions for Reflection

1. **If you were guaranteed sustenance without effort for one day each week, how would you actually spend that time?**
2. **How might your relationship to work and rest change if you truly believed that Providence operates beyond the logic of productivity?**
3. **What does it mean to receive a tradition that includes passages you struggle with? How do you hold difficulty without either minimizing it or discarding everything else?**

This project is made possible with support from the Simchat Torah Challenge and UJA-Federation of New York. Learn more about the Simchat Torah Challenge and get involved at their website.