

SWEETENING LIFE'S BITTER WATERS

A-315

A-315
The last part of the special Terah reading, presents for us a universal problem of immense proportions and eternal relevance. It is the question of how to sweeten the bitterness of life, how to blunt the sharp edge of life's disappointments.

It is after Moses and Israel sing their victory song at the shores of the Red Sea that we read וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ בְּיַם סוּף
The waters of Marah were bitter, and the children of Israel were thirsty. The taste of victory had soured in their mouths. Instead of the exulting cry of triumph, there came the fleeting whimper of complaint. The people were accustomed to victory, of having things go their own way. Now the waters were bitter and they knew not what to do. So revolution was threatened and rebellion brewed and Moses grew apprehensive. And thus Moses turned to G-d and asked him how to sweeten the waters of Marah, even as we so often come here to this synagogue to learn to how to sweeten the bitterness in our own lives וַיִּשְׂאֵל מֹשֶׁה אֶת יְהוָה
- with Moses we cry to G-d asking Him for the secret, how to sweeten life's bitterness, how *alleviate our anxieties, fears etc.*

One answer that has always suggested itself is: knowledge, Enlightenment makes for happiness. Science means progress, and progress will sweeten life's bitter pill. The more education, the more science and knowledge, the more will life be pleasant.

This answer, it must be said, is thoroughly false. For when Moses asked G-d that question of how to sweeten the waters of Marah, we read וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵל מֹשֶׁה
וְהָיָה מִן הָעֵץ And one sage asks: Why a special tree? -
Why not use the same ~~quote~~ "Staff of Moses" which had performed so many miracles in the past? And he answers (see Terah Shelamah exodus 15:262) that the staff of Moses was fashioned from the Tree of Knowledge which had caused death to Adam, and hence could not be a source of sweetness to his descendants. So that the first thing that Moses taught us, negatively, by not using his own staff, was that knowledge is no automatic guarantee of happiness. Knowledge can be deadly as well as enlightening. Science can kill and maim and threaten the universe as well as save and reclaim and open new horizons. Today we have more college graduates than ever, universal free education, and the greatest age of science and technology. Yet there is more unhappiness than ever before. And - curiously enough - the scientist themselves seem to be the most unhappy and the most embittered. "He who increaseth knowledge, increaseth pain."

The second possible answer is psychological; it is a matter of perspective. If you think the waters are bitter then remember that other people must drink of far deeper wells of bitterness. That is why one sage (Rabbi Elazar) identifies

SWEETENING LIFE'S BITTER WATERS (CONT.)

THE Tree Moses used with the olive tree, *עץ זית* *BN NN N - N'S GY*
 It is a valid psychological trick for people who imagine their difficulties to be greater than they really are. All of us ought to use the approach of the olive tree when we feel prone to complain about our personal conditions. At this time of Yizker, when we remember tenderly etc., it will ~~be~~ perhaps be beneficial to us to compare our conveniences and luxuries with the economic level attained by the parents of most of us here. Our Grandparents and Parents were mostly hardworking peddlers or shopkeepers, who labored long hours with no vacations, and usually lived in a cold water flat without an elevator. Yet despite these severe material limitations, they were able not only to survive but also to be happy. If any of us this day, therefore, feel inclined to protest and to complain because we do not have all we want, because we think life has borne down on us everly hard, because we think that the waters of our lives are troubled and tinged with the bitter taste of frustration and hardship -- then let us cast in to these troubled bitter waters which our imaginations have created, the olive branch of our parents' life. By remembering the true hardships they had to endure, the bitter struggles of the poor immigrant family for economic survival and social recognition, their heartaches and their disappointments - sometimes with us - then we shall have cured our bitterness with their bitterness.

In the final analysis, however, the "Olive Tree" is only a psychological device and has nothing to offer on the real problems of life. Psychology is a valid tool in the quest for religious enlightenment -- but it is not the essence of Religion. Certainly Judaism does not have as its primary goal making people "feel good" - though indeed it often does accomplish that for us. But if this were its main goal, it would never demand sacrifice of us. The psychological approach for sweetening life and curing it of its ills, the "nitz zayis" medicine is good but not sufficient. The waters may not taste as bitter as they did before -- but they still are unpleasant. The "nitz zayis" approach has not sweetened the bitterness; it has merely made us satisfied with it.

The real answer given by the Sages lies in a different direction. The "tree" or "nitz" refers to the "nitz ha-chayyim" - the Tree of Life. And the Tree of Life -- that is Torah; EITZ CHAYYIM HEE LA-MACHAZIKIM BAH. Torah is the Tree of Life, "and its ways are the ways of pleasantness", it and it alone can guarantee the sweetening of life's unhappiness. So too do our Rabbis explain the word VA-YOREIHU - He showed him a tree - the word ~~is-similar-to~~ means not only "showed" but also "taught" - HOREIHU DAVAR MIN HA-TORAH, by virtue of G-d's Torah were the waters of Marah sweetened and the sore spirits of Israel soothed in the hot and lonely desert.

For Knowledge 1941
 even for 1941
 Jewish Knowledge 1941
 Torah
 knowledge 1941
 knowledge 1941

And let me make it clear at this point that Terah means more than knowledge. "Knowledge" has not religious value and no curative effect on a man's life unless it is related to his behavior, to his conduct and to his every action. The only knowledge that really counts in the long run is the knowledge of G-d - or, as we would call it, Terah. When ^{in 4 days 17000} Isaiah predicts the Messianic Age, he foretells a world filled, not just with knowledge, but "and the world will be filled with knowledge of the L-rd, even as the waters cover the sea." ^{when the waters of the Red Sea were dried up} [If we want our children to have meaningful lives and to escape the bitter frustration so common to the last generation of their parents, we must send them to Hebrew School for more than just knowledge. Merely knowing how to read Hebrew or chant a Maftir is not enough. The Hebrew must be prayed and the Maftir meant, for knowledge alone will not sweeten the young waters; Terah will.]

Many people deny that there is such a thing as a "Jewish Neurosis". A special anxiety common to modern American Jews. Personally I believe that it does exist except for truly devout Jews. Life is somehow more bitter for these of us who have lost our bearings, who want to prove ourselves and are so eager to acquire status and to mimic others. And this, indeed, is the basic problem of the modern Jew. Our alienation, our sense of being lost, is because we have cut ourselves off from our roots, our feet from the Tree of Life. To a Jew, alienation from Terah is the same as departure from life. And, therefore, a life of Terah - is study, practice, and love - is the secret G-d gave Moses of how to sweeten the Marah of life.

More material advantages will not make us any happier. Rabbi Isaac Elkanan was so poverty-stricken that he bought bread from beggars and had to soak it in water in order to make it edible. And yet, the great Rabbi of Kovne was not an unhappy man. The waters of his life were sweetened by the Terah's Tree of Life. The famous scholar, known by the name of his emerald book "The Shaagas Aryeh" (never owned a pair of socks and did not have enough money to buy candles, so that he had to study at night by moonlight. But it was a happy life. So it is with all Jews, ordinary laymen as well as saints and scholars. When Terah has been our concern, we were immunized against the disappointments and harshness of life. It is often that the Jew had to swallow "Marrer" - but as long as he could convert that act to an act of "mitzvah" and still recite a "brechah" over it - then he could enjoy it, then the bitterness was gone and only the spiritual satisfaction remained.

[Story of Dr. Moshe Wallach of Shaarai Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem - died last year - great physician and great Tzadek. Very sick patient called him, and he gave him personal medical attention in best bedside manner - "Atz ha-daas" and "Aytz Zayis". But patient dissatisfied. Instead; "Dr., say Tehillim with me." In time of crisis only Terah is a Tree of Life; only that can sweeten life's bitterness.]

See attached sheet & v. 11 from notes

3/5/09

וְיִחְיֶה אֲנִי בְּעֵץ חַיִּים וְיִחְיֶה אֲנִי בְּעֵץ חַיִּים

If we shall live by this Tree of Life, that G-d has given us, the Tree whose significance and benefit transcend the scientific Tree of Knowledge and the psychological Olive Tree, than the bitterness and illness of Egypt will not overtake us - for this is the Eternal prescription given to us by the greatest physician of all -

וְיִחְיֶה אֲנִי בְּעֵץ חַיִּים

- the L-rd who healeth us.