

# ONEG SHABBAS

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## Balancing Sweet & Bitter for Drinkability

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

The need for potable drinking water is palpable in the course of the book of Exodus. While we read of the difficulties of the Egyptians (and possibly the Israelites) during the course of the first plague (Exodus chapter 7), the need for drinkable water is noticeable now that they are newly departing from Egypt. Indeed, half of all appearances of "to drink" (לשתות or לשתות) in the Torah are found in this book, so drinking is a notable challenge in this book.

While most of those appeared with regards to the first plague, the challenge for drinkable water reappears in our Torah portion (Ex. 15:23-25):

<p>(23) They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore, they named it Marah. (24) And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" (25) So he cried out to The LORD, and The LORD showed him wood; he threw it into the water and the water sweetened. He made for them a fixed rule there; they were tested there.</p>	<p>(כג) וַיָּבֹאוּ מִרְיָה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתֹּת מֵיִם מִמֶּרְה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מֶרְה: (כד) וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מִה־נִּשְׁתֶּה: (כה) וַיִּצְעַק אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּרְהוּ ה' עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם וְשָׁם לֹא חָק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִסָּה:</p>
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I am not sure how this water is necessarily bitter, but, apparently, it was bitter to the point of not being drinkable. It was so dire that the nation asked "What shall we drink?" Of course, this is certainly an important question, in general, and for readers of this publication, in particular. After Moshe calls out to God, God guides him to some wood that sweetens the bitter waters (curiously, we do not read of the Israelites subsequently drinking the water there, but it's reasonable to surmise that they did, indeed drink the newly-sweetened water following the tossing-in of this wood). What was this wood that was used?

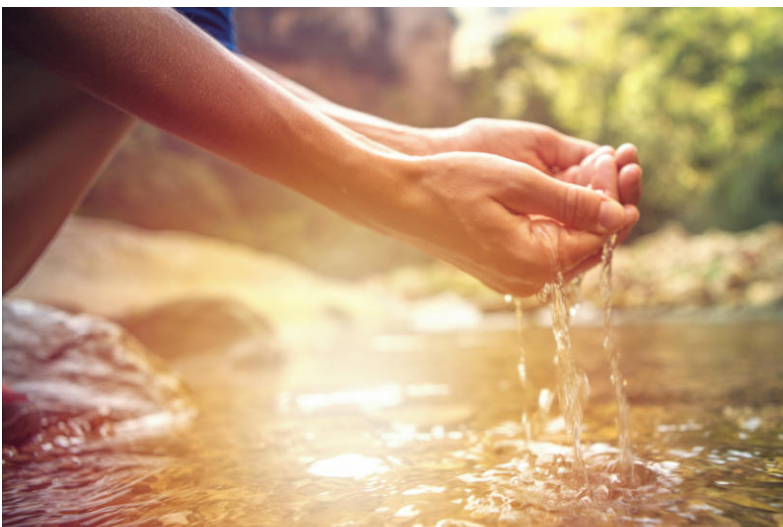


### Multiple Midrashic Miracle Possibilities

What was the wood used to sweeten the bitter water? A handful of suggestions were considered by the rabbis (בתנחומא בובר, בשלח "ח"ב):

<p>Rabbi Yehoshua says: "It was an olive tree." Rabbi Nehemiah says: "A willow tree." Some say: "The roots of a fig tree." And some say: "The roots of a pomegranate, since there is nothing as bitter as those." But the sages say: "It was ivy wood, and there is nothing as bitter as that." Rabbi Yishma'el, son of Rabbi Yohanan ben Baroqah said: "See how great are the miracles of the Holy One! Those of flesh and blood cure the bitter with the sweet, but the Holy One cures the bitter with the bitter, as it is said, "And I will heal you of your wounds," statement of The LORD' (Jer. 30:17) - by whatever means he wounds he heals."</p>	<p>ר' יהושע אומר, עץ זית היה ר' נחמיה אומר עץ של ערבה ויש אומרים עיקרי תאנה ויש אומרים עיקרי רימון, שאין מרים כהם וחכמים אומרים הרדופני עץ הוא, ואין מר כמוהו אמר ר' ישמעאל בנו של ר' יוחנן בן ברוקה, ראה מה גדולים נסים של הקב"ה, בשר ודם במתוק מרפא את המר, אבל הקב"ה במר מרפא את המר, שנאמר כי [אעלה ארוכה לך] וממכותיך ארפאך נאום ה' (ירמי' ל"ז), במה שהוא מכה הוא מרפא</p>
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What is striking is not so much the specific trees that these rabbinic suggestions yield, rather that the final two suggestions are lauded for their bitterness. As these suggestions are rather striking for tending towards bitterness, even celebrated for it, it then dawns on the reader that there is no description of the wood. In fact, while the waters sweetened when the wood was thrown in, the wood received no description. While the reader would surmise that the wood tossed in was sweet in order to sweeten the water, the lack of description offers the opportunity for the rabbis' curious suggestions of the more bitter the word, the better. {continued on next page}



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This line of thinking is then amplified and articulated by Rabbi Yishma'el, son of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Baroqah that our sages' saw this miracle as having been carried out by God by making the bitter waters sweetened through a bitter wood, whereas, people achieve sweetening the bitter through sweet items.

### Different Miracle Approach

A different approach to the miraculous nature of this miracle was articulated by Rabbi Yoseph ben Yitzḥak Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century) who wrote (בכור שור, שמות ט"ו:כ"ה, ד"ה ויורהו ה' עץ):

<p>If God had wished to do this without wood, God would have been able to sweeten the water without wood. But it is God's way to do miracles according to the way of the world: to place sweet things within bitter things in order to sweeten them.</p>	<p>אם היה רצונו של הק' בלא עץ היה יכול להמתיק אלא דרכו של הק' לעשות נסין על דרך העולם שמימינ המינין המתוקין בדבר מר להמתיקו</p>
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Whereas the sages of the midrash advocated for the miracle to have occurred through God providing a bitter wood to be placed into the bitter waters to yield a sweetening of the waters, Rabbi Bekhor Shor asserts that God did not even need wood to achieve this effect, but, rather showed Moshe the sweetening wood that would yield drinkability (cf. also the commentary of Rabbi Ḥezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) (עץ וישלך אל המים חזקוני, שמות ט"ו:כ"ה, ד"ה ויורהו ה')):

### The Natural Proximity of Sweetening Wood to Bitter Water

Picking up on this line of thinking of God working miracles according

to the way of the world, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) articulates that this wood wasn't accidentally nearby these waters (העמק דבר על שמות ט"ו:כ"ה, ד"ה ויורהו ה' עץ):



According to the straightforward reading, this wood had already been created near these bitter waters to sweeten the water, just as with all manner of nature where there is a lack of some necessary detail for human life, some other thing was created there, to make up for the lack, so in that place a tree grew that sweetened the water, but Moses did not know.

לפי הפשט, כבר נוצר במקום המים המרים עץ להמתיקו, כמו כל הטבע אשר במקום חסרון איזה פרט הכרחי לחיי האדם נוצר שם איזה דבר אחר, להשלים המחסור, כך בזה המקום היה גדל איזה עץ הממתיק את המים ומשה לא ידע.

According to Rabbi Berlin, this was no mere happenstance that the wood that would sweeten/fix these too-bitter-to-drink waters happened to be nearby; no: they were intentionally in proximity in order to balance each other.

## The Jewish Drinking Show

With *The Jewish Drinking Show* going on an indefinite hiatus (don't worry: there will be at least one Purim episode this year (if not more)), this is an excellent opportunity to catch up on back episodes, whether recently or otherwise. While we are now two days past Tu biShevat, you may want to check our "Tu biShevat Cocktails and the Contemporary Cocktail Scene in Israel" episode featuring Jay Rosen from four years ago, where we discuss that six of the seven species of the land of Israel are fermentable or other ideas for cocktails involving all seven species.

Perhaps you may want to revisit any of the recent handful of episodes:

- Ep. 150 - Drinking During Mourning
- Ep. 149 - The Rebellious Son (Ben Sorer Umoredh) with Dr. Rebekah Welton
- Ep. 148 - Boone County Distilling: Creating Fascinating Bourbon Products under Kosher-Certification with Josh Quinn
- Ep. 147 - Starting a Kosher Wine-Importing & Distributing Business with Ami & Larissa Nahari
- Ep. 146 - Man Seders with Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Sinensky

Or, if episodes are too lengthy for you, here are some recent clips:

- Context of Man Seders
- Creating Barrel-Aged Kosher-For-Passover Products
- Difficulties in Starting-Up as a Distributor
- Creating Twin Suns
- The Only Bourbon Finished in Israeli Wine Casks
- Drunkenness in Genesis
- Considering Food & Drink Studies in the Academy
- Inappropriate Drinking in the Bible
- Translating שור as Beer in the Bible
- Aninut in the Talmud: No Drinking

### Conclusion

Balancing bitter and sweet in beverages is certainly important for drinkability, as readers of this publication may appreciate. Whether it's balancing the sweet and the bitter in beer, cocktails, or other such combinations, the need is understandable. Perhaps an IPA is way too bitter for you, or a cocktail is made with too much bitters (have you ever had fernet on its own? It's really quite bitter), you will need to turn towards balance. The first batch I ever made of homebrew beer ended up way too bitter (I used a lot of hops at the outset of the boil), although fortunately, someone found it drinkable enough, providing me with a very understandable sense of something that is too bitter to drink. The need for drinkability through balancing bitter and sweet is something that remains with us to this day, although sometimes we need miracles to achieve that.

L'chaim 🍷



As always, all episodes of the show are available on various podcast players, as well as YouTube. Video clips are available on our Instagram (@Jew1shDrinking), as well as on YouTube at [YouTube.com/ @JewishDrinking](https://www.youtube.com/@JewishDrinking)