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Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

Balancing Sweet & Bitter for Drinkability

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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 לשתת) in the Torah are found in this book, so drinking is a notable challenge in this book.

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

(כג) וַיָּבֹאוּ מָרָתָה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ **לִשְׁתֹּת** מַיִם מִמָּרָה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־שְׁמָהּ מָרָה: (כד) וַיִּלֹּנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מַה־נִּשְׁתֶּה: (כה) וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' וַיּוֹרֵהוּ ה' עֵץ וַיַּשְׁלֵךְ אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמָּיִם שָׁם שָׂם לוֹ חֹק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִסָּהוּ:

(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.

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?", indicating that there was no way that it was suitable for their consumption. Perhaps they took a few sips and realized it was not water that could be broadly consumed.

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 (מכילתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי ט״ו:כ״ה, ד"ה ויורהו ה' עץ):

Rabbi Yehoshua said: "This was a willow tree."	ר' יהושע אומר זה עץ של ערבה
Rabbi Elazar of Modi'in said: "This was an olive tree, as there is nothing more bitter than an olive."	ר' אלעזר המודעי אומר זה עץ של זית אין לך מר יתר מזית
Rabbi Natan, son of Yosef said: "It was a carob tree."	ר' נתן בר יוסף אומר זה עץ של קרדיס
Some say: "Even the roots of a fig tree and the roots of a pomegranate tree."	ויש אומרין אף עיקרי תאנה ועיקרי רמון

A parallel text not only mentions the aforementioned possibilities, but also mentions a fifth possibility (תנחומא בובר, בשלח י״ח:ב׳):

But the sages say: "It was ivy wood, and there is nothing as bitter as that."	וחכמים אומרים הרדופני עץ הוא, ואין מר כמוהו

While three of these opinions state the possibility of various trees, it is insightful that Rabbi Elazar of Modi'in and the sages appeal to the logic of being the most bitter wood. What is surprising about this appeal is that the wood in the story sweetens the water, so why would the sages discuss bitter wood sources? One rabbi furnished an articulation as to the rabbinic approach to regarding this wood as not being sweet, but actually bitter (מכילתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי ט״ו:כ״ה, ד"ה ויורהו ה' עץ):

Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka, said: "Come and see how different the ways of flesh and blood are from the ways of the Almighty: A human being heals bitterness with sweetness, but the One who spoke and the world came into being does not act this way. Rather, He heals bitterness with bitterness. How so? He places something consumable into something consumable to perform a miracle within a miracle."	רבי ישמעאל בירבי יוחנן בן ברוקה אומר בוא וראה כמה מפורשין דרכי בשר ודם מדרכי המקום בשר ודם מתוק מרפא את המר אבל מי שאמר והיה העולם אינו כן אלא מר מרפא את המר הא כאיזה צד נותן דבר המתאכל לתוך דבר המתאכל כדי לעשות נס בתוך נס

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Just a Miracle?

A simple defense of this approach by the rabbis to consider this miraculous occurrence is offered by Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), albeit with a curious difference (אבן עזרא על שמות ט״ו:כ״ה, ד"ה ויצעק):

> We do not know what type of tree this was. What happened can only be described as a miracle. If the waters were stationary, then we would say that they were medicinally sweetened. What the sages said is correct.
>
> זה העץ לא ידענו מה היה. רק דבר פלא היה. ואילו היו המים עומדים היינו אומרים דרך רפואה היה ונכון הוא מה שאז"ל

While it is interested to read of Rabbi ibn Ezra agreeing with the rabbis regarding the miracle that occurred, although he prefers a simple approach to considering the wood - that we do not know which type of wood it was.

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):

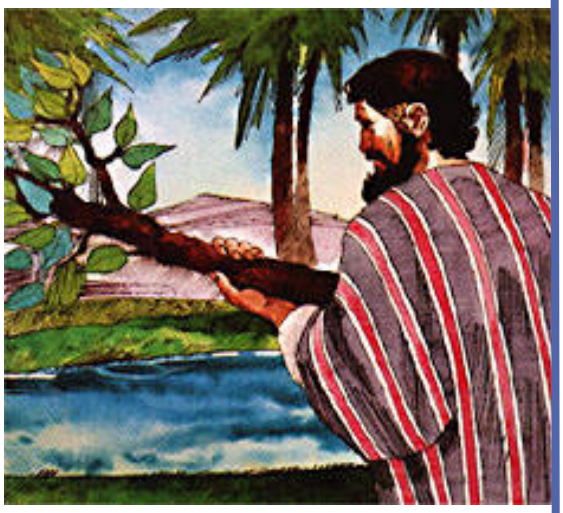
> If God had wished to do this without wood, God would have been able to sweeten the water without wood. But it is God's way to do miracles according to the way of the world: to place sweet things within bitter things in order to sweeten them.
>
> אם היה רצונו של הק' בלא עץ היה יכול להמתיק אלא דרכו של הק' לעשות נסין על דרך העולם שמשימין המינין המתוקין בדבר מר להמתיקו

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 Manoaḥ (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 Yehudah 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):

> 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 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.



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 Opposite of the Plague of Blood

Having mentioned the challenge of finding potable water with the first plague at the outset of this essay, we now turn to the insightful comment of Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855), who wrote (ביאור ישר"ר על התורה, שמות ט״ו:כ״ה, ד"ה וימתקו המים):

> וימתקו המים, זה היה הפך מכת הדם שבמצרים, כי מימי היאור מתוקים והפכם לרעה, ואלו היו מרים ושבו מתוקים
>
> This was the opposite of the plague of blood in Egypt, for the waters of the Nile were sweet, and they turned bad, whereas these were bitter and became sweet.

What I find fascinating about Rabbi Reggio's comments here is that since these two stories provide the majority of the use of the term לשתות in the book of Exodus, they both point out challenges of accessing potable water. Moreover, miracles are involved in both cases, which he seems to note: the Nile *had been* potable *until* God miraculously despoiled it (and potentially other water sources), whereas the waters of Marah were overly bitter so as to be unpotable *until* they tossed in wood to render it drinkable.

Conclusion

Whether the wood used to render the waters of Marah to have their bitterness balanced out was effectuated through a sweet wood, as the text in our *parashah* would seem to indicate or whether, as advocated by our sages, bitter wood was added to bitter water to render it drinkable, 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 through the use of hops to balance the sweetness of the grains or by using bitters to balance out the sweetness from liqueurs (or even spirits), the need is understandable. The need for drinkability through balancing bitter and sweet is something that remains with us to this day.

L'chaim🍷