

ONEG SHABBAS

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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

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 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):

(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 דברי שמעון בן יוחאי ט"ז:כ"ה, ד"ה וירחו ה' עז):

(א) ויבאו מורתה זלא
יכל לשתות מים
מןורה כי מרים הום
על-כן קרא לשתות
ונרה: (כ) אילנו קעם
על-משה לאקר מרה
ונשתה: (כה) ואצען
אל-ה וירחו ה' עז
וישבך אל-ה'ם
ויתהקן הקים שם שם
ולו תק ומשפט ועם
ונפהה:



ר' יהושע אומר זה עץ של ערבה
ר' אלעזר המודעי אמר זה עץ של זית
אין לך מר יתר מזית
ר' נתן בר יוסף אמר זה עץ של קידיס
וש אמרן אף עירקי תננה ועקר רמון

A parallel text not only mentions the aforementioned possibilities, but also mentions a fifth possibility (תנ"ה:ה):

וחכמים אומרים הרדפני עז הוא, ואין מר כמוו

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 דברי שמעון בן יוחאי ט"ז:כ"ה, ד"ה וירחו ה' עז):

ר' ישםאל בירבי יהונן בן בירקה אמר בוא וראה כמה מפושין דבריכי בשארם מדרכי המקומ בשארם מותוק מרפא את המר אבל מי שאמור והיה העולם אין כן אלא הא כאיזה צד נזון דבר המתאכל לתוך דבר המתאכל כדי לעשותה נס בתוך נס

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{continued from previous page}

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 (ה'ז:כ"ה, ט"ז:ז'ז):

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 ידוענו מה היה. רק דבר פלא היה. ואלו היו המים עומדים הינו אונרמים דרך רפואי היה ונכון הוא מה שא"ל

While it is interesting 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 Yitzhak Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century) who wrote:

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 האק' בלי עץ היה יכול להמתיק אלא דרכו של האק' לעשות נסין על דרך העולם שמשים המין המתויקן 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 Hezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) (ע"ז ושלח אל המים חזקוני, שמות ט"ז:כ"ה, ד"ה ווירחו 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"ז:כ"ה, ד"ה ווירחו ה'ע'ז):

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.

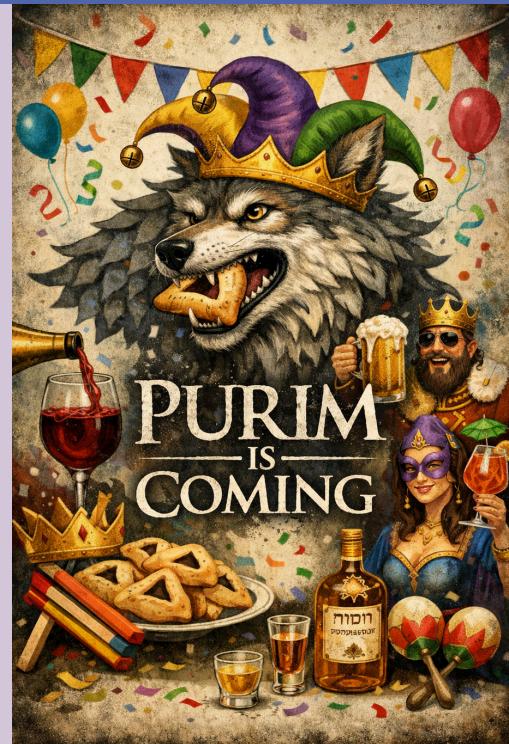
לפי הפשט, כבר נוצר במקומם המים המרים עז להמתיקו, כמו כל הטבע אשר במקומם חסכו איזה פיטר הכרחי לח'י האדם נוצר שם איזה דבר אחר להשלים המהcorr, כך בודה המוקם היה גודל איזה עז המתויק את המים ומשה לא ידע.

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.

Purim is Coming

With Purim on the horizon, you will be seeing Purim-related content in these pages in the coming weeks leading up to Purim to help get us in the Purim spirit, including when to drink, who drinks, and how much to drink on Purim.

Purim resources are also available at



JewishDrinking.com/Purim

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) (ש"ר על התורה, שמות ט"ז:כ"ה, ד"ה ווירחו ה'ם):

וימתקו המים, זה היה הפך מכת הדם שבמצרים, כי מים היו מרתקים, ואלו היו הפקם לרעה, ואלו היו מרים ושבו מרתקים

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 לשותה 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



Oneg Shabbas is a project of Jewish Drinking, a 501(c)3 non-profit initiative to educate about drinking in Jewish wisdom, tradition, history, practice, and more in order to enrich people's lives. Tax-deductible donations made be contributed at JewishDrinking.com/Donate