

## Sweet, Sweet Torah!

*Moshe mobilized the Israelites away from the Sea of Reeds. They came out to the desert of Shur, and they walked three days in the dessert, without finding water. They came to [the lake of] Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah, for they were bitter, therefore it was named Marah. The people complained at Moshe, saying, what shall we drink? Moshe called out to God, who showed him a tree. He threw [it] into the water and they turned sweet. It was there that He [God] established for him law and order, and tried him. He said, if you listen to the words of God, and do that which He deems right, and you obey the commandments, and observe all the laws, I will not afflict you with the plagues of Egypt, for I, God, am your healer!<sup>1</sup>*

This unassuming episode, lodged between the epic stories of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the war at Rephidim, and the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, could have been easily discounted as one more example of the cantankerous nature of the Israelites and of their inability to overcome their slave mentality. Fortunately enough, the promise of healing as a reward for obedience has attracted the attention of some authors and they have incorporated it into the daily Tefilah.<sup>2</sup> However, we know of many wonderful and righteous people, who lived a wholesome life of observance of the law and adherence to the concepts of the Torah, yet suffered all the plagues of Egypt, so we would be justified in demanding to know the nature of that promise.

Let us start by saying that the episode has an underlying symbolic message. It is not about the act of complaining and the miraculous remedy delivered by God, but rather about one's attitude to life and his sense of purpose, and about the unique role of the Torah as methodical logotherapy, meant to help realize our potential and build a better society.

The narrative is that of a nation of slaves and their struggles with their newfound freedom and the need to take control of their lives. They were promised a land of milk and honey, a garden of roses, but the way there is paved with dangers, uncertainties, and discomfort. They are chased by their oppressors, surrounded by sand dunes, searching in vain for water, and not knowing what

they will eat tomorrow. Not only they are not happy, they are bitter. The Israelites could not drink the water of Marah because they, the Israelites, were bitter. The arrival at the banks of a lake is the encounter with the real world, which has a lot to offer, but in most cases through efforts and dedication. The Israelites were bitter because they did not want hard work. They wanted an easy life and sweet water, and they complained about it vocally to Moshe.

Moshe tureds to God who showed him a tree. The Hebrew word for “He showed him” – ויורהו, is derived from the same root as תורה, and the word tree alludes to the role of the Torah as the Tree of Life. That role is evident in our Shul liturgy, which calls the poles holding the Torah “Tree of Life”, and which guides us to chant:

עֲצֵ-תַיִם הִיא לַמַּחְזִיקִים בָּהּ - She [wisdom, Torah] is a Tree of Life to those who cling to her.

This verse from Proverbs (3:18) is also the key to understanding the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. It is a metaphor for the Torah. The Tree of Knowledge symbolizes the inevitable stage in our life when we discover, at a fairly young age, that we have free will. We are thrilled with our newly discovered power, but also terrified of the endless scenarios of abusing that power. The exile from the Garden is that moment of realization that evil thrives in the world and sometimes controls it. God pretends to block the path to the Tree of Life, but in fact He invites mankind to reach for it and discover it. That call is represented by the guardians, the same cherubim which hover above the Holy Ark.

To return to the question posed above, the guidance the Torah provides does not promise an impeccable life, free of illness and suffering, but rather the key to a purposeful life, full of joy and satisfaction, despite physical, financial, and emotional challenges. God’s response to the Israelites’ complaint is that they must use the wisdom of the Torah, represented by the tree, to sweeten the bitterness in their life.

In order to activate the remedial power of the Torah, though, the observance of its concepts should be infused with the understanding of the logic behind them. Too often we go through the motions of prayer, charity, Shabbat, and Kashrut, asking “WIIFM?”<sup>3</sup> and answering “good portion in the World to Come.” This should not be our focus, as the Torah is about this world and its promise of tranquility and prosperity is a communal rather than a personal one. I should ask myself what’s in it for me, and the answer should be one which shows me how this particular

mitzvah turns me into a better person, and therefore allows me to offer a greater contribution to society. When this process is applied by all people at all times, humanity constantly assesses and recalibrates itself in a journey towards a better world.

For example, Shabbat allows us to regain energy and to take a break from life's crazy race, as well as to understand that everybody deserves a day of rest. Kashrut teaches us to delay gratification, to respect the natural world, and to be grateful. The detailed laws of tithes and charity instill in us the importance of giving to others while driving us to financial success,<sup>4</sup> and the strong admonitions against embezzlement and deceit, which equate them to idolatry, inculcate the importance of business ethics and honesty. Finally, the very idea that one can communicate with God is a healing factor, and since our prayers include others as well, the sense of unity and community is reinforced.

The transformational power of the Torah, then, is in the way it helps the individual identify talents and maximize them, while always keeping the other in sight as the main benefactor of that development. The sweetness the Torah offers is that of a life powered by personal growth and reciprocal giving. The bible illustrates this point by using the name Marah, bitter, in the famous story about Ruth the Moabite.

When Naomi returns to Bethlehem, betrodden and desolate, after long years of absence, the women gather around her and ask in astonishment if this indeed is the Naomi they once knew. Naomi, unsure if the question stems from genuine concern or scorn, collects her thoughts, turns to the crowd, and says with a bitter smile:

אל תקראן לי נעמי, קראן לי מרה, כי המר שדי לי מאד

Call me not Pleasant (נעמי) but Bitter (מרה), because Shaddai has embittered my life excessively!

Naomi was entitled to feel as she did, but when you see God as your opponent, there is not much you can do. Ruth, however, knew that Naomi was once an amazing person and a role model, and refused to give up on her. She was careful not to portray herself as the one who helps Naomi, but rather pretended to be clueless and let Naomi take the lead.

Naomi, revitalized by the opportunity to guide Ruth and reestablish her family, became engaged and involved. Her recovery process, and gradual transformation from bitter to sweet, culminate with the statement: בְּרוּךְ הוּא לֵי אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב סִדְּוֹ אֶת-הַחַיִּים וְאֶת-הַמֵּתִים

Naomi says that Boaz, Ruth's benefactor, is a blessing from God, who cares about Naomi's family. That is a complete reversal of her perception of God as the prosecutor and punisher, and it was achieved through Ruth's altruistic giving. When Ruth finally bears a child, the neighbors proclaim: a son was born to Naomi, and Ruth does not protest. She wanted all along to bring Naomi back from the brink of depression and make her feel that her life is worth living, and if it can be achieved by attributing Ruth's son to Naomi, so be it.

The story of Ruth and Naomi complements the events at the shores of Marah in the desert. Naomi, as her name suggests, was a pleasant, positive woman, but her life's circumstances turned her into a suspicious, desperate woman who renamed herself Marah – bitter. She was unable to drink from the water of life until her daughter-in-law, Ruth, whose name means thirst-quencher, changed her attitude by nudging her to find hope and purpose. Though Ruth's efforts were guided towards Naomi, she herself benefited as she has established a family, had the satisfaction of seeing Naomi transformed, and became the founder of the Davidic dynasty.

It is the core teaching of the Torah לְרַעַךְ כַּמוֹךָ – love yourself, develop your talents, and share your love and talents with others, which allowed the ancient Israelites and Ruth the Moabite to keep drinking, even when the waters of life seemed bitter.

May this transformative power allow us as well to bring sweetness into our life and to make this world a better, kinder place.

Shabbat Shalom

<sup>1</sup> וַיִּסַּע מִנְּשָׂה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם-סוּף וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֶל-מִדְּבַר-שׁוּר וַיִּלְכְּדוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם. וַיָּבֹאוּ מְרֹתָה וְלֹא יָגְלוּ לְשִׁתּוֹת מַלֵּם מִמֶּהָ כִּי מְרִים הֵם עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מְרָה. וַיִּלְנֻוּ הָעַם עַל-מִנְּשָׂה לֵאמֹר מַה-נִּשְׁתָּה. וַיִּצְעַק אֶל-יְיָ וַיִּזְרְהוּ יְיָ עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶל-הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שָׁם עָם לֹו חָק וַיִּמְשַׁכְּטוּ וְשָׁם נִסְהוּ. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוּלוֹ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּעֵינֵינוּ תַעֲשֶׂה וְהִאֲזִינָה לְמִצּוֹתָיו וְשִׁמְרָתָ כְּלִי-תַקְוִי כְּלִי-הַמְחַלֵּה אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמְתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא-אֲשִׁים עָלָיו כִּי אֲנִי יְיָ רִפְאָה

<sup>2</sup> In the Sephardic tradition, after Aleinu LeShabeah.

<sup>3</sup> What's In It For Me.

<sup>4</sup> See Adam Grant, Give and Take.