

## Why They Were Bitter

Beshallah 5779

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### I.

I imagine that, for a non-Jew reading the Torah, the scenes following *shirat ha-yam* are confusing. How, after being redeemed by God from oppression in Egypt, after having had the *yam suf*, the Sea of Reeds, split before them, after singing a song of jubilation and appreciation to God for all He has done for them, do we read the following:

וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַּר־שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת־יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר  
וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם: וַיָּבֵאוּ מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשָׁתוֹת מַיִם מִמֶּנָּה כִּי מָרָה הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־  
שְׁמָהּ מָרָה: וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מַדּוּ־נִשְׁתָּה:

Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they travelled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” (Ex. 15:22–24)

At the very first sign of trouble the Jewish people complain. How do they swing so quickly from joy to frustration, from appreciation to grumbling? This, I imagine, is the question that strikes every non-Jewish reader. But I think that, for us as Jews, our surprise is that it took this long! How were the Jewish people able to hold back their frustrations for such a long time?

But their frustration, in truth, is understandable. They need water and they can't drink it. It's not hard to understand why they'd start complaining. After all, they've just escaped slavery in order for this type of thing to no longer happen. Thirst and hunger are supposed to be a thing of the past, but now it looks like their future, too – I get their grumbling.

But there is another way to read this story. As is so often the case, the Torah hides an alternative way to read it in plain sight, through its use of ambiguous language. And so, a *midrash* reads the verse describing the water's bitterness differently. (I also saw that the *Artscroll Chumash* follows this translation.) We typically read it as *ve-lo yachlu lishtot mayim*, “they couldn't drink the water,” *ki marim hem*, “because it was bitter.” But R. Levi in *Shemot Rabbah* (50) sees the subject of this second part of the verse differently: it's the Jewish people who are bitter. *Ve-lo yachlu lishot mayim*, “they couldn't drink the water,” *ki marim hem*, “because they were bitter.”

There's nothing wrong with the water! It's simply that, after three days of searching for water, the people are frustrated and angry. They are no longer thinking rationally. And so, even when they arrive at a source of water they complain, because that's what people are like when they're frustrated. They become snippy and petty. This is what happens to the Jewish people. They refuse to drink the water because they're so angry.

## II.

I'll admit that this *midrash* is just that, a creative reading of the text. The *peshat*, the literal understanding, seems quite clearly to indicate there is something wrong with the water. But I want to stick with this *midrash* and ask: why are the people so bitter? I think there is something more here than simply their frustrating search for water. Because the story ends with Moshe charging the people to observe God's laws, which seems very out-of-place:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים שְׁמֹעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹלִי | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִיָּשֵׁר בְּעֵינֶיךָ תַעֲשֶׂה וְהִצַּוְתָה לְמִצְוֹתַי  
וְשָׁמַרְתָּ בְּכָל-חֻקָּיו כְּלִ-הַמְּחֻלָּה אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא-אֲשִׁים עֲלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה  
רַפְּאֵךְ:

He said, "If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer." (v. 26)

Why does Moshe use this time as an opportunity to insist that the people follow God? He could chastise them for complaining, but he doesn't – he speaks of following *mitzvot*. Why? Because this is the major cause of the people's frustrations.

## III.

A few weeks ago, my 11th-grade Chumash class at Maimo were learning how the story of Adam and Chava raises a challenge we all face: when our personal autonomy conflicts with religious authority. As autonomous individuals there are plenty of things we want to do, but often Judaism says no. It's a challenge that has been grappled with by many great Jewish thinkers. And, after we explored these views, I set my students a paper in which they had to explore a conflict of their own between personal autonomy and religious authority.

A couple of days ago, my students decided they wanted to do an "ask the rabbi" session. While most of their questions were, well, bizarre – a couple of students were obsessed with the topic of conjoined twins for reasons I can't quite understand – one of my students asked me the same question I had put to them a few weeks ago: what is a challenge I face in my own life between the desire for personal autonomy and religious authority?

It was a great question and something I hadn't an answer for straight away. But I realized my answer. Judaism has no days off. As autonomous individuals we are entitled to not do things if we don't want to. And we get time off: we get vacations, we get weekends, we get national holidays. But this coming Monday, for those of you who are off on MLK day, your Judaism isn't off. God never gives us time off. *Davening* is demanded three times a day, every day. Our Jewish life consumes every aspect of us. There's no "cheat day" where you get to eat non-kosher food. And this is something that's hard. There are days when we just don't want to do things, but we don't get that choice as Jews.

#### IV.

Why are the Jewish people so bitter after they leave Egypt? Because they just realized the question that's a cliché for a reason that everyone asks at Pesach: the Jewish people don't go from slavery to freedom, they go from servitude of Pharaoh to servitude of God. The same constant, never-ceasing demand made upon them still exists, only now it is God and not Egypt; now they must toil day-in day-out to build their souls in the spiritual world rather than building cities in the physical one.

I have mentioned before how Chazal borrow a word used to describe our slavery, *'amal*, which means "pain and suffering" and apply it to learning Torah. Yeshiva students throughout the world are referred to as being "*'amelim ba-torah.*" Because that's what Judaism is.

And so, the Jewish people arrive at Marah thirsty and angry. They're thirsty because they need water but they're angry because, with the euphoria of freedom dying down a little, they've had three days to process what their new life is. And it's still one that demands unceasing, never-ending commitment. And so, they can't even drink the water when they finally come across it *ki marim hem*, because they're bitter at the life they will now lead. That's why Moshe has to remind them of their obligation to God and the positives it will bring. As much as he has to sweeten the water, he also has to sweeten the deal.

#### V.

But what about for us? How do we process our same obligation? The best answer is another cliché. A couple of nights' ago, Ruthy's company had their annual dinner. Towards the end, they paid tribute to one of the employees who is retiring after a long career serving the company. She offered three pieces of advice, but I only remember one of them. It was a cliché, but the type of cliché that's actually meaningful, that has been kept by society for so long because its message is genuinely powerful. It was, according to Google, first said by Theodore Roosevelt who was, according to Google, a President (that was a joke – I already knew he was, but I did double-check).

The cliché is this: nothing in life worth having is ever easy. The actual quote, I think, is even better:

Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty. ... I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.

As Jews we are *ovdei Hashem*, servants of God. While that may lead to toil, to pain, to effort, it also leads us to meaning. There is nothing for us that is harder than the rigorous, constant-demands of being a Jew. But there is also nothing in this world that is more worth having.