

SWEET' CAN EMERGE FROM 'BITTER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Beshalach

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Good Shabbos!*

'Sweet' Can Emerge From 'Bitter'

This week's parsha contains the famous "Song of the Sea" (Az Yashir). The Medrash says that Moshe told G-d "I know that I sinned against You with my use of the word 'Az' [then], as recorded in the Torah: 'From the time (mei'Az) I came before Pharoah, you have done evil to this nation' [Shemos 5:23]. Therefore I will praise You with the word 'Az,' as it is written 'Then (Az) Moshe sang' [Shemos 15:1]." This Medrash requires an explanation.

The Torah section immediately following the description of the Splitting of the Sea -- literally in the dawning days of the Jewish nation -- is the incident when Israel traveled for three days and could not find water. They came to a place called Marah. However, they were unable to drink the water there because it was bitter. They complained against Moshe, asking what they could drink. Moshe prayed to G-d. G-d showed Moshe a tree. Moshe threw the tree into the water and the water became sweetened. The Jews were then able to drink the water.

The Medrash adds that the bark of the tree that G-d showed Moshe was itself extremely bitter. The bitter water was sweetened through the addition of a bitter tree.

G-d is not in the custom of magnifying miracles. Normal 'procedure' would be to sweeten the water with something sweet. So we see that there must be a lesson here. In addition, since it is taught immediately after the Splitting of the Sea, during the infancy of the nation, this lesson must be of

particular importance.

The lesson of these incidents is (to quote the words of the prophet) "From the bitter, sweet emerges" [Shoftim 14:14]. Sometimes, the sweetest outcome can emerge from the bitterest pain. G-d is trying to teach His nation a lesson. This is a difficult lesson that the Jewish nation, and every nation, must learn. And just as this is a lesson for nations, it is a lesson for us as individuals as well. Situations that sometimes appear to us as terribly bitter may eventually produce the sweetest of results. While a person is in the process of enduring and suffering through bitterness, he cannot imagine what positive outcome can come out of his situation. However, bitter wood in bitter water can eventually produce sweetness. This is a lesson that we needed to learn early on and that we have seen, in retrospect, over and over again. A situation that seemed like a terrible pill to swallow turned out to be the Salvation of G-d (Yeshuas HaShem).

This is also the key to understanding the above-quoted Medrash regarding Moshe's use of the word 'Az'. Moshe was not merely making a play on words. Moshe was not merely saying "Since I used the word 'Az' in a bad way, now I will use the same word 'Az' in a good way."

The first 'Az' was, in effect, a question: What positive outcome can emerge from all the pain and suffering that the Jews are enduring? "From the moment (mei'Az) I came before Pharaoh, the situation of this nation has worsened. How can this be positive? Where is the sweetness here?"

The answer is that this suffering and torture, in fact, eventually benefited the Jewish nation. Rather than living in Egypt for 400 years, as G-d told Avraham, they only had to stay there for 210 years. As our Sages teach us, the length of the Egyptian exile was diminished because of the severity of the servitude. This ultimately saved them, because had they stayed in Egypt any longer, they would not have been able to leave at all -- they would have spiritually sunk too far into the depths.

This, then, is the explanation of what Moshe was saying in the above quoted Medrash. "With this very word 'Az', which represented a situation where I saw no possible silver lining -- namely the bitterness of Egyptian servitude -- I will now utter a Song of Praise (with this very same word 'Az'). Now I can look back and see in retrospect that the suffering was worth it. I can see that from the bitterest portion can come the sweetest of destinies. Mei'Az (from the bitter) yatza masok (emerged sweetness)."

The "Straightness" Of Parshas B'Shalach Justifies the Name "Shabbos Shira"

The Shemen HaTov suggests that the grammatical root of the word Shirah [Song] is YaSHaR, meaning straight. I am not a grammarian to state that this is correct, but in a homiletic sense it can certainly be suggested.

There are high points and low points in a person's life. There are peaks and there are valleys. When a person can look back and see the straightness (Yashrus) of life -- that somehow, after a while, things tend to work themselves out and become straight -- that is the time when a person can utter Shirah

[Song]. In retrospect, the person can see that what happened was 'straight'.

The Shemen HaTov comments on the fact that this Shabbos is called "Shabbos Shirah" [the Shabbos of Song]. The reason for the name "Shabbos Shirah" could not be merely because the parsha contains the 'Shirah', for if that were the case, then Parshas Yisro, (next week) should be called Shabbos Torah, since it contains the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments. Why then do the Jewish people call Parshas B'Shalach by the name "Shabbos Shirah?"

The Shemen HaTov answers that the entire parsha contains this idea of "Straightness," of ups and downs which eventually balance out. No other parsha has such oscillation between peaks and valleys. The Jewish people came out of Egypt mightily, with a powerful Hand. Then the balloon was deflated when their backs were against the sea and the Egyptians were bearing down on them. The whole Exodus from Egypt seemed to be in jeopardy. It seemed to dissipate and go up in a cloud.

Then the sea split. That was a tremendous high. They were miraculously saved. Then what happened? They found themselves without water, and the 'lows' began again. Then the bitter water miraculously turned sweet and they again were on a 'high'. Then they had no food. They complain again -- another 'low'. Then they were miraculously given Manna and they were happy again. Then Amalek attacked and the cycle continued...

Parshas B'Shalach is the parsha of life. Life is all about the highs and lows, the peaks and valleys. That is why this parsha, which teaches us this lesson, is called Shabbos Shirah (the Shabbos of Straightness, or equilibrium).

When a Jew can look back on his life and recognize that while there have been defeats and low moments as well as the high points, he sees the Yashrus (straightness; fairness) of it all in retrospect, then he can indeed utter that which is the essence of this Shabbos -- Shirah, songs of praise to G-d.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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