

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Matot/Masai* – The Weeping White Broom Bush

As we move deeper into the heat of summer, the fresh garden greenery is gradually yellowing and drying. The barren parched thorny landscape reminds me that we live in the Middle East not far away from the Judean Desert. Even some of the plants that sprout forth during the lush, greenery of spring really belong to the desert. One such desert scrub that graces the Middle Eastern landscape during mid spring is the graceful White Broom, *Retama raetam* in Latin from the Hebrew רוֹתֵם/*Rotem*. רָתֵם/*Ratam* in Hebrew means to harness, rein in, hold in. The רוֹתֵם/*Rotem*, sometimes called הַמְדַבֵּר/*Rotem Hamidbar* – The White Broom of the Wilderness, is one of the most effective plants for holding back sand dunes. I adore the Rotem's myriad of small white mini flowers with their deep purple circles. After a couple of months, these flowers turn into pea-like pods containing one or two kidney-shaped seeds. The branches hang down like the Weeping Willow no wonder the Rotem is sometimes called, Weeping White Broom. My Rotem bush has reason to weep, as it is sandwiched in between a huge pine and olive tree and has no room to stretch out its branches or get much sunshine. Somehow, it is hanging in there, although it is far from reaching its full potential as a shrub that can grow to become three meters tall with downy young foliage on long slender branches. In any case, White broom is a low maintenance plant. It grows mainly on sandy and gravel hills. It is able to grow in very dry conditions due to its lack of leaves. Its seed may lie dormant in the soil for many years, germinating even after fire, but I haven't tested that. Neither have I tested the Talmudic statement that fire made from Rotem embers is hotter than regular fires, as my Rotem is not big enough to cut down into firewood. What I find fascinating is that the very same bush under which Hagar threw her son Yismael, and where Eliyahu the prophet took shelter grows right here in my own garden. What is the underlying spiritual message of the White Broom mentioned several times in the Torah, and what can we learn from it specifically at this time?

#### **Weeping over the Immeasurable Destruction Caused by Evil Speech**

The White Broom Bush has an important message to teach us, which is especially pertinent as we move into the gloomy Month of Av, preceding the destruction of the Temple. The Temple was doomed for destruction before it was even built, because of the Israelites' belief in the evil report of the spies during that fatal Ninth of Av in the desert. Today, we work on rectifying the lack of *emunah* that led the spies to slander the Land of Israel and the rest of the people to believe in their evil speech. The Weeping White Broom bush teaches us to weep over the immeasurable destruction caused by *lashon hara* (evil speech). Its repercussions are so powerful that they could render the magnificent Temple into shambles a thousand years before it was even built.

#### **Continuing to Burn Within like White Broom's Embers**

פֶּרַח תְּהִלִּים פֶּרַח קֶכֶךְ (ג) מֵה יִתֵּן לָךְ וַיְמַה יִסִּיף לָךְ לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה: (ד) חֲצִי גְבוּר שְׁנוּנִים עִם גְּחָלֵי רְתֵמִים:  
 “What shall be given to you or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of the broom tree” (*Tehillim* 120:3-4).

King David compares the power of evil speech with the resilient Rotem scrub, whose coals do not easily extinguish. A person who speaks *lashon hara* is similar to the coals of the Rotem shrub: although they

seem extinguished from outside, they nevertheless keep burning within. Likewise, a person may pretend to be friendly on the outside, while secretly speaking *lashon hara* about others (*Metzudat David, Tehillim* 120:4). The Jerusalem Talmud explains why evil speech is compared specifically to the embers of Rotem coals. "...All other embers once they are turned off on the outside, are also extinguished on the inside, while the Rotem embers, even when they are extinguished on the outside, continue to burn inside. In evidence, take the case of one who left burning Rotem embers on Sukkot and returned on Pesach" (*Yerushalmi, Pe'ah* 5a). Other sources credit the Rotem embers with the power to continually burn for twelve months or even eighteen full months: "Rav Ashi said: Huna bar Natan told me: 'Once we were walking in the wilderness and we had a leg of meat with us. We dressed the meat, cleaned it, and placed it on some plants. While we were fetching wood, the leg regained its original skin texture and we roasted it. When we returned after twelve months, we saw those coals still glowing. When I came before Amimar, he said to me, the plants were *samtari* (yarrow). Those glowing coals were Rotem embers'" (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 74b). The Midrash tells a tale of a fire made from Rotem embers that after being extinguished continued to burn for 18 months through the seasons of winter, summer and winter. This same Midrash elaborates on the power of evil speech compared to both the arrow and the Rotem, "Sharp arrows of the mighty" (*Tehillim* 120:4) – Why select the arrow from all weapons? All other weapons strike close up, while this one strikes from afar. That is the way of evil speech, "What is said in Rome, kills in Syria." Furthermore, someone who accepted a slander, although you have appeased him and he has seemingly been appeased, his anger may still burn within him, just as the embers of White Broom keeps burning (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 98:19). The well-known endurance of the Rotem even had Halachic repercussions. In the discussion about what may be kept on a fire on Shabbat, the Talmud mentions, "A completely cooked dish even if it is upon white broom embers" (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 37b). Rashi explains that white broom embers are hotter than other embers and are not easily extinguished (Rashi, *ibid.*).

### Throwing Her Son Under a White Broom Bush

Although the White Broom fire's power is compared to the in-extinguishable effects of evil speech, the power of the Rotem also has redeeming qualities. In the Rosh Hashana Torah reading, Hashem tells Avraham to listen to the voice of Sarah and expel Hagar and Yishmael (*Bereishit* 21:12), because of the way Yismael was behaving towards Yitzchak. According to Rashi, Yishmael was trying to kill him (Rashi, *Bereishit* 21:9). Hagar and Yishmael get lost in the wilderness. Their water runs out and Yishmael is almost dying of thirst. Contrary to what a good *Yiddishe Mamma* (Jewish mom) would do, Hagar throws her son under one of the bushes in despair, because she can't bear watching the death of her son (*Bereishit* 21:15-16). Rabbi Meir identifies the bush under which Hagar threw her son, as being the Rotem – White Broom bush, because the Rotem bush grows in the wilderness (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 53:13). How does Rabbi Meir know under which bush Hagar threw Yishmael, and why is this even important to know? Hagar and Yishmael got lost in the desert of Be'er Sheva (*Bereishit* 21:14). The wilderness of Be'er Sheva borders to the wilderness of Paran, where Yismael settled down after recovering. It is possible that Rabbi Meir identified "one of the bushes" with the Rotem because of the name Ritmah in the wilderness of Paran where Yismael dwelt after he was sent away with Hagar, "He dwelled in the Wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt" (*Bereishit* 21:21). Furthermore, the Rotem is the only bush that grows in the desert of Paran.

## A Plant of the Wild Wilderness

The main reason for Rabbi Meir's discovery that Hagar threw Yishmael under a Rotem bush is that there is an inconsistency in the recount of the wandering of the Israelites in the desert, which links the Wilderness of Paran with the White Broom bush. In one place, the Wilderness of Paran is mentioned as the stop following Chatzerot:

ספר במדבר פרק יב (טז) וְאַחַר נָסְעוּ הָעָם מִחֲצֵרוֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר פָּאֵרָן:

"Afterwards the people traveled from Chatzerot and encamped in the wilderness of Paran" (*Bamidbar* 12:15).

Yet in this week's *parasha*, the stop following Chatzerot is called Ritmah from the language of the Rotem – White Broom. It was a place so called because of the Rotem plants that grew there.

ספר במדבר פרק לג (יח) וַיֵּסְעוּ מִחֲצֵרֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִתְמָה:

*They traveled from Chatzerot and encamped in Ritmah (Bamidbar 33:18).*

We can resolve the inconsistencies between the two Torah verses (*Bamidbar* 12:16 and 33:18) by explaining that Ritmah is part of the wilderness of Paran. This clarifies the two different names given for the stop following Chatzerot, (Midbar Paran and Ritmah). *רִתְמָה/Ritmah* and *מִדְבַּר פָּאֵרָן/Midbar Paran* describe the same location, yet this week's *parasha*, which repeats the Israelites' stops in wilderness, is more specific by mentioning the particular part of the Wilderness of Paran, which is Ritmah.

## Keeping the Spark of Steadfast *Emunah* Alive Within

What difference does it make which bush Hagar threw her dying son? What was the spiritual message she needed to learn from the Rotem bush? Hagar was at the brink of despair, she behaved like a typical Egyptian daughter who lacks *emunah* in Hashem's miraculous delivery. With her superficial vision of reality, she was convinced that her son was going to die. She had not yet integrated the understanding of Hashem's miraculous way of running the world. Possibly, she also lacked the depth of care to save the life of her ailing son. A Jewish mother would never leave her sick child because she had no strength to see him suffering. This is cruel egoism (Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch). The Jewish view is never to give up, even when according to logic, science and the doctors, all hope is lost. "Even if a sharp sword is pressing on a person's neck he should never despair of pleading for G-d's mercy... (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 10a). Hashem chose this tenacious White Broom bush to teach humanity never to give up hope, even when all seems lost. The spiritual power of the Ritmah plant has the ability to revive a person even after complete despair. The Rotem plant taught Hagar to keep hanging in there in spite of her plight. We all need to be reminded that even when all hope is lost on the surface, the spark of our internal *emunah* never extinguishes. Just as the Rotem bush holds on to the sand-dunes and harnesses them from eroding, so can we learn from the White Broom rather than crumbling down and collapsing, to hold on to steadfast *emunah*.

## Eliyahu's Shelter Under a Rotem Bush

Generations after Hagar, Eliyahu the Prophet reached the same Be'er Sheva desert, fleeing from the wrath of Izevel after he had killed the priests of Ba'al. The Rotem's steadfast power and tenacity of continual burning also taught Eliyahu not to lose hope. From the Rotem, he learned perseverance against all the obstacles of being pursued by the evil queen.

“Frightened he fled for his life. When he reached Be’er Sheva... he left his servant there; he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a White Broom bush, sat down under it, and prayed for death. ‘Enough!’ he cried. ‘Now, O Hashem take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’ He lay down and fell asleep under the White Broom bush. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, ‘Arise and eat.’ He looked about, and there, besides his head, was a cake baked on embers, and a pitcher of water. He ate and he drank, and lay down again. The angel of Hashem came a second time and touched him, saying, ‘Arise and eat; or the journey will be too much for you.’ He arose and ate and drank; and with the strength from that meal, he walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of G-d at Chorev” (I *Melachim* 19:3-8).

### Infusing Eliyahu with 40-day Continual Spiritual Nourishment

Just as the Rotem can go on burning for months without being relit so was Eliyahu able to continue to go on, without any other sustenance after having been imbued with the energy of the Rotem through sitting in its shade and ingesting a cake burned on its embers. Sleeping under the shade of the Rotem permeated him with endurance that comes with trust, and eating the cakes burned on its embers, strengthened his internal willpower to continue to burn with zeal for Hashem. This is similar to Yonah, whom Hashem fed Manna when he was suffering inside of the big fish. This was in order to teach Yonah the lesson of trusting in Hashem, which the daily gift of the heavenly Manna imparted (Rashi, *Yonah* 2:1, Old version). There are several parallels between Yonah and Eliyahu and a direct link between them, as Yonah was the boy Eliyahu revived (*Torah Temima, Bereishit* 49:13). Like Eliyahu, Yonah also was sheltered under the shade of a tree. In Yona’s case, it was a Castor oil tree, as its oil has the ability to purify and cleanse. Hashem possibly selected this tree in order to cleanse him of his desire to die. Likewise, the Rotem tree cured Eliyahu from his lack of life energy, despair and depression, by infusing him with its fiery resilient power.

### Recharging Eliyahu with the Rotem’s Fiery Power

Eliyahu’s power was in fire. When he fought the prophets of the Ba’al he brought down fire from heaven (II *Melachim* 1:12). In the end, he himself ascended alive to heaven in the chariot of fire and horses of fire (II *Melachim* 2:11). Then everyone clearly saw that the fire from heaven permeated his soul and all of his limbs and organs. He was completely fire, and his zealotry was of fire. How did Eliyahu get his fiery power? When he escaped Achav and Izevel to the wilderness, he was devoid of any fire and passion in life. In fact, he was so depressed he wanted to die. Then Hashem designated the White Broom Bush for Eliyahu to lean on and recharge him with its fire. “He sat under a White Broom, slept under it, and ate a cake baked on [Rotem] embers.” Through this encounter with the Rotem, Eliyahu was not only cured from his despair and depression, the White Broom furthermore transferred its great inner fire of tenacity to Eliyahu and empowered him with so much vital energy that he proceeded for forty days and night on his mission to reach the mountain of G-d. The Weeping White Broom silently wishes to anyone who comes near it, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going” (Joseph P. Kennedy).