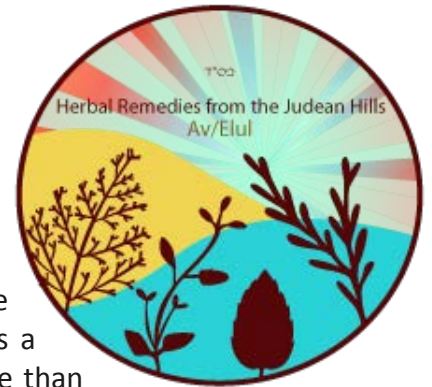


לְעֵנָה – Wormwood – Artemisia Absinthium



Most Bitter, Soul-Inflicting Wormwood

Finally a familiar plant which is mentioned repeatedly in the Torah! Altogether wormwood is mentioned seven times in the Tanach – once in the Chumash, in *Parashat Kitavo*, three times in the Prophets and three times in the Writings. None of these instances are complementary, but rather use the bitterness of the wormwood as a metaphor for sin and punishment. We had a wormwood bush more than once in our garden but each time it became infested with bugs and straggly, eventually passing on to the compost pile. I remember making an anti-aphid spray from wormwood tea, popularly called *שייבה*/*sheebah* after the Moroccan tea made from it. This *Tisha b'Av* (the fast day of the 9th of Av), I noticed wormwood mentioned twice in *Eicha* (*Lamentations*) and thought, “Oh, too bad I haven’t researched and written about wormwood in preparation for *Tisha b'Av*.” Later, I was happy to discover that wormwood also appears in *Parashat Kitavo*:

ספר דברים פרק כט פסוק יז פֶּן יֵשׁ בְּכֶם אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה אוֹ מִשְׁפָּחָה אוֹ שִׁבְט אֲשֶׁר לְבָבוֹ פָּנָה הַיּוֹם מֵעַם הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲלֵהֶינּוּ לְלַקֵּת לְעַבֵּד אֶת אֱלֹהֵי הַגּוֹיִם הָהֵם פֶּן יֵשׁ בְּכֶם שֹׂרֵשׁ פְּרָה רֹאשׁ וְלַעֲנָה:
 “Perhaps there is among you a man, woman, family, or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from Hashem our G-d, to go to worship the gods of those nations. Perhaps there is among you a root that bears poison-weed and wormwood” (*Devarim 29:17*).

Ramban explains that both wormwood and poison-weed are either bitter or deadly; one is called *רֹאשׁ*/*rosh* – ‘head,’ because it is bitterer than anything else, and head of all bitter herbs. The second is called *לַעֲנָה*/*la’ana*, from the language of being ‘humbled’ (*Shemot 10:3*), for he who eats it will suffer and be humbled in his soul. *לַעֲנָה*/*la’ana* – ‘wormwood’ also derives from the words *נָפַשׁ לַעֲנֹת*/*la’anot nefesh* – “to afflict the soul,” as taking this herb causes great affliction (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Devarim 29:17*). I have not been able to identify *רֹאשׁ*/*rosh* – ‘poison-weed’ which is sometimes translated, ‘gall.’ Rashi explains that it is “a root that brings forth herbs as bitter as wormwood plants, which are exceedingly bitter” (Rashi, *Devarim 29:17*). Poison is called *רֹאשׁ*/*rosh* – ‘head’ because it is the head of all bitter herbs, and because poison is found in the head of a snake. The Torah compares idol-worship to poison-weed and wormwood. Wormwood, indeed, was used in idol-worshipping ceremonies among the Mexicans, who celebrated their great festival of the goddess of salt by a ceremonial dance of women, who wore garlands of wormwood on their heads. Moreover, wormwood idol-worshipping ‘spiritualists’ believe that wormwood summons spirits and facilitates communication with the dead – an activity which The Torah clearly prohibits (*Devarim 18:10-11*).

Mind Altering, Absinthe Toxin

The continuation of our Torah verse prompts us to eradicate the bitter within our midst, which causes “utter ruin of moist and dry alike.”

ספר דברים פרק כט פסוק יח וְהָיָה בְּשִׁמְעוֹ אֶת דְּבָרֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֵּאת וְהִתְבַּרְרָה בְּלִבּוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁלוֹם יְהִי לִי כִּי בְשִׁרְרוֹת לִבִּי אֵלֶּךָ לְמַעַן סְפוֹת הָרָוָה אֶת הַצְּמָאָה:
 “It will come to pass, when he hears the words of this curse that he will bless himself in his heart, saying, ‘I will have peace, even if I walk in the stubbornness of my heart,’ that the moist be swept away with the dry” (*Devarim 29:18*).

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Rashi explains that this verse refers to a person who initially sinned unintentionally, but now begins to sin intentionally as well. At first, Hashem was willing to overlook his unintentional sins, yet, his current intentional sins stir up Hashem's anger to include his unintentional sins as well in the punishment of all his sins. The word, **הַצְמֵאָה/hatzemea** – 'thirsty' refers to intentional sins that a person commits knowingly and out of lust, whereas, **הַרְוָה/harava** – 'drunk' refers to unintentional sins, committed as if in a drunken state, unknowingly. In traditional herbal medicine, wormwood indeed is associated with 'a drunken state.' The 17th century master herbalist, Culpeper, was intrigued by this bitter-tasting plant. His depiction of wormwood is described as a "stream-of-consciousness," which reads "like the ramblings of a drunk." In 19th century France, wormwood was used to flavor the popular drink 'absinthe' – a bright green, mind altering drink popular with the Avant-garde. It was considered a 'designer drink' of choice among the artists, writers and musicians who succumbed to the allure of the green fairy that drove many of them to the edge and beyond the threshold between genius and madness. Due to its high thujone content, absinthe got its adherents more than just a little tipsy. Thujone is a nerve poison and absinthe soon became illegal. Wormwood remains an elusive temptation among modern psychonauts, looking for cheap and exotic (albeit dangerous) thrills. However, most people discover that absinthe has no mind altering properties.

Consciousness Expansion and False Prophecy

Seeking the thrills of consciousness expansion may possibly characterize the false prophets whom the prophet Yirmeyahu describes as wormwood consumers:

ספר ירמיה פרק כג פסוק טו לִכֵּן כֹּה אָמַר הָשֵׁם צְבָאוֹת עַל הַנְּבִיאִים הַנְּבִי מֵאֲכִיל אוֹתָם לְעֵנָה וְהַשְׁקֵתִים מִי רֹאשׁ כִּי מֵאֵת נְבִיאֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם יֵצֵא חֲנֹפֶה לְכֹל הָאָרֶץ:

"Therefore, so said Hashem of Hosts concerning the prophets: Behold I will feed them wormwood and give them poisonous water to drink, for from the prophets of Jerusalem has falseness emanated to the whole land" (*Yirmeyahu 23:15*).

One of the features of people under the influence of various substances is an illusionary sensation of discovering prophetic-like perceptions. What may seem like unbelievable insights, while experiencing a psychedelic drug-induced 'high,' turns out to be nothing but a blown-up, out of proportion delusion. This "bitter grass" as wormwood is called (Rashi, *Yirmeyahu 9:14*), is associated with "lusting after bitter foods and poisonous, destructive beliefs (Malbim *ibid.*). Likewise, when justice is twisted, it is compared to the bitterness of wormwood:

ספר עמוס פרק ה פסוק ז הַהֲפֹכִים לְלֵעָנָה מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה לְאֶרֶץ הַנִּיחוּ:

"Those who turn justice to wormwood, and who leave righteousness on the ground" (*Amos 5:7*).

Transformative Bitterness

Amos continues and uses wormwood as a metaphor for transforming the fruits of righteousness to bitter injustice (*ibid.* 6:12). Yet, the concept of transformation can also work the other way around – from bitter to better. The holiday of Pesach celebrating the liberation of the Children of Israel is intrinsically linked with the saddest day in the Jewish calendar when we mourn for the destruction of the Temple and our ultimate exile:

איכה פרק ג פסוק טו הַשְּׂבִיעֵנִי בְמַרְוֵי הַרְוֵי לְעֵנָה:

"He has sated me with bitterness; He has made me drunk with wormwood" (*Eichah 3:15*).

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Being “sated with bitterness” refers to the first night of Pesach as it states, “they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (*Bamidbar* 9:11). “He has sated me with bitter herbs on the first night of Pesach in the same way that “He made me drunk with wormwood” on the night of Tisha b’Av. Behold the first night of Pesach is joined with the night of Tisha b’Av (*Torah Temima* *ibid*). Whichever day of the week the first day of Pesach falls is always the same as that of Tisha b’Av. The wormwood mentioned in *Eichah* connected with the bitterness of the mourning on Tisha b’Av is the converse of the bitter herbs of liberation that we consume on Pesach. Thus, even the bitterness of wormwood can be transformed to the purification of Pesach. In herbalism, bitterness has eliminating and cleansing properties. Actually, the reason for the mitzvah to eat bitter herbs on Pesach is to commemorate the hardship of the bondage which hastened the time of our Exodus (*Torah Temima* *ibid*). “The congregation of Israel said before the Almighty, ‘Master of the Universe, remember the rebellion with which I rebelled against you, and the affliction with which you sated me, wormwood and poison-weed. May the latter make up for the former!’” (*Torah Temima, Eichah* 3:19). Thus bitter wormwood is not only evil but can have both unfavorable and favorable consequences, as King Shlomo declares, “But her end is as bitter as wormwood, as sharp as a double-edged sword (*Mishlei* 5:4). Just as we bless over the good (*Babylonian Talmud* 48b), so do we bless over the bitter for the bad is actually good in disguise as the fast will be transformed “to joy and happiness” (*Zechariah* 8:19). It is specifically the bitterness of the fast day that will bring about its ultimate joy and happiness (*Shelah HaKodesh, Tractate Ta’anit* 69).

Medicinal Properties of Wormwood

Wormwood indeed has an ancient history as a powerful healing herb. Used appropriately, in the right amounts, it can be very beneficial. Wormwood is one of the most popular plants in [Chinese traditional preparations and are frequently used for the treatment of diseases such as malaria, hepatitis, cancer, inflammation and infections by fungi, bacteria and viruses](#). The leaves resist putrefaction, and have therefore been a principal ingredient in antiseptic poultices. Use only low doses internally as higher doses can be toxic when taken in excess.

Digestive Stimulant

Due to its exceeding bitterness wormwood is a digestive stimulant activating metabolism like no other herb. It helps to regulate the balance of stomach juices and stimulates the flow of bile. By increasing bile production, it helps with the absorption of nutrients and can reverse anemia. Wormwood is also useful for gas and bloating. It has anti-inflammatory and anti-tumor effects and can be used for the treatment of temporary loss of appetite. [Wormwood, moreover, treats dyspeptic and gastrointestinal disorders including Crohn’s disease](#).

Cancer Killer

[Researchers in a 2012 study tested samples of breast cancer cells and normal breast cells treated with a water-soluble form of artemisinin, an extract of wormwood. The normal cells showed little change, but within 16 hours, almost all of the cancer cells were dead and only a few normal cells were killed.](#)

Blood Tonic

Wormwood cleanses the liver and kidneys and is regarded as a tonic for the blood and circulation.

Beats Malaria

[Artemisinin extracted from wormwood is a most powerful antimalarial drug. It’s known for quickly reducing the number of parasites in the blood of patients with malaria.](#)

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Has Antimicrobial and Antifungal Abilities

The ancients recommended wormwood as a preventative anti-infectious agent that could be used to ward off highly infectious diseases. [In vitro studies have shown that the essential oils of wormwood have antimicrobial activity. Not only can wormwood kill bacteria, but it's also been shown to kill fungi.](#)

Expels Worms and Parasites

As the name suggests, it can be beneficial in the elimination of parasites as it ruthlessly kills and expels intestinal worms, especially pinworms and roundworms. [Wormwood, black walnut and clove are commonly used together to break the parasite's life cycle and kill off a parasitic infection.](#) However, large doses of wormwood are toxic to the kidneys. Do not use during pregnancy.

Insect Repellent

Wormwood is used as an insect repellent, strewing herb. It produces compounds that suppress plant growth and gardeners sometimes use wormwood infusion to keep weeds down. However, don't use this around baby plants that you want to encourage, but only near well-established plants. This concoction also discourages bugs and slugs. Wormwood twigs and also be laid among clothes and furs to keep away moths and insects.

Hands On

Wormwood can be used either fresh or dried. All the aerial portions (stem, leaves and flowers) of the plant have medicinal uses. Wormwood should only be taken in small doses as directed and for no longer than four weeks at a time.

Wormwood Tea for Digestive Health

1. Place ½-1 teaspoon of crushed dried wormwood per cup of water in a teapot.
2. Heat water in a kettle. Water temperature for this tea should be boiling (100°C).
3. Pour the boiling water into the teapot and let your tea steep for 10 to 15 minutes.
4. Blend with caraway, peppermint, honey, lemon juice (optionally).
5. Strain your tea into a cup or mug. This tea has a bitter flavor that may be hard to get accustomed to, so try sweetening it with brown sugar or honey, and add a squeeze of lemon juice to make it more palatable.

If you are drinking this tea as a digestive aid, take about 1 to 2 cups per day. For painful menstruation, the best time to drink this tea is a week before your period comes. Drink about 2 cups a day to soothe those pains. You can drink 1-3 cups a day, 2-4 weeks at the most. Due to wormwood's possible side effects start with a lower daily dosage and stop drinking this tea as soon as your situation improves. Each person is different and may react differently to this tea.

Chili and Wormwood Spray

1. Blend one cup of chilies and one cup of wormwood with one cup of water.
2. Add five cups of water and bring to the boil.
3. Allow this to stand for one hour.
4. Strain and bottle in a spray bottle.

This mixture can be sprayed on plants and garden beds to kill aphids, bean fly and white fly. It also repels possums, rabbits, snails and slugs.