



How Do the Bitter Waters Heal our Deeper Traumatic Experiences?

True Healing from Trauma Requires Continuing Divine Healing

True healing is multilayered. It includes physical, emotional and spiritual healing. As a second-generationer holocaust survivor, my process of healing still has a long way to go. As with anything in life, the outer, physical layer is always easier to work on. It is the pain and worry in the heart that lingers longer. Although, some people find therapy helpful, in my experience, only Hashem, Who knows our innards, can heal the innermost layers of our hearts. To receive divine healing, we need to call out to Hashem for help, and then we need emunah and much patience. The Temple in Jerusalem was not built in one day. (It actually took seven years, see I *Melachim* Chapter 6). Over time, Hashem will heal our hearts, through the happenings and tests of our life. Sometimes, several reincarnations are necessary. To receive inner healing, we need awareness of our misalignment and to engage in meditation, prayer and *hitbodedut*, together with strengthening of our emunah. In *Parashat Beshalach*, the Israelites were redeemed from physical slavery, and they praised Hashem for the final delivery from their Egyptian enemies at the Song of the Sea. Despite their exhilaration at the splitting of the sea, expressed through praising Hashem, their healing was not done. The Israelites' forty-year trek to the Promised Land was an arduous journey by a people struggling with post-traumatic stress, fears, insecurities and ambivalence. Just imagine the women's trauma of having their babies cruelly taken from their bosom and drowned in the Nile. It would take more than watching the Egyptians drown to heal their bleeding hearts.

Bitter Waters or Bitter People?

I was inspired by Rabbi Fohrman's brilliant teachings on [Refaeinu](#) to learn a deeper perspective on the Israelites' process of divine healing. He noticed the contrast between the epic moment of the Song of the Sea, and the mundane story about the lack of water, the bitter waters and the complaint of the people.

ספר שמות פרק טו פסוק כ וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אַחוֹת אַהֲרֹן אֶת הַתֵּף בְּיָדָהּ וַתִּצְאֶן כָּל הַנְּשִׂיִם אַחֲרֶיהָ בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲלֹת: (כא) וַתַּעַן לָהֶם מִרְיָם שִׁירוּ לַהֲשֵׁם כִּי גָאֵה גָאֵה סוֹס וּרְכָבוֹ רָמָה בַּיָּם: (כב) וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל מִדְבַּר שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבַּר וְלֹא מָצְאוּ מַיִם: (כג) וַיִּבְאוּ מִרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתֹּת מַיִם מִמֶּרְהָ כִּי מֵרִים הֵם עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמֶהּ מֶרְהָ: (כד) וַיְלִינוּ הָעָם עַל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מַה נַּשְׁתָּה:

“Miriam, the prophetess, Aharon’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women came out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam called out to them, ‘Sing to Hashem, for He is very exalted; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea.’ Moshe then led Israel away from the Reed Sea, and they went out into the desert of Shur; they walked for three days in the desert but did not find water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink waters from Marah because they were bitter; therefore, it was named Marah. The people complained against Moshe, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’” (*Shemot* 15:20-24).

It is interesting to notice that the name ‘Miriam’ means ‘bitter water.’ When it says that the Israelites couldn’t drink the waters, it doesn’t state ‘because the waters were bitter,’ but “because they were bitter.” I recall learning with Nechama Leibowitz z”l many years ago, that it was the people who were bitter. When we have a bitter attitude, everything seems bitter. Rabbi Fohrman

asks, if the Israelites hadn't drunk water for three days, wouldn't they be thankful for any water, even if it is bitter? Perhaps, it was their own bitterness that made it impossible for them to drink the bitter waters?

The Ambiguity of Bitterness

(כה) וַיִּצְעַק אֶל הָשֵׁם וַיֹּרְהוּ יְדוּד עַץ וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶל הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שָׁם שָׁם לֹא חָק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִסָּהוּ: (כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אִם שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִיָּשֵׁר בְּעֵינָיו תַּעֲשֶׂה וְהֶאֱזַנְתָּ לְמִצְוֹתַי וְשָׁמַרְתָּ כָּל חֻקָּיו כָּל הַמִּחְלָה אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא אֲשִׁים עֲלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי הָשֵׁם רֹפְאֶךָ:

“So, he cried out to Hashem, and Hashem instructed him concerning a tree, which he cast into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There He gave them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them. And He said, ‘If you listen to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, and you do what is proper in His eyes, and you listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes, all the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you, for I am Hashem, your healer” (*Shemot* 15:25-26).

There is an ambiguity concerning the bitterness. On the one hand it pertains to the waters as it states, “and the waters became sweet.” On the other hand, it refers to the Israelites, as in the same context it states, “I am G-d your healer.” Why would the Israelites need healing unless there was something wrong with them? Perhaps, they needed healing from their bitterness, which can be traced all the way back to the bitterness of the Egyptian exile: “They embittered their lives” (*Shemot* 1:14). Thus, the bitterness of the waters of Marah entailed not just physical bitterness. It, moreover, recalled the Israelites’ deep traumatic bitterness – the bitterness of having their sons drowned in the waters. The bitterness of the waters at Marah is also reflected in the very first moment of the plagues – the plague of blood – that caused the Egyptians to gag, and the very last moment, when the Egyptians drowned at the splitting of the sea. It is interesting to note that the expression: “וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשִׁתּוֹת מַיִם” – “they could not drink” (*Shemot* 15:23), is only written one other time in the entire Tanach when describing the plague of blood (*Ibid.* 7:21), except for just one slight difference: The word לְשִׁתּוֹת//*lishtot* – “drink” is written incomplete, missing the letter וַי/vav at Marah. Perhaps, this alludes to the fact that the inability of the Israelites to drink the water was beyond the physical realm. It was their trauma and survivor guilt that made them terrified that the bitter water could turn into blood, and then, eventually, to water in which they would drown, just as the Egyptians. Therefore, Hashem had to reassure them: “...all the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not impose upon you, for I am Hashem, your healer” (*Shemot* 15:26).

The Trauma of Uncertainty

The deep bitterness of psychological trauma is living in complete uncertainty. Whereas the slavery of Hitler and Pharaoh may seem on the surface to be for the sake of building camps and pyramids, the underlying motive was to make our people crumble (Rashi, *Shemot* 1:13). They compelled the men to do women’s work, and the women, men’s work. An Egyptian would say to the man: “Get up! Knead the dough and bake the bread;” and to the woman, he would say: “Fill this barrel with water, chop down this tree...” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Vayetze* 9). Moreover, it may seem as though genocide was not perpetrated, because everything on the outside looked oh so clean. Pharaoh’s decree did not pertain to all the infants, and the evidence of the murdered babies was quickly washed away by the Nile. Bitterness is when you don’t know whether the objective reality is as devastating as it appears to you, or perhaps, there is something wrong with you, and your pain emanates only from your own subjective perspective. This perplexity is also reflected at Marah, in the uncertainty whether it was the people or the waters that were bitter. A person, who lives with someone mentally ill, experiences this kind of trauma. The spiderweb of the mind-games of uncertainty can break a person into pieces and make anyone crumble.

Dispelling Bitterness Through Drumming and Dance

Just as the trauma of the holocaust didn't end with the liberation of the allies, so did the bitterness of the Israelites not come to an end at the Song of the Sea. Even after everyone was saved, the people were still suffering from trauma and experienced bitterness – which is a kind of disease. By taking a drum or a timbrel in her hand, Miriam began the process of spiritual healing from this profound psychological wound. She began to transform the pain of the bitter memory of the infants cast into the Nile, into utter joy. This is alluded to by the word *הַתֵּהָהוּ/hatof* – “the drum,” which is pronounced similarly to *תַּטְּ/taf* – “infants.” Moreover, “all the women followed her, with their timbrels, and *בְּמַחֲלוֹת/b'mecholot* – “with dancing,” which shares the same root letters *ל/ח/מ* as sickness – *מַחֲלָה/machala*. The women thus began to transmute the bitter sickness through their exultant dancing. Similarly, Rebbi Nachman teaches, “By means of dancing and clapping the hands, the judgments are sweetened” (Rebbe Nachman, *Likutei Moharan, Mahadura Kama* 10:1). Dancing “displaces depression,” and sweats out our bitterness. It is a way that we come out of ourselves. By reducing self-focus, it can bring us to a state of joy.

Hashem – Our Ultimate Healer

It is a natural tendency for people who have undergone trauma to repress it, because it's just too painful to face. Therefore, many holocaust survivors refuse to talk about their experiences. Yet, those who do have the courage to remember and tell the story of their trauma, find it a most cathartic and healing experience. Hashem is our ultimate healer. He brought us the bitter water, to help us face our own bitterness, in order to heal us completely from the slightest trace still blocking our heart. To transform the trauma of the babies hurled to their death in the water, Moshe was to hurl a tree into the water, where it could continue to live and grow. In this process, not only the bitter waters were sweetened, but also the bitter scar of our trauma would eventually be healed. Instead of shunning and repressing the gruesome memory of our bitter torment, we were now not only faced with it, but compelled to ingest it in the form of bitter waters. Yet, now it turned sweet, together with our own healing transformation. In this way, Hashem completed the process of healing the Children of Israel that Miriam began.