

A Taste of Torah – Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech: “Retraining Our Spiritual Taste Buds”

How Does Bitterness Help Us Recognize the Illusory Sweetness in Our Lives?

How Are We Led Astray into Believing that the Bitter is Sweet?

We live in times when the spiritual taste buds of many of us have become distorted. With the constant inundation of messages through media and advertising, often conveying underlying values contrary to the Torah, it is challenging not to be influenced in subtle ways.

For example, I must admit that the Western world’s worship of youth has gotten to me a bit. Although I am aware of the Torah value of honoring elders and the respect due to them, I confess that I sometimes wish the skin on my face were smoother, tighter, and more youthful. At one of the recent weddings I attended, I asked a woman if she was the groom’s sister, but it turned out that she was his mother. Good thing I didn’t make the opposite mistake! The best compliment you can give a woman today is that she looks younger than her years. But why is that? Why aren’t we happy and grateful that Hashem has made the earth turn around the sun all these years for us and granted us so much experience and wisdom to advise and support others?

Yesterday, I was teaching Rambam on character development, nutrition, and health, focusing on value distortion. Rambam writes:

“To those who are physically sick, the bitter tastes sweet, and the sweet bitter. Some of the sick even desire and crave that which is unfit to eat, such as dirt and charcoal. They hate healthy foods, such as bread and meat - all depending on the extent of their sickness. Likewise, people whose souls are sick desire and love evil ways. They hate the good path and are lazy to follow it. Depending on how sick they are, they find it exceedingly burdensome. About such people, Yesha’yahu says, *‘Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who present darkness as light, and light as darkness, who present bitter as sweet and sweet as bitter!’* (Yesha’yahu 5:20). Concerning them, it states, *‘Those who leave the upright paths to walk in the ways of darkness’*” (Mishlei 2:13; Rambam, *Hilchot Deot*, Chapter 2, Halacha 1).

This teaching prompted a discussion about what kinds of things initially seem sweet to people today but eventually turn out to be bitter. One student shared how feeling sad late at night led her to eat a bag of chips even though she knew she wasn’t hungry. Others shared how sweet it may seem to go to *Shuk Machane Yehuda* at night, where men and women are dancing and having fun, but how such experiences may ultimately lead to bitter relationships that are not founded on true connection. Perhaps most often the desire for instant gratification is what causes us to exchange sweet for bitter.

What Kind of Bitter Root Does the Torah Warn Us Against?

Parashat Nitzavim warns us against allowing a hidden root of spiritual corruption to take hold within us:

ספר דברים פרק כט פסוק יז פְּרִי־שׁ בָּכֶם אִישׁ אִשָּׁה אוֹ מִשְׁפָּחָה אוֹ שִׁבְט אֲשֶׁר לָבְבוּ הַיּוֹם מֵעַם הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְלַכֵּת לַעֲבֹד אֶת אֱלֹהֵי הַגּוֹיִם הֵם פְּרִי־שׁ בָּכֶם שָׂרֵשׁ פָּרָה רָאֵשׁ וְלַעֲנָה:

“Perhaps there is among you a man or woman, a family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from Hashem our G-d, to go and worship the gods of those nations; perhaps there is among you a root bearing gall and wormwood” (*Devarim* 29:17).

Rashi explains that “whose heart turns away today” refers to someone whose heart turns away from accepting the covenant. He interprets “a root bearing gall and wormwood” as a root that produces a bitter herb. The bitter plant represents the wickedness that such a person causes to flourish and multiply among the Jewish people (Rashi, *Devarim* 29:17).

The Torah's metaphor does not merely describe a bitter plant but directs our attention to its root. What appears above ground does not suddenly emerge from nowhere. Before the bitterness becomes visible, something has already taken root beneath the surface. Moreover, the danger is not confined to the individual. Like a spreading plant, the bitter root can multiply and affect those around it.

Ibn Ezra adds that שֶׁרֶשׁ/*rosh* – “gall” is harmful even to those who are healthy, comparing its effect to a contagious illness (Ibn Ezra, *Devarim* 29:17). Thus, the Torah's image encompasses both bitterness and contagion. A distorted value that takes root within one person does not necessarily remain private; it can spread until what was once recognized as bitter becomes widely accepted as sweet.

Why Are We Attracted to Values We Know Are Not Ours?

Rabbi Yitzchak Karo (the uncle of the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*) raises a fascinating question concerning the verses immediately preceding the Torah's warning about the bitter root. Moshe reminds the Jewish people that during their travels among the nations, “You saw their abominations and their idols, wood and stone, silver and gold that were with them” (*Devarim* 29:16). If the Jewish people recognized these idols as repulsive and worthless, why would seeing them create a danger that their hearts might turn toward them?

Rabbi Karo explains that although the Jewish people recognized the nations' idols as worthless, they also noticed something else: the nations appeared extraordinarily prosperous. They possessed wealth, property, and honor. This is why the Torah specifically mentions “the silver and gold that were with them.” Observing their material success could cause a person to wonder whether perhaps there was something worthwhile in their ways after all (*Toldot Yitzchak, Devarim* 29:17).

This insight seems remarkably relevant to the subtle value distortion we experience today. We may intellectually recognize that certain prevailing cultural values are contrary to Torah, yet we constantly encounter people who embody these values while appearing wealthy, beautiful, youthful, successful, popular, and happy. Without consciously deciding to adopt their worldview, we may gradually begin to absorb it. What we see celebrated and rewarded around us can imperceptibly influence what begins to taste “sweet” to us.

A person may not reject Hashem or the foundations of faith at all. Rather, the attraction to material prosperity may lead her temporarily astray. She may essentially tell herself: For now, I will follow the path that seems to bring wealth and success; afterward, I can return to serving Hashem. Yet precisely such compromises can become the beginning of the “root bearing gall and wormwood” against which the Torah warns us (*Ibid.*).

Perhaps this is one of the greatest dangers of cultural influence. We rarely wake up one morning and consciously exchange our Torah values for foreign ones. The change may begin much more subtly, when the glitter of someone else's ‘silver and gold’ gradually transforms what we once recognized as bitter into something sweeter.

How Can Something that Begins Sweet Ultimately Become Bitter?

Once outside values begin to taste sweet to us, how do they take root within our hearts? Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov explains the process embedded in the Torah's image of “a root bearing gall and wormwood,” according to Onkelos, who understands the “root” as the initial sinful thought. Just as a root hidden within the earth eventually grows and produces fruit, so too a thought entertained within the heart may eventually develop into action.

He further distinguishes between שֶׁרֶשׁ/*rosh* – “gall,” associated with the source from which poison emerges, and לְאָנָה/*la'anah* – “wormwood,” which is itself bitter. The head of a poisonous creature is not itself harmful; it is only the venom emerging from it that is poisonous. In the same way, what begins within us may not yet appear harmful, but it can eventually develop into overt bitterness.

Based on Targum Yonatan, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech adds a penetrating insight: “The beginning of sin is sweet, but its end is bitter like wormwood.” The danger of unhealthy desires is precisely that they do not necessarily taste bitter at first. If destructive choices were immediately repulsive, resisting them would be relatively easy. Instead, instant gratification can offer an initial sweetness that conceals the bitterness contained within its hidden root.

This explains why the Torah directs our attention specifically to the root. Long before a harmful pattern becomes firmly established, it may begin with a seemingly insignificant thought, attraction, or craving that we allow ourselves to nurture. Just as the quality of a plant depends upon what grows beneath the soil, the choices that eventually shape our lives are nourished by what we cultivate within our hearts.

The challenge, then, is not simply to reject what is obviously bitter. It is to recognize the hidden roots of our desires before they have had a chance to bear fruit. We need to learn to distinguish between the fleeting sweetness of instant gratification and the deeper sweetness of what truly nourishes us. How, then, can we reorient our desires to what is genuinely good and choose what ultimately nourishes us?

How Can Bitterness Become a Source of Healing, Spurring Us to Choose Life?

The healing properties associated with bitter herbs add a fascinating dimension to the spiritual symbolism of wormwood. Although unpleasant to our palate, they have long been valued for their cleansing and healing properties. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, bitter herbs are associated with clearing heat and toxins, drying excess dampness, and supporting the body’s natural processes of elimination. Western herbal traditions likewise use bitters particularly to stimulate appetite and support digestion.

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), the plant generally identified with לענה/la'anah, is a striking example. It has traditionally been used to stimulate appetite and support digestion. Modern research has also identified compounds in wormwood with potential anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties.

Just as physical bitterness can have a cleansing effect, the bitterness we experience in life can sometimes become a catalyst for spiritual cleansing and healing. As long as everything seems sweet, we may have little motivation to examine the roots from which our choices are growing. Only when we taste their bitter consequences do we become aware that something within us needs to change.

Hardships and disappointments can therefore awaken us to places where we may have gone astray. We do not seek suffering, yet when difficulties come, they can prompt us to examine our priorities, reconsider values we may have unconsciously absorbed, and uproot patterns that no longer serve our *avodat Hashem*. This concept is especially meaningful as we read *Parashat Nitzavim* in preparation for Rosh Hashanah, during the season of teshuvah. We are invited to reconsider what we have come to experience as sweet and bitter. Have we developed a taste for values that do not truly nourish our souls? Have the challenges of the past year revealed any bitter roots that need to be uprooted? Through teshuvah, even the bitter taste of recognizing where we have gone astray can become part of the awakening and cleansing process that returns us to what truly nourishes our souls.

Thereby, we can retrain our spiritual taste buds to desire what genuinely nourishes us, discerning the true sweetness of light and life from the illusory sweetness that ultimately leads to bitterness and darkness. We can then truly choose life, as *Parashat Nitzavim* culminates: “I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse; you shall choose life” (*Devarim* 30:19).

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