

Bitter Prescription (Beshalach)

No matter how bad things get you got to go on living, even if it kills you. -Sholom Aleichem

“S’iz shver tzu zain a Yid” a popular Yiddish saying, meaning “It’s tough to be a Jew,” gave little solace to those confronting whatever difficulties their Judaism brought them. Throughout most of Jewish history we have accounts of how tough and bitter it is, from harrowing stories of death, destruction, and persecution to the less dramatic existential issues of Jewish practice.

After the Children of Israel leave the enslavement of Egypt and cross the miraculously split sea, they walk in the desert for a few days. Thirsting for water, they are thankful when they reach a stream, only to be further disheartened to find the water bitter, undrinkable. Moses is commanded to take a tree (apparently also bitter) and place it in the stream. Miraculously, this combination turned the water sweet and drinkable.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the *Kli Yakar* (1550-1619), on Exodus 15:26, believes that God wanted to teach the new nation a particular lesson from their bitter (pun intended) experience. He wanted to teach that He is ultimately a healer, and that medicine and the healing process is not always sweet. The medicine is His Torah, His commandments to the people of Israel, and it is filled with challenges and strictures that at first may seem tough, bitter. But just as we must trust our doctors when they prescribe something distasteful, so too, we must trust God that at the end of our following His instructions, even if we don’t fully understand them or how it works, there will be healing, happiness and a sweet reward.

May we trust the heavenly doctor, learn his prescriptions, and may all our bitterness be turned to sweetness.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of our 21 soldiers who were killed in Gaza this week, including Yuval Lopez hy”d of Alon Shvut and originally Peru.