

Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Ki Tisa / פרשת כי תשא / 5778

Sweetening the Bitter

In the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe dramatically intercedes on behalf of the Jewish people. His prayer opens with the words “*va-Yehal Moshe*” or, “and Moshe pleaded.” However, the midrash notes that this unique formulation encodes another meaning as well:¹

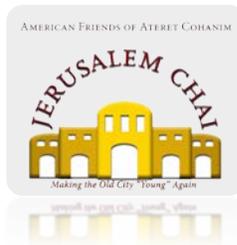
“*va-yehal*” is a language of “sweetening” (*hilui*). How is this so? R. Berechia... in the name of R. Shmuel b. Nahman said, once the Jews arrived at Marah [where the water was bitter] ... Moshe thought in his heart ‘why was this water created, what benefit is it to the world? It would have been better if it would not have been created.’ God knew what was in his heart and said to him ‘Do not say this. Everything in my world was created for a purpose. I will teach you how you are supposed to [respond to seemingly superfluous items] – you should say ‘[God], make the bitter sweet’... Once the Jews came to the desert and God wanted to destroy them Moshe said to God... ‘did you not teach me to pray that the bitter become sweet? So, too, now, sweeten the bitterness of the Jewish people.’

Moshe’s prayer was based on the lesson that God taught him at Marah. Instead of seeking to remove or destroy the bitter elements of this world, God’s true desire is that we pray and actively work towards sweetening and transforming them into something sweet.

Rav Kook saw this ability to transform and not annihilate the bitter as one of the central characteristics of the messianic era. In one of his most seminal public addresses delivered at a memorial ceremony for Hertzl, Rav Kook outlined what he saw as the historical role of secular Zionism. However, at the end of the speech, he cited a passage from the Zohar that is one of the sources underlying his whole approach:²

¹ Shemot Rabbah 43:3.

² “The Lamentation in Jerusalem,” translation from <http://shaalvim.co.il/torah/maayan-article.asp?backto=27&ed=%E2%EC%E9%E5%EF%20%FA%EE%E5%E6%20%FA%F9%F2%E2&id=776>.



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The head of the academy in the palace of Messiah said, “Whoever does not transform darkness to light and bitterness to sweetness, may not enter here.”

Rav Kook then concluded his speech with the following statement:

The prerequisite for the generation of Messiah is the ability to utilize all forces, even the most coarse, for the sake of good and the singular sanctity with which Israel were crowned.

Thus, according to Rav Kook, Moshe’s approach in this week’s parsha has a particularly acute relevance for our generation.

This characteristic of Moshe and Mashiach is highlighted by the city of Yerushalayim. As the seat of the Beit ha-Mikdash, it is the place of atonement for sins and the re-embrace of sinners. As the point of pilgrimage for “the tribes of Israel”³ it receives and allows for interaction between various groups that might otherwise stay in isolation and develop negative views about each other. As “the joy of the entire world,”⁴ the city has a place within it for everyone.

May we merit to see our city sweeten even the most bitter elements of our reality.

³ Tehillim 122:4.

⁴ Tehillim 43:3.