

The Hidden Link Between Refa'einu and the Exodus

Refa'einu: Prayer, Sefirah and Healing from Trauma



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Let me now quote this great discussion about healing from Rabbi Forman and Imu Shalev.

I want to actually begin with the blessing right before that, which begins with “re’eh vaenyenu” [“see our affliction”] and ends with “go’al yisrael” [redeemer of Israel], when we ask God to look at our suffering and we pray to God as a redeemer of Israel.

Behold our affliction and champion our cause, and redeem us speedily for the sake of Thy Name.
Blessed are You, Lord, Redeemer of Israel.

The blessing before Refainu, it’s sort of like you can see “re’eh na v’onyeinu” as sort of a running jump, a lead-up to Refainu. So, what’s Re’eh na v’onyainu about? God should see our affliction, He should redeem us?

Rabbi Fohrman: So, on the one level, that’s a personal request, right? We’re saying to God that we’re maybe going through hard times as a nation, maybe going through hard times as an individual, and we’re looking for God to help us out.

But that prayer doesn’t come out of nowhere; it comes out of a certain kind of grounding, something historical which gives it a great deal of power, a great deal of hidden power. And to see that, let’s play a little game: let’s go back to the Chumash and try to ask ourselves where, if anywhere, in the Chumash, in the Bible, does this kind of language appear. So if we look at the language of that blessing, re’eh nah vaenyenu v’rivah rivenu, look at our suffering, look at our

oppression, and to take up our cause as it were, and the blessing ends with God as redeemer of Israel. So, Imu, if I asked you what event does that remind you of in the Torah, where did God do that, what would you say?

Imu: So, “go’el,” for me, “geulah,” [redemption], the quintessential geulah, the quintessential redemption, is yetziat mitzrayim [the Exodus from Egypt]. And I see this word “go’el chazak atah” [You are a powerful redeemer], and that reminds me of the “yad hachazakah,” “God’s strong hand,” God as a strong redeemer. So, perhaps Exodus? And then at the beginning of the blessing you have “re’eh vaenyenu,” which is our suffering, and I’m pretty sure that word shows up all over the Exodus.

Rabbi Fohrman: Sure, the part of the word for “slavery” is “inui,” right, “suffering.” And again, that’s gonna go all the way back to the very first time that slavery in Egypt is foreshadowed in the Torah, all the way back to Genesis 15, the famous story of the brit bein habetarim, the Covenant between the Pieces, when God comes out of the clouds and strangely tells Abraham, “yadoah todah ki ger yihyeh zaracha b’eretz lo lahem va’avadam v’inu otam arba meot shana.” [“Your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed 400 years.”]

Imu: Right, “v’inu otam” [“and they will be oppressed”]

Rabbi Fohrman: They’re going to be enslaved — but not just enslaved, “v’inu otam,” they’re going to be oppressed, they’re going to be afflicted, for 400 years. I think you’re right. And just to go to those texts, on the one hand you have the notion of God as redeemer. We drink four cups of wine — what do those four cups of wine remind us of? Of four leshanot, four expressions that God used to denote taking us out of Egypt, the third of which was, God says “v’ga’alti etchem” — “I will redeem you.”

As you, I think, correctly point out, God is a “go’el chazak” [“strong redeemer”] — He over and over again, for some strange reason, speaks of Himself as redeeming us with a mighty arm and an outstretched fist, or whatever it is, right? “B’zroah netuyah” and “yad chazakah.” And so, “go’el chazak” sounds like the kind of redeemer which God reveals Himself to be in Exodus. But the real kicker, as you yourself point out, is that language of “oni,” of suffering, in the beginning, which is unmistakably the Exodus, not just because of the brit bein habetarim, but because of the pairing of seeing together with suffering. Right? So let me ask you, Imu, right — where do you have the notion of God not just relating to our suffering but specifically seeing our suffering?

Imu: So I think, if I remember, there’s a verse where Pharaoh dies and the people call out to God for the first time, and there’s this really weird thing where God actually, He says He hears their “na’akatam” [“their moaning”], I think — he hears them crying out, and then it says that He sees, He sees their suffering, right? He sees —

Rabbi Fohrman: So actually, let’s go to the verses, and we’ll quote it —

Rabbi Fohrman: It’s really kind of remarkable. So, yeah, why don’t you take it away from Exodus 2 verse 24? Or actually, 23 is where you start, where I’m quoting from.

Imu: Right. So, basically the king of Egypt dies, “vayenchu b’nei yisrael min ha’avodah,” “they sigh from the work,” “vayizaku,” “they cry out,” “vata’al shavatim el haelokim min ha’avodah,” “their cries go up to the master, to God, from their work,” “vayishmah elokim et na’akatam,” “and Elokim hears their cries,” “vayizkor elokim et brito,” “and He remembers His covenant” “et

avraham, v'et yitzchak, v'et ya'akov" [{"with} Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob"], "vayar elokim et b'nei yisrael v'yeidah elokim," "and God sees Israel and He knows."

Rabbi Fohrman: And your tone of voice there, I think, indicates the sense of the verse — there's something sort of silently emphatic about that "vayedah elokim" ["and God knows"], because the mystery is, what does He know? Right? It doesn't say what He knows. Usually when you know, you know something, it's a transitive verb. But here it's just "He knows," right? What does He know?

Imu: Right. It's also, I feel like if I didn't have that, right, if it just said God heard their cries, He remembered His covenant, and then there's this new verse where there are two pieces that I don't feel like I need. One is, "and God sees Israel" — if I didn't know, if I just had the last verse, I wouldn't need Him to see anything — and on top of that, He knows something. So I don't know what's going on there.

Rabbi Fohrman: It's a mix of cognitive perception and sense perception, right? Sense perception is hearing and seeing; cognitive perception is remembering and knowing. In both cases, there's a far and near. Right? When I hear, I can hear something from afar, but when I see it, it's right in front of me. Begins with hearing, it goes to seeing. When I remember something, I recollect something from afar, something that happened a long time ago.

But when I know it, I know it now. Right? And there's a sense of, how do we come to know things, if you think about it. The relationship between the sense perception and the cognitive perception is that generally speaking, the way we come to know things in this world is through our senses. Our senses are our spies — they gather data, they bring them into our mind, our mind collects it, and knows. So God knows. What does He know? He knows everything that He heard, He knows everything He remembers, He knows everything that He sees. And what happens when you know that way? So, you and I have talked about this a lot in the past — I think this is really the moment of God sort of empathetic being with us, the sense that when I really know, I get it. Right? I come to understand or identify with what's going on. It's in the forefront of my mind, I get it, I know.

And the very next verse is action. The very beginnings of redemption — it's the blessing of "go'el yisrael" — the geulah begins with Exodus chapter 3 with the very next words of the text. And the very next verse, "umoshe hayah roeh et tzon yitro chotno kohen midyan" ["And Moses, watching the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, a priest of Midian"]. Moshe is ambling along, having a very fine life in Midian, and all of a sudden, bang, "vayerah malach hashem elav," an angel comes out to him and there's this vision of this burning bush, Moshe's attention is grabbed, God introduces Himself, and what is the first thing that God says to Moshe after He introduces Himself as God? Take a look at chapter 3 verse 7: "vayomer hashem," "and God said," "raoh raiti et oni ami asher b'mitzrayim." There it is. "I have seen the suffering of My people in Egypt." There it is.

Imu: I didn't even know you were going there! I thought we were going to do some loosey-goosey connection in the previous verse with God saw, what did He see, He saw our suffering, and that's where re'eh [seeing], but no! Black on white in the verse. "Raoh raiti et oni ami" ["I have seen the suffering of My people"]. So "re'eh na b'oniyenu" ["please see our suffering"] is right out of this verse.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right out of this verse, yeah. And it's as if the sages are identifying that as the beginning of the process of geulah. It begins here, right? This is where it all begins, where God says here's what I've seen: I've seen the suffering of My people and I will not stand by any longer. And

look at how the verse ends: “yadati et machavav,” right? “I have come to know their pain.” When did we have that before? End of chapter 2, right? God knows, right? And then God is basically telling Moses, I get this. I see what’s going on, I understand it, I understand the depth of pain, I get this. And therefore verse 8, “vaered l’hatzilo,” I’m gonna take them out of Egypt, this is the plan, “ulha’aloto min ha’aretz,” I’m gonna take them all the way to the land of milk and honey.

Imu: So, putting it all together, it seems like this is actually what chazal [the rabbinic sages of the Talmudic era] are doing, is they’re reading this chapter, these two chapters, 2 and 3, and they’re saying, what’s a really good prayer template for us if we’re ever in difficult straits? Well, in chapter 2 you have Israel crying out to God. What does God do? We know the end of the story — He hears their suffering, understands their suffering, He empathizes with it, and He puts together a master plan to actually save them from it. He becomes the redeemer, He follows through, He answers the prayer. So chazal say, what a great prayer — God, can You do what You did back in Exodus chapters 2 and 3?

Rabbi Fohrman: That’s exactly what we’re saying.

Imu: That’s the prayer.

Rabbi Fohrman: And that’s the “re’eh na b’onyenu.” Look at that extra word. What word have we added between the words of the verse, “va’yar et onyenu” [“and saw our suffering”]? One simple word, which is?

Imu: “Na” [“please”].

Rabbi Fohrman: Please. We’re asking God “please.” We have a request, which is, we are rooting this in history. We’re not coming out of nowhere, where we’re asking You to look at our suffering, to look at our pain, and to redeem us from whatever personal troubles or natural troubles we find ourselves in. We know this is who You are — it’s written there in the book. We’re just going back in our history. You’ve proven yourself as the being who’s kind of made good on a promise. You made a promise here in Exodus 3, and You fulfilled it.

Imu: Very good. So, we see how “re’eh v’onyenu,” one piece of the Shmoneh Esrei, comes from the Chumash. And I’m assuming that your theory will extend to Refa’einu, the very next bracha.

So, what I want to do in the final minutes of this first kind of session with you is take us into the next blessing of Shmoneh Esrei, kind of the mystery of Refa’einu. If the Sages are clearly alluding to events in Biblical history, events in yetziat mitzrayim, in the blessing of “re’eh na v’onyenu,” are they continuing to do that in the blessing of Refa’einu hashem v’nerapei hoshienu v’nevasheya” [“heal us, God, and we shall be healed; save us and we shall be saved”]. So, let me actually take that phrase, maybe let’s just translate it, Imu — that beginning phases of the healing blessing. Refa’einu hashem v’nerapei,” “heal us that we may be healed,” “hoshienu v’nevasheya,” “save us that we may be saved.” Now, you and I are going to focus a lot on healing and what that means, but let’s look at the second line of that blessing. “Save us and allow us to be saved.” So, Imu, let me ask you again — “save us and allow us to be saved” — put your Biblical hat back on. If I had to say to you, where in the Five Books of Moses do we have God revealed in this kind of way, as a savior, as someone who we can scream “save us” and God is there and He saves us, is there an event that comes to mind in the Torah where that becomes clear?

Imu: So, I’m gonna be a jerk for a second and sidestep your neat little target you painted for me to answer, and I’ll answer you this way: if I were reading the bracha of Refa’einu on my own, I never

would have thought that it comes from anywhere. I look at Refa'einu and I'm like, well, that doesn't remind me of anything, there's not a lot of healing in Egypt, but "hoshienu v'nevasheya," sure, you know, that sounds a lot like "vayosha hashem vayom hahu" ["and God saved on that day"], which is right after the splitting of the sea, it declares that God has saved us, and this is what we say every day, right before we say az yashir [section of morning prayers recalling the splitting of the sea and the song of rejoicing sung thereafter]. It's very clear God has saved us, and even if I continue in Refa'einu, right, now we have "veha'aleh refuah shelemah l'kol makoteinu" ["bring complete healings to all our wounds"], right — the makkot [wounds], the Ten Plagues [makkot] come to mind right here.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yup. And that's puzzling, by the way, the "makoteinu" ["our wounds"], because in the Exodus, the makkot don't seem to inflict —

Imu: Right, nobody healed any makkot in the Exodus.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right, and we were the victims of makkot, because "makoteinu" means "our makkot," "our plagues," right — it was our enemies who were the victims of the plagues. So you're right, the makkot do seem to recall the plagues, but it's strange, it's a kind of inverse there. But I think you're absolutely right about "hoshienu v'nevasheya." "Hoshienu v'nevasheya" in Biblical text, it's gonna also be lifted right out of the Exodus, right out of the story of the splitting of the sea, which as you say, "vayosheh Hashem vayom hahu," "and God saved us on that day." That becomes "hoshienu v'nevasheya," "save us and allow us to be saved." And there was precedent for that. We cried out to God at the sea, God responded by saving us, we're crying out to God now, "hoshienu v'nevasheya," and save us. And now, even before we get to the Refa'einu part of this blessing, there's an interesting kind of bookends out there that kind of emerge here. If you think about these two blessings, "re'eh na v'oniyenu" and "go'al yisrael" on one hand and Refa'einu hashem v'nerafei, hoshienu v'nevasheya" on the other hand, we see that they both reference the Exodus from Egypt, but they reference two vastly different points in the Exodus from Egypt. Right? "Re'eh na v'oniyenu" was what moment in the Exodus?

Imu: Right at the beginning. It's in the midst of their suffering.

Rabbi Fohrman: Midst of their suffering. It's the very beginning of God's involvement. For 400 years God has been silent, and now all of a sudden here is God, right, coming down and responding to Israel, that sighed and cried out to God, and the first thing He says, the very first thing He says, is "raiti et oni ami asher b'mitzrayim," "I have seen the suffering of My people." And that becomes "see our suffering." And then the very next blessing is the culmination of that process, when God finally makes good on that process. When have we finally been redeemed? We don't really know it's real until we see the dead bodies of the Egyptians of that army that pursued us at the moment of the splitting of the sea. So there are both canons here. Those two blessings, right, contain the very beginning of the redemptive process and the very end of the redemptive process, seemingly. Right? The promise of the burning bush on the one hand, blessing number one, and the splitting of the sea and the victory of that moment in blessing number two, "hoshienu v'nevasheya." Leading us, really, to the 64,000 dollar question: what, then, is the first part of that second blessing, Refa'einu hashem v'nerafei hoshienu v'nevasheya" — "heal us and allow us to be healed" —

Imu: Right, I don't remember a whole lot of healing at the splitting of the sea.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah. It doesn't sound like that's what God was doing at the splitting of the sea, right? It doesn't sound like there was healing at all in the Exodus process. And what Ami noticed,

and I kind of know this concurrently, and, you know, you and I have talked about it, is that there actually is a moment of healing. We don't think about it as the Exodus, but maybe what the sages are telling us with a wink and a nod is that the climax of the Exodus actually wasn't the splitting of the sea; it was the event that took place right after that. A healing kind of event. But they seem to lump together with the splitting of the sea, which is strange, because it's not the way you and I would realize. And I'm referring, now, to the very next event, right, which conventionally, we normally read it as, okay, the Exodus from Egypt is all over and we're moving on and we're going through Sinai, we're starting with our 40 years in the desert — the very first thing that happens —

Imu: I think if you — it's strange that if you're stressing that the climax is not the splitting of the sea but the event that happens right afterwards, I imagine that most of our listeners' minds are going blank for a second. The event that happened right after the splitting of the sea...

Rabbi Fohrman: What event happened after the splitting of the sea? Is it just like Amalek?

Imu: What is he talking about?

Rabbi Fohrman: Like, what is that event? The truth is, it's like a downer event, right? It's this really crazy events. The Israelites go through the desert for three days, they can't find water, they get to this oasis, right, only to find that it's bitter. And they scream to Moshe, they're upset, and Moshe asks God, you know, what's going on, God says don't worry, and He gives him this tree and he throws the tree in the water, the water becomes sweet. At the very end of that episode, God makes a little speech, and at the very end of the speech, He says that all the sickness that I have placed upon Egypt, "lo asimalach," "I will not place upon you." You hear those words that come out of the blue — "v'ani hashem, rofecha" — "because I am God, your healer." This is the only moment —

Imu: Bingo!

Rabbi Fohrman: That's it, right? This is the only moment in the entire Five Books of Moses, to my knowledge, that God specifically refers to Himself as a healer, when God says this is who I am, I am a healer. And the sages seem to be wrapping this up together with the splitting of the sea, which as I said to you is the first great mystery of Refa'einu. These events seem like they have nothing to do with each other. It's like, okay, the Exodus is over, clap clap clap, right? Think about it, Imu. Think about all the Hollywood portrayals of the Exodus, right? Where do they end?

Imu: We've already — we've faded to black here at this point. The scene has been finished completely and the sages, like you say, are totally tying them together. In fact, most of the recountings of the Exodus — I can't remember any of them, not The Ten Commandments, The Prince of Egypt, that even include this scene.

Rabbi Fohrman: The Prince of Egypt ends with the Israelites dancing off into the sunlight and Whitney Houston singing her song about miracles with the splitting of the sea and the fish and the drama, right? If you go to Universal Studios and they take you on that ride through the splitting of the sea from The Ten Commandments, nobody has the bitter oasis on the other side.

Imu: The bitter water.

Rabbi Fohrman: It's just not there! We barely remember it. And yet the sages seem to say you can't talk about the splitting of the sea, "hoshienu v'nevasheya," without talking about Refa'einu hashem v'nerafei." They are bound up together with each other, which is strange. You know, you

read the story of the Exodus, it seems to be over, and the sages say it ain't over. There's another part of this story.

And it's the strange story of marah [bitter], which is part of the climax. Okay, Imu, so we've got this incredible mystery here, right? The sages, in writing this prayer of Refa'einu, are bundling together two events that don't seem like they're bundled. Here's this prayer, which, it was centuries of Jews over the ages, from people in the emergency room praying for their loved ones to, you know, the smallpox and [35:00] the black death and just all of the dark moments in all of humankind's history, in all of our history — this is the prayer that the sages put together to speak about God as our healer, and it all comes back to this Biblical source.

What I'd like to do with you in our next podcast together on this is actually to take a deep dive into that story of marah. It feels to me like it is worth exploring this time when God Himself speaks of Himself as a healer. I think if we look at the story of marah carefully, we may find hidden dimensions of what it means to speak of God as our healer. I think the answer to the secret will be found in marah. Marah is, as I think we'll see, is a very strange story. It's one of the stories that's pithy, it's short, it's five or six verses long, but it's got questions up the wazoo.

And the question I would leave our listeners with as they ponder this and before they press play in the next episode of this podcast is, you know, take some time to go back to Exodus 15, just read through those five or six verses and ask yourself, what's strange about this? Clear your mind, pretend you've never seen the verses before, and just read it for the first time, just say gee, what's strange here, what is odd? Can you kind of catalogue those things? Do that, and come back with prepared notes. That's exactly what Imu and I are gonna do — we're just gonna go through the verses, what seems strange about them? Let's look at those questions, and I think if we put those questions together, they'll kind of beckon us towards a way of seeing the notion of God as healer, which I think is at once surprising and rich. So, Imu, that's what I think we have in store for us in our next session together, and I'm looking forward to that.

Imu: As am I. Thank you, Rabbi Fohrman, I think that's very exciting homework — don't skip it, you should definitely look at these verses yourself. I'll also say, it may not feel like it right now, but this is a course on Sefirat Haomer, and I'm hoping that it will have important implications for those of us struggling during this coronavirus. So, hang tight — I promise there's great payoff. Rabbi Fohrman, thanks so much for doing this with me.

Rabbi Fohrman: Thank you.

Bitter Water Made Sweet

Exo 15:22 And Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water.

Exo 15:23 And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, because it was bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah.

Exo 15:24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?

Exo 15:25 And he cried to Jehovah. And Jehovah showed him a tree. And when he had cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet. There He made a decree and a law for them, and there He tested them.

Exo 15:26 And he said, If you will carefully listen to the voice of Jehovah your God, and will do that which is right in His sight, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His Laws, I will put none of these diseases upon you, which I have brought upon the Egyptians; for I am Jehovah who heals you.

Exo 15:27 And they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water, and seventy palm trees. And they camped there by the waters.

A Closer Look at the Bitter Waters of Marah

Previously on Refa'einu: Prayer, Sefirah and Healing from Trauma...

Rabbi Fohrman and I started this series with an attempt to understand the Shmoneh Esrei blessing of Refa'einu. We suggested that Refa'einu would have strong spiritual implications for us in this new world of Covid-19, and, also, strangely, that it could help us understand sefirat ha'omer. But before we get to Covid and Sefira, we need to explore that blessing of Refa'einu and understand its depths. Upon reading Refa'einu, we suggested that it points us to two mini-stories at the very end of redemption in Egypt: the story of the splitting of the sea, and, oddly, the story that comes right after it: the bitter waters of marah.

And so...we're ready to dive into those two episodes, and see if we can understand just why Chazal thought that these are not only connected, but also that they give us the perfect template for praying for health. Let's jump in.

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Rabbi Fohrman: Hey folks, welcome back. This is Rabbi David Fohrman, with my compadre-in-arms Imu Shalev. Imu, are you there?

Imu: I am, and excited!

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, fantastic. And, Imu, when we last met up, we were talking about the prayer of Refa'einu ["heal us"] in Shmoneh Esrei [the central prayer of the three daily services], and we suggested that it was anchored in this Biblical text of Marah [bitterness], what the rabbis seem to see as a kind of coda, a kind of culmination of the victory at the sea, somehow, by the strange story of the bitter waters. And when we last got together, you and I suggested that we would kind of take a deep dive into the story of marah, sort of read it through, and just ask ourselves whatever questions came to mind, sort of erase our minds of anything we knew about the story and try to notice the oddities in the story. So, if you're ready for that, I'm game. What say you?

Imu: I need a few minutes! No no, I'm ready. Let's jump in!

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, sounds good. So here we are — let's take us through. Why don't you read, and as you read through this, feel free to stop at anything that strikes you as odd, and interject, and stand up in your chair and wave your hands and scream.

Imu: Fantastic, I'm good at that. Where do you want me to start from?

Rabbi Fohrman: Why don't you start from Exodus chapter 15 verse 20?

Imu: Okay. So, the very last verse, verse 19, is the final verse of az yashir [the Song of the Sea] and verse 20 begins “vaticach miriam haneviah achot aharon et hatof b'yadah,” Miriam the Prophetess, the sister of Aaron, takes the drum or the timbrel, tambourine, in her hand, “vateztana chol hanashim achareha,” all the women go out following her, “betupim u'vmecholot,” with their own timbrels and dancing. “Vatamahem Miriam,” Miriam sort of answers to them or calls out to them, “shiru l'hashem ki gao ga'ah sus v'rochvo ramah bayam.” She seems to pick up a line out of az yashir, she says “sing to God because He is mighty, exalted; horse and chariot have been thrown into the sea.”

Okay, so just a couple of — I get, I have some questions that come up here, right, we have Miriam, who is apparently a prophetess — I don't remember hearing that before, that she's a prophetess, but she's a prophetess here, curious to hear what her prophecies might have been. It's interesting that she's identified here as “achot Aharan,” she's the sister of Aaron — if I were identifying her here and telling you how great she is, I'd tell you she's the sister of Moshe, who's been the star of the show up until now. She takes some drum, some timbrel, and the women follow her, but my question is why? Why is this a part of the story here? We had Moshe do a song, and all of a sudden Miriam has her own song, and all the women follow her? What's going on with that, why do the women do something different?

Rabbi Fohrman: Right. And, you know, we talked about some of the questions before, and one of the things I think you had pointed out is that you have other songs of thanksgiving in the Bible, this isn't the only one — we don't find men and women splitting up. We even find a song of thanksgiving led by a woman, where women and men seem to sing together — the song of Deborah in the Book of Judges after her victory against the forces of Sisera. This seems to be unique. Right? This notion of, that the women have to do their own song. And it's not a different song; it's just a piece of the men's song. And so why is it even necessary?

Imu: Right. “Az vata'an lahem,” which is the strange word or maybe I'm not familiar, but usually “vata'an” is “you answer,” but no one asked a question. So she's sort of answering to them — maybe the people have some implicit question?

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, that's kind of interesting, isn't it, right? “Vata'an” — over here the English from JPS 1917 translates it as “she chanted for them,” but you're right — literally it means “answer,” which leads to the great \$64,000 issue, which was, what was the question?

Imu: Right?

Rabbi Fohrman: Was there some kind of question? Yup. Okay, go ahead.

Imu: Okay, and then, seemingly we have our fade-to-black moment, and then the scene ends and we begin a new scene in verse 22: “vayasah moshe et yisrael miyam suf,” Moshe, he leads the people and journeys them from the Red Sea, “vayeitzu el midbar shur,” and they go out towards the wilderness of Shur. “Vayachu shloshet yamim bamidbar,” and they go three days in the desert, “valo

matzu mayim,” and they do not find any water. “Vayavo umarasa,” they come to a place called Marah, “valo yechu lishtot mayim im marah, ki marim hem,” they weren’t able to drink water from Marah because apparently the waters were bitter. “Al ken kara shema marah,” and therefore this place was called “Marah,” bitterness. “Vayilonu ha’am al moshe lemor mah nishteh,” the people complain on Moshe, saying, hey, what are we gonna drink? “Vayitzak el hashem,” seemingly Moshe is the one who calls out to God, “vayorehu hashem etz,” and God shows him a stick or a tree, “etz” is a tree — “vayishlech al hamayim,” and he casts it off into the water, “vayimteku hamayim,” and the water becomes sweet.

“Sham sam lo chok umishpat,” there, law, right — “chok” and “mishpat” are interesting, two different words for “law,” right, decree and law, “v’sham nisa hu,” and there He tested them, perhaps. “Vayomer im shamo et hatishma et kol hashem elokecha,” and He said ‘If you hear, if you really listen to the voice of God,’ “vayeshav enav ta’aseh,” and you do what is just or straight in His eyes, “vahazanta lamitzvotav,” and you really hear, right — so this is another word for “listening,” this one from the word “ozen,” “to hear,” you will hear His commandments, “v’shamarta kol chukav,” and you keep His ordinances, “kol hamachala,” all of the disease, the sickness, “asher tzanti b’mitzrayim,” which God apparently put on Egypt, “lo asim alacha,” I will not place upon you, “ki ani hashem rofecha,” because I, God, am your healer.

I have lots of questions!

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, alright, as do I. So, you know, pretty short story, seven verses-ish. But jam-packed with a lot of questions. And I’m actually just gonna steal the floor for one second, and then I’ll give the floor to you. But, you know, one question is, okay, Imu, how long can you go without water, right? About three days, right? And that’s what these people did. So you’ve gotta think, you’re pretty thirsty by the time you get there. I mean, presumably the people used up the water from their canteens on the three-day journey to the Yam Suf [Red Sea] in the first place. So they’re really pretty thirsty. Now, if you saw an oasis, right, so, bless the Lord, there’s this oasis in the distance and everyone wants the water, and it’s bitter, but you haven’t drunk for three days. What would you do?

Imu: Right. It’s sort of like, oh, this isn’t my filtered water, right? I won’t have tap.

Rabbi Fohrman: Someone put too much lemon in the Perrier, you know? It’s like, you haven’t drunk for three days! Drink the water! Right? Why are the people so finicky? It sounds like a strange thing. If you said the waters were poisonous, I get it. If you said that the waters were brackish and they were sewage, I mean — something, right? Undrinkable. But we don’t usually think of bitterness as a deal-breaker when it comes to water — as a matter of fact, one might even argue that nowadays a little bit of bitterness in water, you pay more for that, for the lime twist in your margarita. So what’s the deal here? It just seems like a strange response, that they can’t drink the water because it’s bitter, of all things. Anyway, so that’s my question. Go ahead, what do you have to say?

Imu: Yeah, I wouldn’t have even thought of that — that’s a really intriguing question. But even taking it at face value, that, like, the water was undrinkable, to me it’s upsetting. Like, this story’s upsetting. We just had shirat hayam [the Song of the Sea], it was this epic climax, and I’m kind of upset at everybody, right? Upset at God, to some extent, right? Like, you just left Egypt, you’re all on a high — and there’s no water? Why wouldn’t water be provided? Why do they go three days,

these ex-slaves, been through plenty of trauma — just give them some Poland Spring, and you know, maybe test them in a few weeks!

Rabbi Fohrman: Right. In other words, this is the high point, right, of God's relationship with the people. You can't think of a better moment, right? The people have just sung this song — and remember, right before this, “vaya'aminu bahashem uvemoshe avdo,” the text comes out, it comes out of the blue and says “and they believed in God and they believed in Moshe,” so it's this wonderful kumbaya moment, everyone is singing. If you're God, you've gotta feel pretty good about the people now, and it's like — no, surprise quiz! Like, a test! And what am I gonna do? I'm gonna lead you, go for three days without water, only to find an oasis, and if you just stop right there, if you're, you know, Israelite Joe, and you're on your way and you go three days without water and you've been good, right? You haven't said anything, you haven't complained yet — you're, like, literally on the brink of dying of thirst but you've maintained your faith.

And there you see in the distance the palm trees, you see the oasis. What do you think of yourself? You're thinking, oh my goodness, you know, I was just in this moment, I wasn't sure but I placed myself in His hands and here He is, and I get to the water and it's bitter. Right? So, what do you expect? Of course I'm gonna be upset, right? Like — this is a test? And then God has to come with His magic trick, with the stick and the water and the throw it in — it's just, like, why are you making life hard for me, now that you're through the trees, and I learned something — what did I learn? And so, again, it seems almost capricious of the Almighty to bring them to an oasis. You were leading them through the desert — bring them to an oasis that wasn't bitter! Why make it so hard? What else is problematic?

Imu: I think I'm also kind of annoyed at the people, or perhaps even just the story. And this, I think, is the reason why it doesn't make it into The Ten Commandments, it doesn't make it into The Prince of Egypt — it's like, you made me read verse 20 and 21 before reading marah, and it's just, like, really jarring. They were just dancing and singing and they had just experienced this epic moment we'd all been waiting for at the end of the Exodus, and then all of a sudden there's this mundane story about how there's no water, or the water is bitter, and then the people are complaining.

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, take a look at verse 26.

Imu: Okay, verse 26. God says here, “im shamo'a tishma l'kol Hashem elokecha,” if you follow in the voice of God, and you do what is right in His eyes, and you listen to all of His commands, and you keep all of his chukim, his ordinances, “kol hamachala asher samti b'mitzrayim, lo asim alecha,” then, I will not place any of the sicknesses in which I placed upon Egypt, upon you, “ki ani Hashem rofecha,” because I, God, am your healer.

Verse 26 seems jarring, right? He sort of uses this opportunity almost for an ad hoc advertisement for the laws, which, by the way, we don't seem to have gotten yet. Right? It's like, by the way, did I mention my laws, right? If you follow My laws — we didn't seem to get very many laws yet — then, all the sickness that I placed on Egypt I will not place upon you, because I am God your healer.

What a strange way to end the speech, right? I think there's at least three problems there. Anything bother you about that, Imu? “Kol hamachala asher tzamti b'mitzrayim,” all the sickness that I placed upon Egypt I shall not place upon you, because I am God your healer.

Imu: I mean, there are a few problems. One is, I don't remember any sicknesses in Egypt, unless it's referring to the plagues.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right. The plagues weren't really sicknesses; they were plagues. They were bad things that happened. If hail came down from the heavens, that's not a sickness being placed upon Egypt; it's this problem that Egypt has to face. It wasn't, like, in the people. Now, you could argue the plague of boils might qualify as a sickness, but it seems to be the exception rather than the rule, and it doesn't seem like we hear about any fits of tuberculosis. Could it be the last plague, the smiting of the firstborn? Just, like, hard to understand what's the sickness? You wouldn't have sort of phrased it that way.

Imu: The opposite makes the question stronger, right? If darkness came and then darkness were removed, you wouldn't say, oh, what a great healer, the healer has come and relieved us.

Rabbi Fohrman: And play that out, Imu, right? Imagine you went to your doctor and as you were leaving your doctor, your doctor said by the way, you know, my social media presence is really important — would you mind just rating me five stars, because that would be really helpful for me? So, you know, you say sure, but, you know, you asked him — I'd be happy to, but, like, what do you want me to say in the comments? Like, this is a very quick visit — how am I supposed to say it was, like, such a wonderful thing? Like, what did you do that was so wonderful? And you feel, like, mean to even ask that question.

So Imu, let me show you something. He takes you to another room. He says, in this — the only thing in the room is just this one injection needle, right? And he says, Imu, over here I have one small vial of smallpox that I keep here. Now, I could have injected you with this, but I didn't, okay? That qualifies me as the greatest healer in New Jersey. You wouldn't give that guy five stars, right? That doesn't make you qualify as a healer, because you didn't inject them with something! So, what's even on the face of what God's saying? I will not place the sicknesses of Egypt upon you? I am your great healer. Right? It doesn't make you a great healer!

Imu: I think it's especially bothersome if you consider the fact that the Sages make this our prayer for healing also. It's sort of like, oh, this is, like, I wish that we pulled the prayer for healing from the time where, you know, Israel had a great plague upon them and God waved His magic wand and we were all healed. No. What you're saying makes this really really strong, which is that really the thing we're praying to God for healing us for is for not putting plagues upon us. Not even healing us, but not putting plagues upon us?

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, I mean, I think these are some serious questions for the story. Anything else come to mind that bothers you here?

Imu: You mentioned the law, the fact that, like, I would expect God would say hey, please listen to My laws maybe after Sinai, after we get laws — here there aren't very many.

Rabbi Fohrman: And it also even goes out of the way and sort of says — there's this really strange phrase that's hard to understand in verse 25 here, 15:25, right? "Vayitzak el hashem vayorehu hashem etz vayishlech al hamayim," God shows him this tree, casts it into the water, "vayimteku hamayim," the water becomes sweet, "sham sam lo chok umishpat, v'sham nisa hu."

Imu: Oh, that's a good point.

Rabbi Fohrman: What does that mean, right? That little throwaway phrase at the end of that — “there God placed for him” — seemingly “him” would be Israel — “chok umishpat,” laws. Right? So the question is, what’s the meaning of that? Now, you have commentators struggling with that because it doesn’t sound like they got any laws here. So the Tamud says, well, maybe they heard about shabbat here. Maybe they heard about parah adumah [red heifer] here. But in the peshuta shemikra, the face value of it, it’s just strange, because you hear that they’re hearing about law, but they don’t seem to be hearing about law. So that’s a strange thing also. Right?

And then, also, what does all this in general have to do with law? It’s not like I was talking about before, it’s almost as if you want to paint God as a capricious over here, you might say part of the capriciousness is using a crisis as an advertisement for your laws, when your laws don’t seem to have anything to do with this, right? It’s like, what’s law have to do with it?

Imu: Right, if I were editing this story, I would have included the part where God explicitly says “thou shalt keep My laws about not mixing wool and linen together,” and then the people go and they sew themselves garments of wool and linen, and then there was a plague. And God, you know, God healed them, He says, this one’s on Me, and please keep My laws so that you don’t get sick. Right? That would be a story that I could understand, but that’s not, that doesn’t happen here.

Rabbi Fohrman: Exactly. So, you know, some really strange stuff going on in this story.

Imu: I think, also, just one more thing, which to me is just, like, on the literary level, what are we supposed to make of the fact that there’s a tree and you throw it in the water, and that somehow that solves everything, right?

Rabbi Fohrman: Right, in other words, if you think about it, there could have been any end to this story. If God wants to make a big show of His magical abilities, His alchemic transformations of bitter waters, He could have had three elephants circling in the air and a puff of orange smoke a la The Wizard of Oz, and then Glinda appears, and — you know, there could have been anything, right? Why the tree that you throw in the water and voilá, you got sweet water — one would expect that there’s meaning to that, right? But it doesn’t seem clear what the meaning is.

Imu: And this may even be just a detail question, but I wouldn’t have had the same question if God said to Moshe, you know, tap the water with your stick, and it’ll turn sweet, right? Because that’s the magic trick that Moshe uses for all the plagues, his staff, it hits the water, whatever, and he hits the water later on. But this is a very weird one. It says “vayorehu hashem etz,” and God shows him a tree — “vayorehu” [“He showed him”], also, that word is a word that has the word “Torah” in it as a word of, apparently, right, he somehow has to teach him that there’s a tree or show him, guide him to a tree, he throws the tree in the water, and my brain, you know, kind of, like, has a hard time figuring out how to visualize that — was it a stick? Did he throw a tree in the water?

Rabbi Fohrman: Right, it’s like he uprooted this tree, it’s like he tore this tree out by its roots, and then — right, that would be the image, and then you’ve got this tree dangling with its roots that’s getting hurled into the water. Also, the word “vayashlech” is a very strong word. Right? “Vayashlech” really means “to cast away,” “to hurl.” It doesn’t just mean “to place in the water.” Right? The word “place,” by the way, shows up here in these very words, right? “Sham sam lo chok umishpat.” There God placed for him laws. It wasn’t like Moshe gently placed a tree in the water; he hurled a tree in the water. So, what do we make of all of that?

Imu: This may also be a detail question, but what's strange about that verse that we're reading is, right, if I were ending the verse, I'd end it, you know, "vayorehu hashem etz vayashlech al hamayim vayimteku hamayim." He throws the tree in the water, it gets sweeter. Next verse is sort of like an epilogue: "sham sam lo chok umishpat, v'sham nisa hu." That was the place where he gave them chok and mishpat, He gave them these laws, and there he tested them. But it's all in the same verse, right? It's sort of like, tree goes in the water, water gets sweet, seemingly everything is resolved, but no, in that very same verse, right, there's law. And I would wonder, maybe somehow the end of that verse has to relate to the beginning, somehow the law has to do with throwing the tree in the water. I'd be curious to know how.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yes, it sounds like, if I read you correctly, the fact that all of this is one verse, sounds like there's something about laws, which can't be distinguished from the teaching about this tree. And, so, to that end, the point you made earlier about "vayorehu" being an interesting word, that God showed him the tree, but "vayorehu" also has this connotation of "to teach," right? The same word as Torah, right? So, is there something mysterious going on there about some sort of symbolism of the tree and Torah? This raises a lot of interesting eyebrows, shall we say.

Imu: Cool. You've successfully confused me enough about the story that I feel that I have no clue what happened here.

Rabbi Fohrman: That's right. Okay, good. So, let's move, now, to a second stage, okay? And I think, by the way, for all you guys back at home, this is a helpful hint, kind of when reading a Biblical story and trying to make sense of it in a deeper kind of way, to sort of two passes you can make over a story. The first pass is what we've just done, which is sort of brainstorming questions. For that, it's just easy to kind of let your mind go and just say I've never heard this story before, what's strange about it, put yourself in the shoes of various people, put yourself in the shoes of the people, put yourself in the shoes of Moshe, what seems strange about the story?

And the second pass that's often helpful to do, where you say, okay, that's it for the questions — what about observations? Right? Observations are different than questions. Observations are little oddities along the way. Sometimes textual, right? The stuff going on, it's not so much a question as something that you should notice in the story, that seems like it should at least raise an eyebrow. Let me show you an observation that I think is kind of interesting. There was a reason I had you start from Exodus 15 verse 20, and not two verses later at the beginning of the story, and the reason is because there's stuff that happens at the end of the story of the sea that seems to foreshadow this very next story of Marah, right? Like, as we talked about, the story of the crossing the sea seems like a very different story — it's triumphant, it's climactic, it's this Charlton Heston moment, and then the story of the bitter waters is like this other thing.

But if you look at it from a textual angle, there's these interesting links between these two stories. And one of the great links, of course, is language that appears at the story of the sea, which reappears with the story of Marah. So, Imu, number one, the reason they can't drink the water is because the waters are bitter, but how do you say bitter in Hebrew? Just so happens, mem-resh-yud-mem is the word for bitter. Now, if you vowel-ize that differently, "marim" ["bitter"] doesn't spell "marim," it spells "Miriam."

Imu: Right, that's — her name is mar-yam, her name is bitter waters. Wow!

Rabbi Fohrman: So here you've got this woman who's named Miriam, and what's strange about this is not only is there this unmistakable echo that Miriam becomes mar-yam, it's a strange echo,

because if you had to talk about the tone of Miriam's song, you'd say it's the most joyous, happy moment, the least bitter moment that you could possibly imagine is this joyful song. And yet, two verses later, three verses later, they get to these waters that are described as bitter, it's almost like this transmutation of Miriam's name into its very opposite, into this, this terrible bitterness which the people are experiencing. Now, that doesn't seem coincidental. But what heightens this lack of coincidence —

Imu: As you said that, I realized — I'm just reading the verse — you said, you know, Miriam, bitter waters, and you said that basically it's sort of the opposite, right? Here's this woman's who's named "bitter waters" and she's rejoicing, and I'm reading the end of that verse, verse 20, and she is taking the women with dancing "bitupim uv'mechalot," timbrels and tances, but that word "mechalot," it means "dances" but it also ends up being "sickness." Right? "Machala." It's the same letters, mem chet lamed —

Rabbi Fohrman: It's exactly the same letters.

Imu: — and it means the opposite. Right? The end of this story is sickness, and the beginning of this story it means dance.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yes. It's fascinating. So here in the space of a single verse, verse 20, right, the story of Miriam's exultant song, you have two words, miriam and mecholot, which are going to reappear in the very next story in an opposite way. Miriam is going to become "marim," "bitter," and the dances of "mecholot" are going to become the "kol hamachala asher tzamti b'mitzrayim," all the sickness that I have placed upon Egypt I will not place upon you. So something is strange, something is afoot in the story.

There's this, just incredible whiplash transformation of these two words, and this can't be coincidental. But one of the things it does, I think, is reinforce what we kind of left off in our first podcast, which is this notion that the Sages, in Refa'einu, remember, in the same space that they are referring to hoshienu vanevasheya, the story of the splitting of the sea, in that same phrase they're referring to the story of Marah, "Refa'einu," with God being our healer. And we said it's strange that the Sages would put these two stories together — it's true they're chronologically connected, but they seem so incredibly separate, but what we see is that in the text itself they're not so separate. The Sages were coming from somewhere, right? They saw something happening in this text that made them convinced these aren't two stories, the story of Miriam at the sea and the story of the bitter waters; they're the same story!

Imu: There's something else at the end of verse 21 — is it connected also, the fact that the actual song they sing is "shiru l'hashem ki gao ga'ah sus v'rochva ramahbayam?" ["I will sing to God for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider He has hurled into the sea."] The fact that the horse and chariot were cast into the sea, but that word "rama" also reminds me of "Marah," the place that they end up?

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, isn't that fascinating? Isn't it interesting that the one verse that Miriam chooses to quote — because she could have quoted any verse — the one verse that she chooses to quote from the Song of the Sea just happens to include a word that has the very same letters as the place which they're about to visit, Marah? "Marah," mem-resh-hey. "Ramah," reish-mem-hey. So there's three transpositions: the transposition of Miriam the joyful singer into "marim," the bitter waters; the transformation of "mecholot," the joyful dances, into "machala," the sickness of Egypt, and the literary transformation of "ramah bayam," right, the casting, the hurling of these, of the

forces of Egypt into the sea, right, becomes “marah,” this bitterness. By the way, the hurling, right — what does hurling remind you of?

Imu: Yeah, it recounts the hurling of the tree into the water. Two things are hurled into the water — in the first story you have sus v’rochvo, the charioteer and the horse, and then you have a tree that’s thrown into the water.

Rabbi Fohrman: Exactly. And, by the way, there are a few different synonyms for the hurling of the forces of Egypt into the sea. One of them is “sus v’rochvo ramah bayam,” right —

Imu: “Vayorehu.”

Rabbi Fohrman: Oh, that is interesting, isn’t it. Huh. Yeah, take a look at verse four — Exodus 15 verse four, Imu points out, “markevot parah v’cheylu yara vayam.” Again, another word for “hurl.” Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he casts into the sea, hurled into the sea. Now, “yarah” is phonetically similar to “ramah,” it’s got two out of three of the letters, but it’s not actually the same shoresh, it’s not actually the same root. But it seems like it’s the same root as “vayorehu,” or at least it’s a play off of, right? So later on when God says “vayorehu hashem etz vayishlech al hamayim,” it might be that “vayorehu hashem etz,” God showing him the tree, is a play off of 15:4 back at the splitting of the sea, “markevot parah v’cheylu yara vayam.” It’s almost like there’s these two elements of casting that tree in the water that both hark back to the song at the sea. Right? The hurling of Moshe recalls the ramah bayam, and the “vayorehu hashem etz” textually recalls the “markevot parah v’cheylu yara vayam.”

So the question is, what is it about the hurling of the tree that recalls the hurling of these chariots into the waters? A lot of mysteries, but it seems that these things are deeply connected. Okay. So, Imu, maybe if we can, to kind of tie up our sort of questions and observations into a bow, I’d like to suggest the beginnings of an answer, kind of a keystone clue, which might help all of these strange and disparate things fall into place. And it’s perhaps the most puzzling thing about the story of Marah, although it is the most subtle thing. Frankly, to be perfectly honest, somebody in a class I was teaching noticed this, and it struck me, it’s like, oh my gosh, I can’t even believe that.

Here the people, they get to Marah, chapter 15 verse 23. Now, as we read it, you know, you read it this way, I read it this way, everyone reads the verse this way. “Vayavo umarah,” and they came to Marah, and they couldn’t drink waters from Marah because the waters were bitter. “Al ken kra hma,” that’s why they called it bitter. That’s the way we translate it, right, and that’s the way, even if you look at JPS 1917 over here on Sefaria, that’s the way they translate it: they came to Marah, they couldn’t drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. ‘It was bitter’ clearly means the water of Marah is bitter. But if you look at the Hebrew, it’s not actually so clear that that’s what was bitter. There’s an incredible ambiguity here: “vayavo umarata,” they came to Marah, they couldn’t drink the waters of marah, “ki marim hem.” The first thing to notice is that “hem” is plural, it’s not singular. So the English, it’s not “it” which is a singular thing; it’s plural. Right? Now, you could say that the waters are plural, because technically in Hebrew the word “mayim” is plural. But it doesn’t have to mean that. As a matter of fact, there’s an incredible ambiguity. Let’s actually read the verse literally and sense the ambiguity. “Vayavo marata,” and they came to Marah. “Valo yachlo lishtos mayim mimarah,” and they couldn’t drink water from Marah, “ki marim hem,” because they were bitter. “Al ken kra shma,” because that’s why they called it “Marah.” Now the question is, why couldn’t they drink the water? Because they were bitter. The question is, who’s “they?” Is it the waters, plural, were bitter, but there’s another “they.” The “they” —

Imu: The people.

Rabbi Fohrman: — might just be the people. And if you read the verse carefully, it sounds actually on a second reading like it probably was the people. Because look at how “they” gets used earlier in the verse. “Vayavohu.” “Vayavohu” is really a contraction of two words — “hem” va “u” — and they came to Marah. “Valoyachlu” is really a contraction of two words in Hebrew. “Hem lo yachlu lishtot mayim,” they couldn’t drink the water. What is “they” referring to all the times? The people. And now let’s get to the third “they.” They couldn’t drink — they came to Marah, they couldn’t drink the water, “ki marim hem,” because they were bitter. Who’s “they,” right? It sounds like it’s the people, but it’s unclear.

Imu: That would change everything about the story, if the people were the ones who were bitter, right, maybe the waters themselves weren’t bitter; the people were bitter and somehow their bitterness didn’t allow them to drink the water. I’m not even sure what that would mean, but that changes everything.

Rabbi Fohrman: It does change everything. For example, the question we had about God being capricious. If this were true, God isn’t capricious; he didn’t lead them to bitter waters. He led them to waters that were perfectly fine. The problem wasn’t with the water; the problem was with them. And notice, by the way, how ambiguous it is. It sounds like the text is trying to make it ambiguous. Now, what’s the meaning of that purposeful ambiguity? I think there’s a couple things there. One is, it’s unclear to the reader what it means, and maybe it’s unclear to the subject in the story what it means. In other words, you and I don’t know what’s bitter and what’s not bitter — could it be the waters? Maybe. Could it be the people? Maybe. It’s almost like there is no right answer — you can’t prove it one way or the other. Similarly, if you’re the people, you don’t know why you can’t drink the water. Which might be the reason why they called the place “Marah,” because what are the people thinking?

Imu: That the water is bitter, when they’re bitter, but they don’t know that.

Rabbi Fohrman: They don’t know that. Right? If there’s something wrong with me, I’m not aware that there’s something wrong with me. And the reason I can’t drink the water — what does my mind tell me is going on?

Imu: The water is bitter.

Rabbi Fohrman: There’s something wrong with the water. Which would explain another thing. You said it changes everything — it changes why they couldn’t drink the water, right? It wasn’t like there was a little too much lime in the Perrier, right? There was something wrong with them! That’s why they couldn’t drink it!

Imu: It’s like they weren’t willing to drink the water.

Rabbi Fohrman: They weren’t willing to drink the water! It would also change — one of the great questions of the story is why is God your healer? It’s not just that, well, I didn’t inject you with smallpox — it’s that the people could say to themselves, one second, we got to this water, the water was problematic, there wasn’t a problem with me, the water was problematic. The water was bitter! So don’t come and advertise yourself as the great healer; you didn’t heal me! You might have fixed the waters when you threw that tree in the waters, but you didn’t fix me. But we’re now in a position to say, well maybe that’s not really true. Maybe there was a problem with them. They were bigger — maybe that was their sickness. And when God says I am the God who heals you, it is that

that God is healing them from, from their bitterness that they didn't even understand, that they were projecting on the water.

Imu: If something is wrong with them, then that helps us understand how God could possibly be a healer, because somehow God healed them.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yes. So now the question is, how does this notion, which seems like there's something going on with this — why is there this ambiguity around what's going on? Is it the waters that are bitter, is it them that's bitter? If God really means it's them that's bitter, just tell me they were bitter! It's a strange thing. And also, what were they so bitter about? They just experienced the best thing in the world! Their enemies were destroyed, it was so great, it was this great kumbaya moment — it's a fade-to-black, it's the end of The Prince of Egypt, everything is — it can't be more wonderful than this. What's everyone so sour about?

Imu: Right!

Rabbi Fohrman: Like, why would they be so bitter? But, and yet, if this is what's going on, it seems to me that these are the great mysteries that we need to plow through going forward. Why were they so bitter? Where did this bitterness come from? How did God heal them with the tree, and why is there this ambiguity — is the water bitter, are they bitter? Somehow that's bound up in this question of how this story is connected to the last story. The story of the splitting of the sea — somehow the splitting of the sea should give us a clue to help us understand that it's all one story we've seen. And if we can figure that out, we might have an answer as to why suddenly the joy of Miriam becomes transmuted into the bitterness of marim, the joy of the mecholot becomes transmuted into the bitterness of these memories of Egypt's sickness. And I think, Imu, when we get together next, that's what we gotta look at: what's this bitterness all about?

Imu: Amazing. Eager and excited. I feel that much closer to solving the mystery of Refa'einu, and yet I am on pins and needles here.

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, Imu, that sounds great. I look forward to getting to you next time and continuing this, the exploration of this marvelous and difficult story.

Imu: Great.

The Real Bitterness of the Bitter Waters

Previously on Refa'einu: Prayer, Sefirah and Healing from Trauma:

We started this series with the question, how can we understand the Shmoneh Esrei blessing of Refa'einu, especially in this scary world of sickness and pandemic? And we said to understand that, we have to look at the story that Refa'einu brings us too: the very end of the exodus, the splitting of the sea, and the bitter waters of marah. If you haven't listened yet, go back to the first two episodes before continuing, but if you did listen, here's a quick reminder: we listed a bunch of questions about that weird story. Like, : What's with the Godly commercial for following law, what does it have to do with bitter waters? What does it have to do with the tree in the water? how is God healing them by not inflicting them with sickness? And lots more.

And a good place to start, is to try and determine: just what was that sickness? Israel seems to be afraid of getting sick, afraid of God making them sick. And not just of any sickness, but the kind of sickness God once gave to Egypt. If we can figure out this mysterious sickness, that the Israelites in Marah were worried about getting, and that God had once placed upon Egypt, we can figure out, and just how God was their healer.

So this episode begins with Rabbi Fohrman sharing a clue with me about what this sickness was. That clue, he suggests, is bitterness. Somehow, when the Israelites taste those bitter waters, they're worried. Maybe they'll get sick. Sick with what? We don't know. But let's follow the breadcrumbs of those bitter waters and see where they lead...

...

Rabbi Fohrman: Now, let's just get a little bit granular about that. They can't drink it because it's bitter. So, imagine what's happening. You're taking this water and you're trying to ingest it, but instead of ingesting it you're gagging on the water, really. It's inciting the gag reflex, the walls of your throat are sort of closing together, you're spitting the water out as if the water is painful or poisonous or something like that. We even raised this issue that maybe it's not even true, maybe it's just in their heads. But one of the reasons it might be in their heads is because somebody just experienced something like this. Who just gagged on water? I mean, how were the Egyptians destroyed, right? They weren't destroyed through hailstones coming from the sky. They weren't destroyed through javelins thrown by the Almighty from His holy throne. This is how they were destroyed! They drowned!

Imu: They just drowned.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right? And when you drown, what happens? The last thing that happens is you involuntarily take in water, your throat closes, you gag on the water. So, is there some connection? The Israelites, they might be happy that their enemies were just destroyed, but it doesn't seem coincidental that the way they were destroyed was through something that the people of Israel can't do now, which was drink water. There was this gag reflex. And that doesn't seem coincidental.

Now, it doesn't seem to answer everything, but I guess it does take me to another place, which is, like, let's trace this idea backwards in the text. Marah, a moment when people can't drink waters, and there's a gag reflex which is incited. Before that, the Egyptians at the sea — another moment where people can't drink water and there's this gag reflex that's incited. Can you go back even further to an earlier moment where someone couldn't drink waters because of a gag reflex that was incited?

Imu: Hmm. Yeah, this is — I think this is “makat dam,” the very first of the plagues, right? The water turns to blood and the Egyptians can't drink it, it's gross.

Rabbi Fohrman: It's gross! What if the river was blood and you tried to drink it? What would happen if you tried to drink it?

Imu: Yeah, you'd gag.

Rabbi Fohrman: You'd gag. That was the first moment where this happened. And isn't that interesting — the very first moment, the very first of the plagues. It's the touchstone of all the plagues, it's where the plagues begin. Right? And now go back to what God says — “kol hamachala asher samti b'mitzrayim lo asim alacha,” all of the sickness that I placed upon Egypt I will not place

upon you. Isn't it interesting that the Egyptians were faced twice with the very same thing that Israel's struggling with? The very first moment of the plagues, and the very last moment. The first moment was blood; the last moment was the splitting of the sea. In each case, they had this gag reflex when it came to water, and in the first case they didn't drown, but they couldn't drink the water; in the second place, not only could they not drink the water and they were gagging, they actually died because of it.

And now Israel, when that circle comes complete, all of a sudden it's almost as if there's something in their head that's scaring them about this. And God's, like, reassuring them that this machala I won't impose upon you. So could — here's an interesting, tentative possibility — could the machala, the sickness that God placed upon Egypt, could that be a reference to makat dam, the first of these plagues?

And the fascinating thing about that, by the way, is that it's actually the language of the text itself. The language of the text is, "lo yachlu lishtot mayim mimara ki marim hem." They can't drink the water from Marah, ki marim hem. And, Imu, the amazing thing is that that exact piece of language, lo yachlu lishtot, right, they couldn't drink from the waters — it's a very unusual phrase in the Chumash.

The only other time it appears is actually with the plague of blood, when God actually uses that exact same phrase in the Torah to describe the Egyptians' inability to drink the water: "lo yachlu lishtot mayim miyimei hayor." The Egyptians couldn't drink from the waters of "hayor." So, it really does seem to be the case that the machala that God placed in Egypt, i.e. their inability to drink the water of the Nile, a strain of that is that which is afflicting the people now, and is which God is reassuring them, somehow, that God would never somehow afflict them with that. And that, by extension, perhaps somehow the water's okay.

Imu: So is that it? Did we find the machala? This mysterious sickness? Egypt was gagging on the blood at makkat dam, the plague of blood, they gag, and drown at the splitting of the sea, and lo and behold, very next story, Israel is gagging on some water. So they're worried, maybe they're getting the machala of Egypt! The makkah of bitter, undrinkable waters!

RF: right? But I still wouldn't call that a machala, right? It's not like a sickness — the definition of a sickness is something that afflicts me, right? Not something in the environment, right? In other words, like, if I come to a mushroom and I can't eat the mushroom because it's poisonous, I might be stuck because I'm hungry, but we don't say I'm sick; we say there's a problem with the mushroom, there's not a problem with me.

Narrator Imu: Hey, Narrator Imu cutting in just to explain what's about to happen: Rabbi Fohrman just suggested bitterness is the clue that helps us find the mysterious illness, we're in search of. But, as he just said, it can't be that bitterness, or the undrinkability of the water, is a sickness. Sicknesses affect people, not things. But remember in our last episode, we suggested that maybe the waters were not bitter, but that the people were? Lo yochlu lishtot mayim mimarah ki marim hem – they were bitter. Does 'they' mean water? Or does it mean people? And if it means people...well... people can get sick... Rabbi Fohrman goes on to suggest that the ambiguity itself is a sort of sickness. Bitter waters and bitter people, all at the same time. Let me bring you back to our conversation:

But, here's the really cool thing.

The reason why the ambiguity is there is because at some level, as strange as it may sound, both are true. The people are bitter, and the waters are bitter. And you might say, that makes no sense. It's one or the other. Either the people are bitter, or the waters are bitter. I want to suggest that no, the ambiguity suggests that both are true.

And, by the way, I'll prove to you that both are true. Which is, let's put on our very rational thinking cap for a moment. Imu, look at the story of Marah for a moment. From the story of Marah as you know it, can you give me an indication from the text that the waters really were bitter, that this was an objective phenomenon?

Imu: I think I can, I think my strongest evidence would be from what happens to the waters on the other side, which is verse 25: God makes the waters sweet. Vayimteku hamayim. It doesn't say "vayimteku" the people, it says the waters were sweeter.

Rabbi Fohrman: Exactly, right? So, clearly the waters were afflicted, right? Because you can't make the water sweet if the waters were never bitter. It's clearly an issue with the waters. Okay. Great. But now, let me ask you the flip side of things. Looking at the story of Marah, can you give me any evidence from the text that the issue wasn't in the waters, that the issue was in the people?

Imu: Well, other than the ambiguity of the word "ki marim hem?"

Rabbi Fohrman: Other than the ambiguity of "ki marim hem." "Ki marim hem" is our theory that there's this ambiguity, but what about the very last thing that God says? God says, I'm not going to place the sickness of Egypt upon you, because I am God your healer. God seems to position Himself as your healer, not the healer of these waters. Your healer. What does healing the waters with the miracle have to do with Me being your healer, unless you were sick?

Imu: That's a great proof. That's actually a really good proof.

Rabbi Fohrman: It is, right? It just goes to the very last words of the text — God can't portray Himself as a medical doctor if I was never sick.

Imu: He could say, I, God, am your provider, your strong miracle worker, but He doesn't do that. He actually says I'm your healer.

Rabbi Fohrman: God says I'm your healer. Evidently there's something wrong with you.

On the one hand, there was something wrong with the people; God healed them. On the other hand, there was something wrong with the water. But those two things contradict themselves. Whatever the answer to how there could be a quality which is both subjective and objective, like the bitterness of these waters and the bitterness of the people, it seems to me that exactly the same conundrum faces us with the very first plague visited upon Egypt. What might well be the machalah of mitzrayim — the story of blood.

Let me play the same game with you. Imu, the water turned to blood — can you give me an indication of why I might think that that's a subjective phenomenon, that the water wasn't really blood, that it might have been a trick that the Egyptians' minds were playing upon them, almost like they were sick, that they had some perception that they couldn't drink the water, but objectively the water was fine? Given what you know about the plague of blood, is there any indication from the data that might indicate it's all subjective?

Imu: Sure, the text doesn't say it explicitly, but the medrash tells us that when the Egyptians would drink from the waters of the Nile, it was blood for them, but when an Israelite would go to drink, it was water, for them. Now the Midrash, I think, isn't pulling that from thin air. It would sort of be a self-defeating miracle for God to plague the Nile with blood, and then force the Israelites to drink blood. The Sages are filling in the blanks, letting us know that this plague miraculously affected only the Egyptians, while leaving the waters untouched for the Israelites.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right! That is what subjective is, right? One way of saying it is, there was this miracle, right, that God, like, quickly changed the waters. If there was an Israelite drinking it God changed it into water, and once the Egyptian came God changed it back into blood, and it kept on floating back and forth. Or you could say, a more basic way of saying it, is that no, it was water, right? The Egyptians perceived it as blood, and the Egyptians might even be in a position to be able to come to understand that there's something wrong with their minds, because when they look and see their Israelite neighbors drinking from the water, what are they gonna think? I mean, they have to contend with that.

Imu: Right.

Rabbi Fohrman: Maybe this is all in my head. Right? Okay. So that's an indication that there is a subjective quality to the problem of the water and the plague of blood. Now, given all the data that you know about the story of the blood, if I'm an Egyptian looking at this, what is the contradictory indication from the data? That, no, it's an objective quality — this isn't in my head. It's actually blood. Let's go back into the text and explore it.

Imu: “Vayehavchu kol hamayim asher baor l'dam,” and they change all the water in the Nile into blood. “Vehadaga asher bior meita” — oh wow, okay, there you go. The fish in the Nile die, “vayivash hayor,” and the Nile becomes putrid and stinky. “V'lo yachlo mitzrayim lishtot mayim min hayor,” and Egypt could not drink water from the Nile. Okay. I see your point.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, so, Imu, if I am Joe Egyptian — so on the one hand I'm thinking, how are those Israelites drinking the water, this is all in my head! But on the other hand I'm thinking, but the fish are dead! Right? If the fish are dead, it's obviously a quality of the water. So which is it?

Imu: Sure.

Rabbi Fohrman: I literally have contradictory indications from the data, which is to say, I can't figure it out. I don't know — how did the Israelites drink the water? Clearly it's subjective. How did the fish die? Clearly it's objective. And it's the same thing that happened at Marah. Right? How does God portray Himself as a healer? Clearly it was subjective. I had a problem, yeah. But if I had a problem, how come you throw the stick in the water, “vayimteku hamayim,” and the waters get better? It's not about the waters, it's about me. The data contradicts themselves.

I'm arguing the text is going out of its way to create a subjective-objective mind-bending moment for us, where the reader and probably the participants in the story can't figure it out. The Israelites at Marah can't figure it out, the Egyptians at the plague of blood can't figure it out. It is inherently ambiguous. It's a great \$64,000 question — how do we make sense of the Schrodinger's cat? In life things can't be subjective or objective; it's a binary choice, it's one or the other.

But the fact that it is both in both cases seems to suggest that we might be onto something when we say the machalah asher samti b'mitrayim lo asim alecha was the plague of blood. Right? God seems to be saying, I get you, Israel, you're afflicted about something, it's almost the same thing as the

Egyptians were afflicted with — don't worry about it, I'm not going to inflict that upon you. That was them, not you. And all of a sudden, that's starting to make more sense, this notion of a sickness. Right? We asked before, the plagues were plagues, they weren't sicknesses. But maybe some of them were, right? Specifically the plague of blood.

Imu: So, you're saying, the sickness isn't bitter waters, or bloody waters. It's actually the ambiguity surrounding the waters. In Egypt, the plague was blood, but the machalah was the mind-game, It's like the Egyptians were asking: is this water blood? It looks like blood, tastes like blood, even the fish are dying. But...the Israelites can drink it? It's not blood for them? I need to sit down. I've lost my grip on reality.

That's the sickness of the Egyptians. The sickness of ambiguity in blood. And the mind-games seem to come back, in Marah. So the people are afraid. The ambiguity – is the water bitter? Am I bitter? And then – even worse – Egypt had this same ambiguity around the blood! Does that mean God is thinking of us the way He thought of Egypt? And that's when God needs to come in, clarify things, and say, nope nope, you aren't Egypt. I'm your healer.

So in putting together the puzzle pieces around Refa'ainu, around marah, it feels like it's a start. We don't fully understand this sickness, this mind-game, but we know it has something to do with Egypt's experience of blood. And somehow Israel is experiencing ambiguity too in Marah. But we don't know why they're experiencing ambiguity. Did they come upon bitter waters or not? Why, in some sense, did they feel like they were bitter? We need just a bit more backstory. I think we can get that backstory by way of our heroine, Miriam. A woman whose name, as we said in the last episode, means bitter waters...

We had noticed that, you know, strangely the reason why they can't drink the waters is because they're bitter, mem resh yud mem, that echoes not two or three verses before, Miriam's name. But if I asked you, when is the first moment in the Torah when you, the reader, know Miriam's name —

Imu: I would say, probably when she's following her brother in the tevah, in the little basket, the water, I'm assuming — that's why she's called Miriam.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right, that's what you would think. So take a look. The little basket gets put in the water — chapter two verse four, “vatetatzev achoto merachok l'deya mah ya'aseh lo,” his sister stood from afar to see what would happen to him. Which sister? Don't know anything about her. Along comes the daughter of Pharaoh and she sees the tevah in the suf, she sends her maidservant, takes the tevah, opens it, sees the child, has compassion upon it, says it's a Hebrew child — again, “vatomer achoto,” not Miriam, his sister said to the daughter of Pharaoh, shall I find a nursemaid from the Hebrews to let you nurse the child? “Vatomer la bat parah,” the daughter of Pharaoh said, go do it.

So isn't it fascinating, then, that the very first time that we actually discover who this girl is is actually years later, at the Song of the Sea, when she just happens to decide to take these women out? That's when I hear that her name is Miriam, three verses before that name becomes mar-yam. Why would she be named for mar-yam, bitter water, right? A bitter, great body of water. How do we understand that, and connected to that, why are the people so bitter? And does that have something to do with the plague of blood? So, let me put that question to you.

Imu: Yeah. So that to me is like a really, really strong clue. Right? Why would her parents have named her bitter water? What story that sends me to is the occasion of her birth, right? So, what was

Egypt like for her and her parents when she was born? I can't help but think of the, the edict of Pharaoh, of throwing babies into the Nile. Like, that would make the waters pretty bitter to the Israelites, I would imagine.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah. So why would you name a kid "bitter, vast waters"? It's almost like it's the experience of Yocheved, mother of Moshe. And why would she have named a child that?

And when you put yourself in her shoes it becomes obvious — and by the way, let's even do this according to the way the Sages understood it. One of the questions that you asked as we were going through this story is why we meet Miriam and she's introduced in the strange way that she is, she's introduced as the sister of Aharon and not the sister of Moshe; she's introduced as a prophetess. Why is it important for her song at the sea that she be introduced those ways? And the Sages, of course, take up those exact issues in a fascinating midrashic comment, which they make, a series of comments they make.

And they say, in essence, that if you want to understand why Miriam sang at the sea, you have to understand two things about her, the very two things the Torah gives by way of introduction to her. A, she was a prophetess, and B, she was, her prophecy concerned something that happened when she was a little girl, when she was only the sister of Aharon, because Moshe had not yet been born. And they go back to the beginning of chapter two verse one, "vayelech ish mibeit levi vayikach et beit levi," and they suggest that Amram and Yocheved, parents of Moshe, had separated. They separated for the same reason that anybody might be tempted to separate. Why bring children into a world when the children are just going to be cast into the Nile? And in that world, along came Miriam, this little girl, their daughter, with a prophecy.

And her prophecy, as the Sages tell it, is atid a imi, my mother is destined to give birth to the savior of Israel. And she came and told them this, and Amram and Yocheved got back together, they had this child. "Vatara isha vateled ben," and the child was born. "Vatero oto ki tov." "Vatitzpanehu shelosha yerachim." Now, that itself is already dark. She hides him for three months. Now, why does she have to hide him for three months? What's going on that she's hiding him for three months, right?

Answer is, they're living in a time of genocide, Egyptian stormtroopers are outside the house listening for the cries of babies. It ain't easy keeping a newborn quiet. And the stormtroopers gather and get closer until verse three, "v'lo yachlo od hatz'fino," she just could not hide him anymore. And at that point, she places the child in this little boat and she places him in the reeds at the side of the river. Now, what's interesting here is that, you know, from her standpoint, what was that little box? Right? If you had asked, rationally speaking, if you can't hide the child anymore, again, inhabit her shoes — what are you thinking, and what are you feeling when you can't hide the child anymore, and you put him in that little box? Because the question is, if you had hope, what would you do? So, the great anguished question is, could you watch what happened next? And it's clear from the text that she doesn't. Right?

Imu: She walks away. Wow. Wow, that's really chilling.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right? Which means, what was that little box?

Imu: It was a coffin.

Rabbi Fohrman: It was a coffin. The last little chesed that she could do for this little baby is at least give him this little box that he wouldn't just be hurled into the Nile. And it's a terrible, terrible

moment. And in that moment, think now about this name that Miriam gets, right? Bitter, bitter waters. If you were Yocheved, as you look out at the vast waters of the Nile, right, what are those waters? They're terribly bitter. Let's transport ourselves back to that moment where Yocheved gives Miriam that name, right? There's something bittersweet about her birth, right? What are you feeling, if you're Yocheved and you're naming this daughter, you know, Miriam, mar-yam?

Imu: You know, on the one hand your daughter is safe, and you can feel jubilant — oh, thank God I didn't have to go through the horrible tragedy of a child being tossed into the river. On the other hand, perhaps out of solidarity with the other women of Israel, or perhaps just the anguish of nine months of not knowing what might happen to your child, you can't express your joy and say, you know, this one was saved. You name her bitter water.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah. Which is that here's this birth, and this sense of relief that washes over you, that this is a girl, and thank God I don't have to worry and it's okay. And yet, the waters are bitter. And she's bitter. So she becomes Miriam, mar-yam.

And now, let's actually pull back the zoom lens a little bit. It doesn't seem coincidental that bitterness is the adjective that shows up in Miriam's name, that it's bitterness that would describe the anguish of these women. If you think about that word marim, bitterness, in the larger context of the Exodus, what does it remind you of? When else does the text play with that adjective?

Imu: Well, there's "vayimareru et chayehem b'avodah kasha [ba'chomer] uvalveinim?" This is Pharaoh right at the beginning of Exodus, embitters the lives of the Israelites through crushing labor.

Rabbi Fohrman: And think about that, that it means that the one adjective to describe the Israelite experience in Egypt under oppression is bitterness. Isn't that interesting? That here are these people after the Exodus, and of all things they're bitter. And what had we experienced for four hundred years? It's almost as if the "vayimareru et chayehem b'avodat kasha," the embittered lives because of work, also transmuted itself into a kind of bitterness, at least in the case of Miriam and Moshe, with the waters in the Nile and the death of these children, and now, years later, when everyone is saved, somehow the people are now experiencing bitterness, as if there's something sick, there's something that's afflicting these people. There is a profound psychological wound that expresses itself in these embittered lives. And maybe this gets back to the notion of the last great act of the Exodus drama — that it's not enough for the story to end the way The Prince of Egypt ends, with the grand victory at the sea. Right? That would be like saying that the story, you know, to borrow a modern analogy, the story of the end of the Holocaust ended when Buchenwald was liberated, and Auchwitz was liberated. That's when the movie ends. But anybody who was there, if you read the first-person accounts of the soldiers who liberated those camps, know that the story wasn't over the day that the camps were liberated. Because it's one thing to have the victory over the foe, it's one thing to watch the Germans vanquished, but that doesn't heal you. Victory is one thing, but after victory you need healing. And it was the same thing, maybe, for the Israelites. They had victory at the sea. But it wasn't over. Those scars continue to afflict them.

Imu: Just to add a dimension to this, it reminds me of something you once said to me, that really stuck with me. You asked me this question, you said what is the worst thing the Egyptians ever did to the Israelites? And I said, well, they made them slaves, they were slaves for, you know, many many years, it's terrible. And you were like, no, that's not the worst thing. What was the worst thing? And you said, it was the fact that the Egyptians threw the Israelite babies into the water. And

you asked me something that, again, should be so obvious — why do they do that? Why didn't they just kill them? Why didn't they, you know, use their swords or whatever.

And in this really creepy way, I remember, in my voice, you said what happens when you throw a baby into the water? And you answered, nothing. You don't see anything. The water changes not a whit. It's just water. Your suggestion was that the Egyptians did not want to dig mass graves — it's really unpleasant business, controlling a population explosion by, you know, digging these mass graves and going around killing babies. The Egyptian populace can't handle that, the Israelite population can't handle that, and so you deal with it in this quiet, insidious way. You kill the child and the evidence is gone. Vanished. The river looks just the way it did the day beforehand, and the trauma that must have been for the Israelites, where they're losing their children and you can go around and ask a neighbor and say, did you see this, this injustice that was done to me? And they can say, well, what do you mean? What crime? There's no evidence — we don't see anything, there's no issue, there's no corpse.

And that this Nile, which is the source of your sustenance, the source of your water, the source of life for Egypt, becomes this great source of death and this source of trauma for the Israelites. It's bitter waters, indeed. And what hit me, was what a sign it was, indeed, for God to actually begin with the plague of blood, to say this water that everybody else thinks is water — I know is really blood. It's the blood of your children. It's the trauma that Egypt has put you through, I see it for what it is and I will make Egypt face it.

Rabbi Fohrman: I'll make Egypt face it, and I will help you understand that I get it. Because part of the strategy of Pharaoh, in a certain way, was to play mind games with us. The nights are full of screams, in the morning there are Egyptians jogging on the path by the Nile, and everything looks normal, and we think that we're crazy. It's as if nature itself is conspiring against us. And that was the very first mind game that was insidiously placed before us by Pharaoh. And I would even argue that it was an extension of the bitterness of “vayimareru et chayehem b'avodah kasha.”

Let me show you something that suggests that in the text itself. Right? Let's go back to that phrase, that signal phrase for slavery, “vayimareru et chayehem b'avodah kasha,” because there's something strange about this, right? On the one hand, we're arguing that here is Miriam, named for mar-yam, who may have experienced a kind of bitterness about the waters, and yet, strangely, the way bitterness is first described has nothing to do with waters, it has to do with slavery. And how do you bridge that?

So there's a very interesting textual cascade, as it were. Let's go back to that phrase. Where is it there? “Vayimareru et chayehem b'avodah kasha.” That would be back to chapter one. What bothered Pharaoh? What bothered Pharaoh was verse seven. “Uvnei yisrael paru vayishratziu vayirbu vava'atzmu bimeod meod,” and Israel became mighty, they became huge in numbers, this population explosion, “vatimalei ha'aretz otam,” and the land was full of them. And at that point, there was a new king upon Egypt who didn't know Joseph, and he says to his people, the people of Israel are too great for us, “hava nitchachma lo,” let's deal wisely with them.

Now, apparently Pharaoh's so smart, “hava nitchachma lo,” we're gonna deal wisely with them. That, Imu, I want to suggest to you that there's two really stupid things that Pharaoh does. Right? You're Pharaoh. What's your problem? A great population explosion. Now, Pharaoh has kind of a three-stage plan, right? Stage one: slavery. Stage two: tell the midwives to kill the baby boys. Stage three: throw the baby boys in the Nile.

Now, I understand stages two and three. They directly address the population explosion. Brutal, but I understand it. It gets rid of people. But number one is about economics, right? If the population explosion is what I'm worried about, it doesn't directly address that to enslave them. That's a strange thing, part one. Strange thing part two is, if I was worried about a population explosion, if I was going to segment it by gender, I sure as heck wouldn't kill the boys; I'd kill the girls. I mean, girls are that which makes the children, right? So why does Pharaoh do exactly the opposite? He doesn't seem smart. He seems stupid. Why does he begin with slavery? Why does he only attack the boys?

Let's keep on reading. So here comes Pharaoh. He says "hava netchachma lo pen yirbeh." I'm worried about this people, I think that they're going to grow even stronger, this exponential growth, and they're gonna gang up against us. So here's what we're gonna do. He goes and he makes the taskmasters, and they build these storehouses for Pharaoh, and we read in verse 13, "vayavidu mitrazyim et b'nei yisael vifarech." And here we get to, "vayamareru et chayehem b'avodah kasha," and they embittered their lives with terrible work.

Now, the first thing I have to tell you is, looking at the verse right before that, the word "farech," which is the particular type of slavery, slavery that was avodat perach — Rashi translates that word in an interesting kind of way. Rashi says that that word needs to be seen as related to the Hebrew word "to crumble." And Rashi says, "avoda hamecharefet et haguf." It was work that crumbled the body. Which means if you take the horrific implications of Rashi's statement, that deep down there wasn't really an economic rationale for this work. It wasn't about pyramids. It was about working people to death. It was about grinding them down until there was nothing left. So you say to yourself, well, why don't you just start with genocide? Why even start with this? I mean, why pretend it's about work?

And here, I mean — I just keep on thinking about the Holocaust, right? For the same reason the Nazis did it. For them it wasn't about work either, right? When push comes to shove, it wasn't about the uniforms that the slaves could make. They were willing to divert the trains to the gas chambers, they were willing to put everything into killing the people, and even to destroy their own economy in doing that. So, why pretend it's about work? And I think the answer is, that's the way you co-opt a populace. A vulnerable populace can be co-opted to become participants in the genocide scheme if you give them false hope. If you say to them "arbeit macht frei" at the gates of the killing camps. Right? Because what does arbeit macht frei tell you when you're getting in? It's false hope. And if I just am a good soldier and if I just work hard enough, things will be okay. And nobody wants to look death in the eye. And because we don't want to look death in the eye, we'll tell ourselves lies. we'll cling to this hope that no, maybe is just about economics, maybe Pharaoh wants his pyramids.

But it was never about work. And this is the first ruthless, wickedly smart thing that Pharaoh does, to be able to co-opt the populace into his genocidal scheme. But it doesn't work. The people still keep on reproducing, and we read that "k'asher y'anu otam ken yirbeh," the more he oppressed them the more the population exploded, continued, so he had to go to plan B.

But plan B also continued with something surreptitious, right? It was a secret command to the miyaldot to kill the children. And then a secret command to the people to throw the babies in the Nile and the Nile would cover over the crimes. But here's the textual cascade. That language, "vayamareru et chayehem," and they embittered, the Egyptians did, the lives of the people — that language is a description of stage one in Pharaoh's genocidal scheme.

But as you get to stages two and three, you hear a residual from “vayemararu et chayehem.” Now listen to stage two: He tells the midwives when you give birth to the children, “uri’item al ha’avnayim,” when you see them on the stones, “im ben hu vahamiten oto,” if it’s a baby boy, kill it, “v’im bat hi,” and if it’s a daughter, “v’chaya,” then allow it to live. Which is fascinating. That word “to live,” that’s an interesting word, isn’t it? Because in stage one, what did Pharaoh do? “Vayimararu et chayehem.” And now, “im bat hi, v’chaya.” “V’chaya” was the second word from that phrase — “vayimararu et chayehem.” And now there’s a daughter who’s living.

And what happens next? Stage three. any little boy, throw him in the water, “v’chol habat,” but any daughter, “tichayun.” Same word. Allow her to live. And now, here’s the deviousness in Pharaoh’s plan. What was he really doing? Just do the algebra in the text. “Vayimararu et chayehem” was stage one — they embittered the chai, that which was living, right? Our lives. But then, what was the “vayemararu et chayehem” In stage two and stage three? It’s almost like it was there. The cascade is the chai keeps on going from stage one to stage two to stage three. So, what was embittered in stage two? What was embittered in stage three? Who was embittered?

Imu: The women.

Rabbi Fohrman: Stage one, what was embittered? That which was chai. In stage two and stage three, what was embittered? That which was chai. Who was chai? The women. It was all an attack against the women. It was a concerted attack upon the fertility of femininity. Pharaoh had a problem — how do I get ahold of this exponential growth curve? How do I destroy fertility? I destroy fertility through this evil thing, right? This allows the women to live, but what kind of life? “Vayimararu et chayehem,” a bitter, bitter life. Any woman who’s born is celebrated, but yet bitterness is the only thing that women, that parents or siblings, can think about. And hence, who is Miriam, the symbol of all these women? Mar-yam. Just the bitter, bitter waters. What’s that gonna do to fertility, right? Are you really gonna have children in a world in which if you roll the dice and if it’s the wrong gender the child gets thrown into the river?

So here’s the bitterness that Pharaoh sought to impose upon us. Now, when Pharaoh did impose this upon us, one of the evil things he did was he took the greatest natural resource of Egypt and turned it into our enemy. You talked about it before when you said the waters — waters are a source of life. And Pharaoh makes them into death water. But the real trick is, is not only does Pharaoh make it into death water; Pharaoh makes it into maybe it’s death water, maybe it’s not death water. Pharaoh plays games with our heads, because we don’t know if it’s really true. Is it the children really happened, did it not really happen?

So, let’s break it apart, Imu, for a second. Put yourself in the shoes of a woman at that moment, witnessing this carnage all around. The rational side of you — why might you not want to have children?

Imu: That situation — I don’t want to face a situation where if I have a child who’s a boy, that he’d be thrown into the Nile.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, perfectly rational. What good is it, you might even say, to have children if they might die? It’s rational to just not invest now, there’ll be a time for children but not now. But let’s put all that aside. Let’s get to the irrational thing that you can’t explain, that just the feeling that you have. Why is it — you just can’t even think of having children now? Why is it that the notion of fertility, of fostering new life, it’s just something that almost is bitter, that almost, like, I gag when I

think about that, I just can't bring myself? Why would you not do that? Why would you just not have yourself a little girl?

Imu: As you're saying — I think it's more than just the fear of facing a boy — it's just, what does life look like if you have a little girl? I imagine — what are you gonna do? You're gonna have a simchat bat, you're gonna have a party, and everyone will come and say, oh, mazel tov on your new baby? How can you face the rest of the community that's losing their sons? You'd be wracked with guilt, the fact that you have this daughter and they have nothing, they've lost their child.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, and that's a wonderful analogy, right? Think about that joy that you have upon having that little girl, that you rolled the dice and you got lucky. How could you experience that joy when Nancy next door is crying her eyes out for the child that was ripped from her arms and thrown into the Nile? And what feeling do you have? And you pegged it, I think, correctly, as guilt. I don't have a right to be happy, I can't be happy at a time like this. And this was Pharaoh's evil, diabolical scheme.

Take the happiest things in life. What is happier than the moment of childbirth? I don't think you could put it into words for a woman or for a man — there's just nothing more ecstatic. And it doesn't feel like you should deserve to be able to have that in a world when my neighbors are crying, in a world where I cried for the child that didn't make it. I just don't feel like I should deserve to have it. And that's irrational. I didn't do anything wrong, right? I'm doing something good, I'm having a child, but we don't work that way. We feel saddled by this irrational guilt — it was all part of the plan.

So here comes God. And God says, you know what the first of the plagues are? I'm gonna take water and I'll play with their minds. And they won't be able to drink it — you know why? Because the water is blood. Now, why would the water be blood? And let's come back to the Schrodinger's cat issue, right? That issue of, how could it be? Is it subjective or is it objective? When God made the water blood, was it really blood, or wasn't it blood? And the answer is, maybe it was kind of both. It starts subjective and becomes objective, and what is it really? The subjective side of it is guilt. God says, you weaponized guilt. You took guilt and turned it into a weapon against fertility. I too will weaponize guilt against you. But I will weaponize real guilt, and you weaponized fake guilt.

My people, Israel, had nothing to be guilty of, and you forced them into a sense that the mere fact that they survived was something that they should feel terrible about, and that's how you chose to go against them. Well, Egypt, in following orders, if you try to go to bed at night and assuage your guilt by saying I was just doing what any self-respecting Egyptian would do — you can't escape guilt. The water is blood. Here it is, the crime is staring you in the face for all to see. And the Israelites are drinking it. Why? And you're not even sure — is it really true or isn't it true?

The same mind games you played with water, the mind games will be played with you. But the guilt is so strong, so powerful, I would argue, that it's as if it manifests itself objectively true. It starts as a subjective reality in the mind of the Egyptians, and almost bleeds — you'll pardon the pun — into objective reality, that the fish become poisoned. It is a subjective phenomenon that is so powerful that it begins to affect the objective world. And this is the Egyptian experience of blood. And later it becomes our experience at Marah.

Imu: So just to put a lid on things – we started off this episode searching for the machalah. We said we couldn't understand just how God is our healer if we don't know what the sickness is. And our

clue was the bitterness – a bitterness that pointed to mind games. Mind games at marah, because the water was bitter or the people were bitter. They gagged on the water, they couldn't drink it. That led us to the splitting of the sea where Egypt experienced gagging, choking on the water at the sea. Which also reminded us of the plague of blood, and the mind game that God placed on the Egyptians – was the blood really blood? Was it water? And we've just placed the final piece of the puzzle. Why did the Egyptians experience mind games, this sickness, at blood? Because they plagued mind games with Israel, they placed sickness upon Israel, embittering their lives with work that was meant to break them down, embittering the women, making them sick with guilt.

Miriam was the final clue that helped us fill in this backstory of the sickness, let's go back to Marah, back to the sea, back to Miriam and finish putting the pieces together.

So here you have Miriam, right? Who was she, really? Go back to that text. What does Miriam do? Her mother places him in this little box, her mother doesn't look. No one looks, but one person looked. It's Exodus two chapter four, "vatetatzev achoto merachok l'deya mah ya'aseh lo." And she stood from afar to watch what would be with him, what would happen with him. Now, why did she look? If you were watching the destruction of your brother, how could you do that? You can't do that — no one can do that, but she did it.

Imu: Especially given what the women are saying, right? This isn't some other kid they have who watches — this is the daughter, this is the one who would be having the survivor's guilt more than anyone else, right? She's the one who was spared, and she's the one who can bring herself strangely — maybe the most unlikely person — she's the one who can bring herself to look.

Rabbi Fohrman: And look what that looking does. Here comes Miriam, who says I don't know what I can do here, I feel so powerless, the girl named for bitter waters. She must have felt, at that moment, her name coming to life, what could be more bitter than that, the waters that might swallow alive my brother? But she looked anyway. Why, if you would interview her, what do you think you're gonna accomplish by looking? It's just gonna make it worse for you. You think you're gonna save them? You think you're gonna make it all better? What power do you really have anyway? You're so powerless.

But what Miriam says is, I don't care. Here's what I can do. What I can do is not let him be alone right now. What I can do is stand by him. It recalls, in a way, one of the great humane things that Israel is even doing in this COVID-19 thing, they came out and said, you know, people shouldn't be allowed to die alone. If somebody's on their deathbed, they can have visitors. And that overrides everything else, because crisis is a time when you need accompaniment, and Miriam says I don't know what else I can do, but I can be there with him, I can watch. And here's Miriam watching.

And who should come along but the worst person in the world, the daughter of Hitler, "vatered bat paro lirchotz al hayor," but Miriam won't go away. She still stands and watches. What are you even thinking? And there must be a part of Miriam that says I don't know what can be, I can't control the future, but I can control what I can do. There's a possibility. I don't care about the daughter of Hitler — there's still hope. Miriam had hope. And as it happened, look what she did. She becomes the one who's able to transfer that possibility of hope into actual salvation. Here's the daughter of Pharaoh. The daughter of Pharaoh opens the little box, sees the child, hears the child crying, "vatachmol alav," has compassion upon it, but even as she has compassion upon it, she's caught in a quandary herself. She says it's a Hebrew child — what can I do? I'm the daughter of Pharaoh, I'm supposed

to kill this child, but I have compassion on the child. Enter Miriam, “vatomer achoto al bat paro haelech v’karati lach isha meneket.” Miriam says, can I call a nursemaid for you?

And what do you know — suddenly mother and child are reunited, and Moshe’s got a chance at life. Moshe becomes the savior of the Jewish people — she actualizes her prophecy. And she couldn’t have predicted it, but fascinatingly Miriam defeats Pharaoh. Here Pharaoh’s designs were, I will poison the women, I will freeze them in horror, I will cause them to be inactive by virtue of the horror of mar-yam, of the bitter waters; I will play with their minds. But one person was able to have the strength, power, to defeat that: the girl who stood and watched and looked out at the bitter waters and would not be intimidated by them. Somehow had the faith that there’s a God in heaven and because of that I can give this to God and say, here, God, this is for You. Almost as if what Miriam was saying was defeating her name.

Imu: Right, maybe Pharaoh controls the Nile, or thinks he controls the Nile, but next to the sea, the Nile is just a small river. God controls the waters, the larger waters, the entire sea – so mar-yam is a lie. The yam isn’t bitter.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yes. There was a larger body of water than just the Nile, right? It’s God’s body of water, God’s water is so much larger than Pharaoh. You think Pharaoh was the ultimate power of the universe? If that’s the world we live in, then despair is the only option. But there’s a larger king, and there’s a larger world, and He has His waters too. That’s the larger waters, and they aren’t bitter! They’re joyous. And here the women —

Imu: The survivors.

Rabbi Fohrman: That the women are the survivors. And I was talking to your mom about this — your mom actually shared this insight with me, I think it’s a beautiful way of reading the story. And what your mom suggested is that, why do you think the women had to sing now? The answer was, because who sang the song at the sea? Evidently not the women, only the men did. Why weren’t the women singing? The answer is, who were the women? They were the embittered ones. They were the ones who, more than anything, felt this trauma — they were the targets of all the bitterness. The men, they can sing — they were the victims, they died, they never experienced the trauma. It was the women who experienced this trauma. And so they’re looking at the drowning of the Egyptians and they’re frozen, they’re horrified.

So they can’t sing. And it’s a vestige of what Pharaoh tried to do to them. When Pharaoh tried to freeze them into inaction. And Miriam the healer, I would suggest, comes and says, women, we can do this. I know you can’t sing, I know you can’t even talk, but could you dance? Could you wordlessly take a timbrel and a tambourine and sing? And she leads them in this wordless song, because it’s all they could do. “Vatikach miriam hanevia achot aharon et hatof b’yadah v’tetzana kol hanashim achareha b’tupim uvimcholot.” They don’t yet sing — nothing comes from their mouths. That’s stage one.

Stage two is, now let me teach you the words. I know it’s hard to sing. I just want to teach you one verse. The verse is, “shiru l’hashem ki gao ga’ah sus v’rochva ramah bayam.” The one verse is, horse and rider have been hurled into the ocean. Hurling into the ocean — what does that remind you of? What was the trauma? The trauma was, you remember the babies that were hurled into the Nile? God has come and done something different. It’s not our babies, right? It’s the enemy that’s been hurled, and the enemy is gone, and mitzrayim will never threaten us again, so we can begin to recover, we can speak, we can sing. We’ll just say this — it’s the enemies that have been destroyed,

it's not us. And Miriam begins this process of healing. It's a process of healing that starts with her, and somehow, I think, the mystery of Marah is the continuation of that process, which ends with not just Miriam being the healer, but somehow God finishing the process that Miriam started.

Imu: So, I think we'll leave that stuff for our next session, but I just want to re-emphasize how mind-blown I am by verses 20 and 21, which appear to be filled with double entendres, tikach miriam hanevia achot aharon, just to answer some of our questions — this is Miriam, whose name is bitter water, who's now the opposite of that. She's nevia — her prophecy, as the Sages refer to, has now come true, the prophecy that she received when she was only achot aharon, when she was the sister of Aaron before Moses was born. Back then, she was the only one who was able to stand and watch what would happen to the boy she convinced her parents to conceive, she had faith salvation would come through him, and now, it's all coming true – We're harkening back to that time — the pain of that time is now being redeemed or healed. She takes “et hatof b'yadah.”

You actually pointed out to me off this podcast what that word also reminds you of, tof b'yadah. Not the same letters, but the same sound, tof, and taf, taf with a tet is “infants,” right? So, instead of taking the infants in hand or perhaps cast into the Nile, she's taking a drum or a timbrel, a symbol of pain is now a symbol of joy. “Vatezena kol hanashim achareha,” and all the women follow her, “b'tupim uvimchalot,” right, with their “tupim,” with their timbrels, and now their “mecholot” — instead of sickness there's dancing. Not only does she cancel out her name, she cancels out the sickness, right? So she acts the exact inverse of the circumstances of her birth — now she's, instead of being sick, she's dancing mecholot. “V'taan lahem Miriam” — that word “vata'an” — she answers them. A question we brought up — I wonder if that's referring to back in Exodus one where we're talking about how their lives were embittered. One of the things that is said there is, “v'chaasher yanu oto, ken yirbeh.” They were afflicted, and so the affliction is another part of the double entendre. Their suffering is now transformed into joy, into singing, into proclaiming a song.

Rabbi Fohrman: And, by the way, your point here is that vata'an has the ayin nun of the word for, the signal word for slavery, which was oppression, “kasher y'anu oto.” It's almost as if the wordless question that Miriam is answering, which you brought up earlier — what is she answering? The question was the horror of the oppression, which began with the bitterness of work, but continued into the bitterness of children that just freezes you. And Miriam says, let me respond to that, and instead of allowing oppression to freeze me into inaction, let's talk. Let's sing. Let's do something here. And she leads them into a response to horror, rather than an inability to act because of the horror.

Imu: And the final double entendre in this verse is shiru l'hashem ki gao ga'ah sus v'rochvo ramah bayam. Once the victim was hurled into the sea; now the perpetrator is hurled into the sea. It's really chilling, it's really incredible what you're showing us here, Rabbi Fohrman.

Rabbi Fohrman: Well, and I credit your mom — she saw. No, really, she saw a lot. So, you know, I think we've gotten to somewhere, I think the question that we still have to answer is, okay, we've gone back to the story, we've gone all the way back to the machala that was in mitzrayim, all the way back to the sickness of mitzrayim, all the way back to the children of the Nile, the story of the blood, the story of the sea, as a response to that, Miriam's beginning of healing — how did the story of Marah take that one step further? How does God pick up on what Miriam is doing, and take it one more step?

It's beautiful, if you think about it — God is leveraging Miriam. It's not just that God is our healer; God is responding to something that Miriam is doing, if we're right, and building upon it and saying, that was good. Let me take that one step further. Let me draw that out for you and show you what that really is. And somehow, how does the strange story of the tree at the water, how does the story of if you listen to my laws and all of that, if Miriam was responding to the oppression, “vata'an lahem miriam,” how is God responding to Miriam in the story of Marah?

Imu: Incredible stuff. And I just want to keep going with you, I want to know how it answers the tree in the water, but I will wait with bated breath until next time. Thanks, Rabbi Fohrman.

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, see you then. Bye-bye.

Healing from the Trauma of Slavery

Rabbi David Fohrman: Okay, everybody, we are back. This is Rabbi David Fohrman, and I am joined once again with my compadre-in-arms Imu Shalev. Imu, can you hear me out there in Teaneck-land?

Imu Shalev: What?! Speak up!

Rabbi Fohrman: Alright. He can, he can! Okay, Imu. The last time you and I talked, we kind of went through the backstory of Marah. We came up with a lot of interesting stuff, but now it's time to go through the story itself. What I'd like to do with you, if we can, is just take a quick inventory of our outstanding questions on the story. Maybe we'll do this responsively — your question, my question.

Imu: My turn. What do the laws have to do with anything? Why is there this great commercial advertisement for laws? Somehow, if you follow all the laws, then the sicknesses that God placed upon Egypt you're not gonna get. Gotta follow all the laws. What does that have to do with the tree, what does it have to do with the water, what does it have to do with them being bitter?

Rabbi Fohrman: Yep. And along those lines, God also makes another passing reference to law: “sham sam lo chok umishpat v'sham nisa hu” — it sounds like God actually gave them some laws, even though we don't really hear what the laws are, but if He gave them laws, how come you don't hear about the laws? And maybe we can begin with the question of laws. So, maybe an opening into this is to get back to this question of what exactly was the nature of the sickness that was placed on Egypt? Because God's referencing that sickness that I've placed upon Egypt — again, the language of the text is, “if you listen to My laws and you keep My words, then all the sickness that I have placed upon Egypt I will not place upon you” — suggests, at least to me, that in God's eyes, what the people are afflicted with is something that's a close cousin of the “machala asher samti b'mitzrayim.”

And I think by way of explanation, we should go back to what that machala was, right? We made the case that the plague of blood really was a machala, it was a mind game that God inflicted upon the Egyptians. We're never really sure whether it was them or whether it was the water — the fish are dying and so it looks like it's the water, but on the other hand the Israelites are drinking it, so it looks like it's all in their heads. And deep down, an argument we made was that the Egyptians are

suffering from a Lady Macbeth syndrome, right? They're looking at their hands and they see blood, because there is blood on their hands, because the water really is blood, because there's something that is haunting them, and that something is guilt.

Now, here's the thing: if guilt is what is haunting the Egyptians, what that suggests is what's haunting the Israelites is also guilt. Pharaoh sought to inflict a kind of terrible survivors' guilt — But here's the thing: if you think about survivors' guilt, it is the least rational kind of guilt there is. There's something about the human psyche about when it comes to survivors' guilt, right — I didn't do anything, I've just existed, but yet I feel guilty. And what God seems to be saying is, is that there's a difference between your guilt and the Egyptians' guilt. Your guilt is a phantom; Egyptian guilt is real.

And now, Imu, if you look at this language over here, “im shamo'a tishma hakol Hashem elokecha v'hayashar b'ainav ta'aseh v'ha'azanta lamitzvotav,” if you keep My mitzvot, what's particularly chilling is that if you think about God as a king who commands things, well, what other king, other than God, ever commanded anything in this story?

Imu: Pharaoh.

Rabbi Fohrman: It was Pharaoh. And what was his great and terrible command?

Imu: His great and terrible command was a command of genocide, of throwing babies in the Nile.

Rabbi Fohrman: And it's that exact same language in Hebrew — “v'yetzav paro l'chol amo lemor,” Pharaoh commanded. And, by the way, this begins to give us an inkling into the stick-and-the-water thing. It doesn't completely explain it, but chillingly, if you look at this story of casting the tree in the water at Marah, it also evokes the great command of Pharaoh, “vayorehu Hashem etz vayashlech al hamayim,” the text says. God showed Moshe this tree and he hurled it into the water. Vayorehu vayashlech, vayorehu vayashlech, it actually reminds us of the very first command of another corrupt and evil king in the story, not the commands of God, but the commands of Pharaoh. “Vayetzav paro l'chol amo lemor, kol haben hayalud hayeorah tashlichuhu.” How do you spell “yeorah”? Yud-alef-vav-resh-hey. How do you spell “vayorehu”? Vav-yud-resh-hey. Almost exactly the same, just a silent aleph that's the difference. And the verb that Pharaoh says, “hurl them in the water,” babies hurled in the water. “Kol haben hayalud hayoreah tashlichuhu.” God: “Vayorehu Hashem etz vayashlech al hamayim,” hurl it into the water.

There's something about God who's issuing this command over here, the command to hurl this tree in the water, rather than a command to hurl babies in the water. Now, God is basically distinguishing Himself by the nature of His commands. God is basically saying you can listen to My commands and you will never be afflicted with the machalot that afflicted Egypt. Guilt.

Imu: This is amazing — It sounds like you're saying that there's this decree that Pharaoh said, this mitzvah, right, it was a mitzvah of Pharaoh — we don't think of that word “mitzvah” as a command, you think of mitzvah as sort of these Godly precepts.

Rabbi Fohrman: And, by the way, in society, isn't that how it works? When you think about that which is legal, that which is mandated by society, and you think of that which is moral and upright and just, in a normal, well-functioning society, those two things go together. But look how twisted that becomes in Egypt. So the king comes on the radio, right, and says we have a national security concern, these vermin need to be exterminated, right, and to throw them in the water and trust me, right? Trust me. This is what's necessary, this is good, this is legal, this is required.

Imu: It's a mitzvah.

Rabbi Fohrman: It's a mitzvah! We don't think of a mitzvah as a command; we think about a mitzvah as a good deed. This is good. It's hard, it requires sacrifice, right, it's not easy to throw little babies in the water, but this is what greater Egypt demands, and this is what I ask of you. And so, Imu, if an Egyptian thinking, yes, I'm just doing the right thing, right, could they escape guilt for that? That they sleep at night? And the tragedy is, they think they might be able to, because they're an upright, law-abiding citizen.

And you gotta understand something, is that, you know, there's a little king and there's a big king. The little king here is Pharaoh, and Pharaoh issued commands, and his commands were terrible. You need to know something about me: I'm a king, I'm a big king, I'm the king of kings. My mitzvot are good mitzvot. There's no guilt in following My commands; My commands are good commands, you can trust them.

And I would even go so far as to suggest that my commands are more than not guilt-inducing; they are themselves curative. Let's talk about this strange puzzle of, here are these commands, but there's no commands. "Sham sam lo chok umishpat." Here God placed commands, "v'sham nisa hu" — and yet we don't even hear what the commands are. How come we don't hear what those commands are? And so, Imu, my instinct was that if there was a command that's mentioned and yet there is no command mentioned, that it has to almost be an implicit command, a command that's just implicit, and what happens to them? The people just came out of Egypt. Coming out of Egypt itself places a command before you. What is the great implicit command of coming out of Egypt?

The Torah over and over again harks back to what the fundamental command of coming out of Egypt was. There's one command that the Torah will always go back to as a rationale for the command. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, right? What is the great command that we have — that remember that you were the slaves in Egypt, right? And therefore, x. Right? What command is that? That command, of course, is love the strangers, because you know what it was like to be a stranger in Egypt. Right? This command is going to be articulated over and over again in the Torah, right, but here's this moment where the command is simply put to them, just as a result of what it is they've experienced, and it seems to me that perhaps there's something about this command that is curative. Why? Because here's this bitterness. It's almost like all of the terrible bitterness that we experienced in Egypt, it's all laying there in this bitter oasis of water, and the water is fine, but the people are imputing their bitterness on the water, they're seeing these flashbacks of the Nile, they can't drink, they're consumed by guilt, they're consumed by the bitterness and the pain and the suffering. I feel so, so terrible and guilty.

And God says, okay, you gotta drink this water, you've gotta bring this bitterness inside of you somehow, you've gotta connect with it, right? It's almost strange — if you think about the way we deal with bitterness, our instinct is to cut ourselves off from it, right? PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. I just shut the door and then I shut out that part of my life. Well, God has said, well, you know, you pay a price when you do that. You're, like, amputating part of your life. What does it really mean to heal? It means to take back that experience inside of you somehow. What's gonna work to take that bitterness inside of you?

And the answer is, if you can find something positive, listen to my commands, my fundamental command about what you've been through, is love the ger, love the stranger, because you know what it's like to be a stranger. You know all the bitterness that the stranger feels. The stranger feels a

bitterness that is very akin to your bitterness. The stranger also hates himself in a way that doesn't make any sense. He can't take care of his kids because he doesn't have a green card. He can't provide for them. He's forced to — what's he gonna do, to steal? What do you want him to do? He has no way of making it — he doesn't have any land, he doesn't have any resources, and he hates himself. There's a phantom guilt that consumes him and he has that same kind of self-revulsion and that same kind of bitterness. You know what that bitterness is like. You know how you're gonna hurt yourself. You know how you're gonna bring the bitterness inside of you.

If you can find a way to transmute it into something positive and to transmute it into love, to empathy for the most broken members of society, empathy — the soul of empathy is deep understanding. You are in a position to deeply understand what these dispossessed members of societies feel. You can take your bitterness and you can use it for something powerful. And if you do that, you can stand to have it inside of you and you can be whole again, and you can be healed. So, we were talking about this a while back, and you kind of added another layer to this. I wondered if you can kinda come back and revisit those thoughts.

Imu: Yeah, so, I thought it was a beautiful idea, the idea of taking law and finding law to be curative because you take this awful, traumatic experience and you turn it, you weave it into the fabric of your national DNA, to your moral character, and you find a way to take the trauma and to make sure that no one else experiences what you experienced. However, in the back of my mind I wondered if that was somewhat speculative, you know, if there's more evidence. And I did what you often teach us to do, which is, okay, so if there's "sham lo chok umishpat," right, if God placed the law, a chok and a mishpat, my question was, is there an earlier chok or mishpat that is taught to us? Was there something, was there some other laws given before this moment, and it turns out that there are earlier laws, just a chapter or two ago, back in Exodus 12. They actually get their first chukim.

Rabbi Fohrman: So, let's actually read that text. We hear in chapter 12 verse 14 that this holiday, the holiday of Pesach, of the korban pesach, this chukat olam, it's a chok, a precept, that will endure forever. But then you pointed out to me that at the very end of this, we actually hear about what this essential chok is, with this language, "zot chukat hapesach." Right? Where is that?

Imu: 43.

Rabbi Fohrman: So take us into 43.

Imu: So, what actually happened is, this whole chapter is pre-Exodus and post-Exodus. So it's the laws of the korban pesach at the night in which they're being taken out of Egypt.

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay, so "vayomer Hashem al moshe v'al aharon, zot chukat hapesach," this is the law of the Pesach; "kol ben nochar lo yochal bo," you've got to be part of the community to eat it. And indeed, you know, as Imu, you and I have talked about together, the korban pesach really is the offering that makes us a community, and that says this is what it means to be an Israelite. And what you have is Israel being formed as a nation this night.

And, Imu, you'd think that if you had some sort of symbolic vehicle that was responsible for the creation of the nation, your instinct would be that everything about this would be, it's all about us. It's about, this is only for us, and anybody who has a wisp of being a foreigner, right, has nothing to do with this, and as evidence, somebody who's a foreigner, you know, can't do this. But then the

text hits you over the head in 47 and 48, you hear about this amazing exception to this, something that just kind of boggles your mind, doesn't seem to fit.

Imu: There it is. It's the ger, the stranger, is included — in fact, the stranger must keep the same laws as a natural-born Israelite, the verses say “torah achat yihyeh l'eizrach lager hager b'tochechem.”

Rabbi Fohrman: So here you have a non-Israelite, somebody who's not part of the tribe, and he's kind of hanging out there on the outskirts, but the resident alien makes the Pesach with you. Right? And “vayake eizrach ha'aretz,” and he is to be treated like a citizen as long as he can be part of this larger community, and it seems to be this moment where the text is saying your community is larger than you think it is. Right? It's not just those who have exactly the same mitzvot as you; it's those who dedicated themselves to an upright and upstanding vision and are willing to join you and be a part of you, even as they have differences that they celebrate too.

And the ger is someone that you bring in and that you connect with on the very night that you celebrate your own nationhood. The thing that you might think excludes them, you don't exclude them. And it lays the groundwork for laws of Marah, “sham sam lo chok umishpot,” the great implicit, not explicit law, the great implicit law of you've just been through all this bitterness, right? Reach out — My mitzvot are good, they will allow you to take that bitterness and do something transformative and positive with it. It'll allow you to relate to the ger.

Imu: Now, I went back and read this chapter after you taught this to me and I was just so struck by the fact that here's this people, this ger — the Israelites are referred to as gerim in Egypt, and they were cast out and they were treated terribly, turned into their verminization, turned into their genocide. And as we leave, we have this oneness offering, this unity offering, this korban pesach which is supposed to be done family by family, and it is the most patriotic expression you could possibly think, it's hanging the flag outside your house, right — it's literally the blood on the doorposts, right? And you'd think that when you hang your flag out on your doorpost, right, you would think that it's the most exclusionary thing in the world, right, patriotism, nationalism necessarily means we are better than everyone else, and yet, you know, in the same breath, it says torah achat yihyeh l'eizrach lager, you actually include the stranger, you include the foreigner. Don't do to others what was done to you; bring them in.

And what's incredible here is that these laws are taught together, the laws of korban pesach, the laws of treating the ger kindly. And these laws are all taught in one succession, the laws of korban pesach before they leave and then the same chapter tells you that they leave, and then it tells you what they do on that night when they're camping in sukkot. But one of the things that's taught right before the laws about making sure the ger is included is verse 37, it says “vayisu b'nei yisrael meramses,” they leave Egypt, verse 38, “v'gam erev rav alai etam, right,” it tells you that a mixed multitude, people that seemingly aren't Israelites, right — it says “rav,” “rav” is a word that was used to describe the threat of Israel, “vayirbu,” they became very, very many.

So what's interesting here is that the Israelites are leaving with their own mixed multitude. There are some gerim that have come along for the ride, and we're not to treat them as a threat. We're actually immediately told, there's some newcomers with you, and you've gotta treat them just the way you would any other citizen. So it's really powerful, it's just this incredible repudiation of the values of Egypt, in a way that is redemptive, in a way that takes our trauma and our victimhood and it turns it into moral character. It turns it into what it means to be an Israelite.

Rabbi Fohrman: And in a way, you know, you were talking about before, the redemption really is the theme here, taking that which was bitter and transmuting it. The sickness of mitzrayim, the machala of mitzrayim becomes the mecholot, the dances of Miriam, right? The taf that was thrown in the water becomes the tof, right, the timbrels and the flutes that they were dancing with. And the marim of bitterness becomes the joy of Miriam's song. And the terrible, evil decrees of the king, right, which are exclusionary, which are, treat the ger as if he's inhuman, becomes no, treat the ger as part of your larger community and your community is larger than you think it is.

And, Imu, you know, what struck me as fascinating was an insight by one of our writers, Ami, who really got me thinking about this. When he was, you know, doing this work on the Shmoneh Esrei — if we go back to Refa'einu, the words of Refa'einu seem to evoke Marah, the story of Marah — that indeed is where God is spoken of as our healer. But Refa'einu also includes another word, which goes not just back to Marah but somewhere else in the Torah. "Refa'einu Hashem v'nerafei, hoshienu vanevasheya ki tehilatenu ata," that You should be our rofeh, our healer. And then "tehilatenu ata" is a strange word, "ki tehilatenu ata," because you are — and Ami and I were struggling to figure out, like, how would you even translate that?

And the best translation I could come up with is either because you are our song or you are our rapture, something, you know, this passionate singing of the song. That's what "ki tehilatenu ata." It's almost like the taking of the sea goes one step into Marah, almost like it's taken up a level in Marah. And it turned out that this word tehila actually comes from somewhere in the Chumash, Ami happened to notice, that "Refa'einu Hashem v'nerafei hoshienu vanevasheya ki tehilatenu ata," that comes from Deuteronomy 10:12, "hu tehilatcha," He is your rapture, "v'hu elokecha," [35:00] and He is your God who did all these amazing things.

So here God describes Himself as, here the text describes God as He is our rapture. But what, exactly, makes God your rapture? The preceding verses talk about that, and in the preceding verses, God adjures us and says, look, I'm a God that asks things of you. Verse 13: "lishmor et mitzvot Hashem," I ask you to keep the commands of God.

And Imu, here's the amazing thing: the text goes on right before it talks about God as tehila to detail what the commands of God are. What are these commands? God says, listen, let me tell you about who I am. I am a God who's "oseh mishpat yatom v'almana," I take up the cause of the orphan and of the widow. Ohev ger, I'm the God who loves strangers. "Latet lo lechem v'simla," to give them bread, to give them clothing. And because I love strangers, here's my command: "v'ahavtem et hager," you should love strangers. Why? "Ki gerim hayitem b'ereetz mitzrayim," as you were strangers in the land of Egypt. And therefore, "et Hashem elokecha tira oto ta'avod uvo tidbak uvishmo tishaveya," you should cling to God, God should be the essential basic staff in your life. You should cling to Him, you should worship Him, you should swear in His name, He's everything to you because He loves strangers. Because you were a stranger and He loved you, and you can emulate Him by loving strangers. "Hu tehilatcha," He is, after all, your rapture.

And so I think when the Sages brought together this idea of God as our rapture, right, together with Refa'einu, [25:00] perhaps they really were bringing forth this fundamental mitzvah which they see God as asking from us, is to be like Me, right? Love strangers. I loved you, I took you out of Egypt; use your feeling of bitterness, right, as a vehicle for love, to be able to transmute your own bitterness into a kind of loving and giving of those who were in the unfortunate situations that you once found yourself in.

Imu: So, you know what a lot of this reminds me of, this notion of taking something bitter and transmuting it into a more whole and maybe even more beautiful experience? It reminds me a lot of the seder, right? In the seder you have the bitter herbs, where you kind of experience it separately in maror, you eat it and it's bitter —

Rabbi Fohrman: Isn't that fascinating, that in a way the whole Marah experience, which the Israelites experienced historically, we experience again every seder because we're faced with their challenge, which is how in the world am I gonna eat this horseradish, right? You know what I mean, like, there's this big pile of horseradish, and I'm gonna choke on this. And yet I've gotta eat the maror, just like they had to drink the bitter waters, right? How are you ever gonna do that? And it's almost like you were saying — the seder actually gives you a strategy for it, right, which is kinda crazy.

Imu: Right, because eventually you get up to korech, right, and korech takes the, you know, the line in the Torah literally, "al matzot umorim yochluhu," and it's this sandwich, the sandwich with a few elements, it's got matzah, it's got maror, and it has the meat of the korban pesach, and you eat it all together. And it's actually kind of refreshing. You take something that on its own is bitter, and you put it together with these other elements, with the great unity offering of the korban pesach, you eat it together and it transmutes it, it turns something bitter into something tasty, something enjoyable.

Rabbi Fohrman: And that's God's formula for healing. Right? And all of a sudden you have a delicacy. So too in our psyches we have a delicacy, if we take the bitter parts of life and bring them in and transmute them and become a whole and use them in ways that make us ourselves whole. So the bitter parts of life actually make life richer and deeper, which is a profound understanding of suffering, right? Which is that when suffering is taken alone, it is nothing but suffering, but when somehow it becomes part of the rest of life, there is a kind of depth of experience that you have with the sandwich when it's got some horseradish in it that just doesn't exist if all it is is sweetness, light, and candy. It's a meal. And somehow, as painful as that is, that is the path to healing. Right? To somehow become whole, to bring suffering into our lives, and to figure out what we're going to do with it to bring this into ourselves. If we can figure out what to do with it in our lives, we can be healed.

Imu: Yeah, it's remarkable. It's something that I need to chew over, no pun intended. But this, the idea that I think on one level, that the bitter parts of our lives and the terrible things that we suffer somehow give flavor to the rest of our lives, it's a very hard thing to understand or to swallow — again, no pun intended. But there's also this other piece which rides on top of that, which is, and if you have experienced bitterness, and if you're moving past it or trying to move past it, the best way to do that isn't to bury that deep down, because it will haunt you. It's to find a channel for it, it's to find some way to take that bitterness and to apply it, right, in our situation, in the situation of Israel, inasmuch as they were treated like strangers and treated awfully, we invite the stranger in, and we make sure that they become included as part of our national pride. But just that larger message is something I really want to think more about.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah. So, Imu, I think we're almost there — we have one final mystery left in this grand saga of Marah, and it is the magic trick. It's the mysterious —

Imu: The tree!

Rabbi Fohrman: — tree that gets hurled into the water. Somehow it's got something to do with those little children that another king hurled into the water, that, why the tree, right, with its roots

floating in the water — what was that mysterious message about? And Imu, we're gonna have to try to tackle that when we come back next time.

Imu: Great, so in our next session, I promise you that it all comes together: the tree, Refa'einu, I promise we'll talk about what all of this means to us, personally, during this era of Covid 19, how to pray for healing during this time, how we heal from trauma, and we'll set the stage for just what all of this has to do with the Omer. Join us next time.

Rabbi Fohrman: Thanks. See you then.

Refa'einu Revisited

Rabbi David Fohrman: Hey, folks, this is Rabbi David Fohrman, I'm back here with Immanuel Shalev. This is gonna be the last episode in which we're gonna be talking about Marah, if things go well! And then we're going to move on to one of the next stories in the Torah, the story of the manna. Right, is that what we're doing next? What are we doing next, Imu?

Imu Shalev: It's what we're doing next, because we're gonna deal with sefira next! We've dragged you along on this journey, we promised you coronavirus antidotes — sefirat haomer answers, and I promise you it will come together. Thanks for sticking with us. But, yeah. Here we put the cap on Refa'einu and we move on to sefira, and show you how everything we've been doing actually does relate quite a lot to sefira.

Rabbi Fohrman: So, in order to do that, we kinda do have to put the cap on Refa'einu, and therefore we wanna address this one last kind of nagging question which we've been talking about — what is this mysterious tree that gets hurled into the water, what's that all about? So, Imu, I came across something that I want to share with you. It, I think, is pretty intriguing.

It begins with a fascinating wordplay. The word I'm thinking of is actually the word that the king of Mitzrayim was battling against. You're on the couch, you're Pharaoh, you're struggling to tell your psychiatrist, what is it you hate, what it is you fear about all these Israelites? And remember, Pharaoh didn't begin by hating us. Pharaoh began by fearing us. What did Pharaoh fear?

Imu: He feared their population explosion — “vayafnu vayirbu vaya'atzmu.”

Rabbi Fohrman: “Vaya'atzmu.” Right? “Vaya'atzmu” is the culmination of three verbs, right? “Vayifru, vayirbu, vaya'atzmu,” right? They had children, “vayirbu,” and there were many, “vaya'atzmu,” and they became mighty. And Pharaoh fears that, right? Because what does he tell his populace? “Hen am b'nei yisrael,” the people of Israel, “rav v'atzum mimenu,” they are too mighty for us. It was that fear of Israel that caused Pharaoh to act.

Imu: They're most afraid of war, they're afraid that they're going to join their enemies and fight them, and in a war, the most important issue is how strong are they, how many are they?

Rabbi Fohrman: Right, so these population numbers translate into might. That's what scares Pharaoh. So, spell “vaya'atzmu” — right in the middle of it, you see that “etz,” ayin-tzadi, right? So there's “etz,” tree, and what's on the other sides of “tree?” Yud on the one hand, mem on the other hand. A tree in a veritable sea. A tree in a veritable ocean. A tree in a veritable, endless, expansive

water. That is what “vaya’atzmu” is. And if you think about it, in this context, here is Pharaoh, who is panicked by the “vaya’atzmu,” by Israel, and he’s got a plan.

If you would take the plan in terms of wordplay, it’s almost as if Pharaoh is saying, how will I do battle against this tree in the water, as it were, against this mighty thing, this mighty, powerful force? I will take out the tree, and what will I thrust into the endless waters instead? Children. “Kol haben hayalud hayora tashlichuhu,” all children cast into the waters. And God then comes in the story of Marah and plays off of those words, and says the evil king Pharaoh, this little king, he comes along and says, cast children into the waters of the Nile, “kol haben hayalud hayora tashlichuhu.” I too am a king, and I too can issue commands, but My commands are different. “Vayorehu Hashem etz vayashlech al hamayim.”

We talked about “vayorehu Hashem etz,” and God showed Moses this tree and had him cast it in the water — plays off of “hayeora tashlichuhu” of Pharaoh. And now we begin to see another layer in that wordplay. It’s as if God is writing the situation, God is saying, let’s bring it back to the way it was; I’m the king who believes in “vaya’atzmu,” I am the king who fosters “vaya’atzmu,” I am the king who wants you to become mighty. Pharaoh is the king who wants to destroy your might, wants to drown children as a way of attacking vaya’atzmu; I am the king who believes in the tree in the water.

So, when I saw this, it was suggestive, it sounds like, oh, well, Fohrman, I never thought he was the kind of guy who was into gematriya so much, and he’s got this wordplays, and this – it all sounds like this tower of speculation. But what made me think twice about this and think that there really is something going on here is actually something that Ami, the scholar here at Aleph Beta who was working on Refa’einu showed me, and I kid you not, he showed me this text — it hit me between the eyes, it was like, holy mackerel, what in the world is going on here? And that text, coming out of nowhere, is Jeremiah 17. And, Imu, I want to take you into Jeremiah 17, because it just knocked my socks off.

What Ami showed me is something which was pretty remarkable, which is that the Sages actually are not just anchoring their words in Biblical language; they’re also anchoring it in language from the prophets, later Biblical books as well, they’re drawing upon both of these sources. And what Ami showed me in 17:14 is confirmation of exactly that idea. Read 17:14. “Refaeini Hashem v’nerafei, hoshieni v’yivashea, v’tehilati ata.” It’s just right out of Shmoneh Esrei. This is clearly where they’re coming from. Now, heal me, God, and let me be healed, save me and let me be saved, because You are my rapture. So, clearly —

Imu: This is the prayer, pretty much word for word.

Rabbi Fohrman: This is the prayer word for word. Now, that doesn’t mean we’re wrong, right? Goel yisrael clearly goes back to the Exodus. The beginning goel yisrael, reina v’onyenu, clearly goes back to the exodus. Refa’einu, I think, also clearly goes back to Marah. But there’s other layers here, right? There’s a layer in Prophets, and then there’s a layer in Torah. That’s true for Refa’einu, and I think it’s true for all of the blessings in Shmoneh Esrei. Ami and I are working on a podcast now in Shmoneh Esrei, where hopefully we’ll show that throughout the entire Shmoneh Esrei, there are biblical layers and then there are prophetic layers. And then the rabbis are drawing on both of those.

But here’s the thing — if that’s true, Imu, right, you might think like, okay, so let’s draw a little triangle here. Up there is the rabbis, and then down here is the Torah and the prophets. The Sages

are drawing on the Torah, they're drawing the story of Marah, so let's connect that little dot at the top which is the Sages — let's draw a line that goes all the way down to the Torah in Marah. To finish my triangle I'm gonna take another line from that top dot of the Sages, and draw it all the way down to Jeremiah 17. But, Imu, I've only got two lines, I need three lines for a triangle. What line am I missing?

Imu: You've gotta understand how Jeremiah relates to the story of Marah.

Rabbi Fohrman: Exactly.

Imu: I'd argue if you can't do that, then, you know, we may have totally missed the mark in saying the Sages had anything to do with Marah. It seems that it's a much stronger proof to say it comes right out of here from Jeremiah.

Rabbi Fohrman: Exactly.

Imu: So the pressure's on, Rabbi Fohrman!

Rabbi Fohrman: The pressure's on. Can we draw that line? Did the Sages understand that Jeremiah 17 was really leading back to Marah? So let's go back, Ami says, to the beginning of Jeremiah 17, and let's actually read through the text, coming up to 14. So our goal is to get to "refaeini Hashem v'nerafai hoshieini v'nevasheya ki tehilati ata." But just like we did with Marah, we had to look at the backstory; here too in Jeremiah 17, we've gotta look at the backstory of verse 14. What is the backstory of "refaeini" in Jeremiah 17? Ready, Imu?

Okay. So, Imu, let's start from Jeremiah 17, let's start with verse 5. "Ko amar Hashem, aror hagever asher yivtach ba'adam v'shem basar z'ro'o umin Hashem yasor libo." God says, cursed is someone who trusts in people who makes mere flesh his strength and turns his thoughts away from God. What is such a person like, Jeremiah continues — "v'haya c'arar ba'arvah," he's like this kind of wilty kind of bush in the desert, "lo yireh ki avo tov," he's never even going to be around to sense the coming of good times, "v'shachan charerim bamidbar," stuck in these scorched places in the desert, "eret malecha," the salty earth, "v'lo teshev," it's in a barren land, no one can even live there, and there's this isolated bush that's just gonna wilt and die. That's somebody who trusts in man. But on the other hand, "baruch hagever asher yivtach b'Hashem," blessed be the man who trusts in God, "v'haya Hashem mivtacho," God, for him, is basic bulwark, his basic source of trust. What is that person like? Look at verse eight, and it just hits you between the eyes. Imu, read us verse eight.

Imu: "V'haya k'etz shatul al mayim." Oh, wow. It'll be like a tree that's planted on water. "V'al yuval yishalach shereshav,:" this tree seems like it takes root by the river, "v'lo yireh ki avo chon," and it won't see when the heat comes, "haya alehu ra'anan," its foliage will be splendorous.

Rabbi Fohrman: It'll be verdant, it'll have these leaves that are green, no matter how hot it is outside, these leaves that are green and wonderful because it's not gonna become parched; it's got its access to water built in.

Imu: "Uvishnat batzoret lo yidag," when a drought comes, it has nothing to worry about, presumably because its roots are in the water, "v'lo yamish measot peri," and it will, it never stops providing fruit.

Rabbi Fohrman: So, Imu, isn't that just like — here you have this "refaeini Hashem v'nerafei, hoshieni v'yevasheya," this line that the Sages are drawing to Jeremiah 17. And what's Jeremiah 17

talking about except for a tree in the water, which is the whole thing of Marah? It really is true — Jeremiah 17 is talking about Marah, it's talking about a tree in the water.

Imu: Okay, Rabbi Fohrman, you've laid the groundwork for me — can I try and attempt to tell you what this means to me?

Rabbi Fohrman: Sure, I mean it feels like you've got this tree in the water thing, which is coming right out of Marah, together with the Refa'einu — put the pieces together for us. What do you see here?

Imu: So, first of all, just what you said is true, right — obviously Jeremiah 17 is pointing us back to Marah, right, the “Refa'einu Hashem v'nerafei hoshieni v'yevasheya,” the only time in Chumash you have “vayhosha Hashem” right next to “ani Hashem rofecha,” so it seems very much like Jeremiah is commenting on Marah, which is amazing, because we really need to understand what's going on in that story, and verse eight jumps out at me.

So, right — “vahaya k'etz shatul al mayim,” you know, you will be as a tree that is as planted on water, so I'm picturing sort of like this missing piece here in the Marah story and picturing the etz being thrown into the water, but what's happening to that tree that's being brought into the water — in what sense is it curative, in what sense is it sort of healing? Well, Jeremiah's telling us the etz is “shatul al mayim,” it's like it's planted in the water. It's not like running down the river, “va'al yuval ivshalach shoreshav.”

Rabbi Fohrman: Almost the way I see you — hearing this, that at some level there's this dichotomy, right, between Jeremiah 17 and Marah, which is that even though the imagery of the tree in the water is so stark, that it's so obvious it's going back to Marah together with the refaienu, and yet there's a slight difference between the two trees, right? Because the tree in Jeremiah 17 is this tree that's planted on this island in the middle of this oasis, and it's got its root system all going into the river, and it has nothing to worry about.

But if you look at the tree in the water at Marah, it was a very different tree, right? Moses took this tree and literally yanked it out of the ground — this tree has just gone through trauma — it's like the tree is like, I had a very good life with all my roots in the ground, and all of a sudden I'm taken out and being hurled into the water, this poor tree is floating on the water — so it's two entirely different visions. And maybe the answer is that Jeremiah is talking to us about that, and talking about the meaning of faith and the meaning of hope. Who would need hope more than that little tree? Who is that tree? That tree was us.

Imu: Right. And that's the verse right before that, “baruch hagever sheyivtach b'Hashem,” right? Blessed are those who trusted in God, “v'haya k'etz,” they will be as a tree that was “shatul al mayim,” a tree that was purposely planted on water. And I don't read it necessarily the same way you do — you add in an island and in an oasis, right? The text here says planted on water, right? Which you don't plant a tree on water. You plant a tree in the ground. But this tree is planted on water.

Rabbi Fohrman: You see this when you're hiking in New Hampshire, you know — you'll sometimes see, there's this tree that's just coming out of the river, right? How did that tree get there? And you've gotta think that well, one day there was this tree, you know, it was on the side of the river, and there was this big storm and it got washed away, poor little tree. What God seems to be saying is, guess what, I have news for you! You can take a tree and you can rip it out of the

ground and you can throw it in the water, but that isn't necessarily the end of the tree! A tree has the ability in the water to have its roots catch onto some stone and to grab hold of that, and then fast forward five years later, what is that tree? It's no longer this little bush, but it's this proud tree coming up, and it's better off for being in the water. It has its root system and it's fine and it's doing — it has nothing to worry about, it doesn't have to worry about the summer...

Imu: And those are the very next words, right? “V'al yuval vayeshalach yorshav,” it will catch root, right? You plant the tree in the water — oh no, that's terrible! Water is a destructive force! But no, “v'al yuval vayeshalach yorshav,” it's gonna — it will grab root, it will stand, and then here's the amazing metaphor, is that water was this destructive force and it went through trauma, but now, no. Now the water's gonna be the source of its strength. “Lo yireh ki yavo chom.” There's actually a nice double entendre, he will not see heat, but “yireh” also, yud-resh-alef, is he will not fear the coming of heat. But that word “chom” also, you can read as “cham.” Here, little Israel, this tree, need not worry about the coming of “cham.” Cham is one of the sons of Noach, and the father of Mitzrayim. He need not fear Cham's progeny, he need not fear Mitzrayim.

Rabbi Fohrman: That's it, that the tree need not fear “chom.” And if you think about the tree as Israel, right, and as God as the waters that nurture it, so it comes back to this idea of “baruch hagever,” you can understand why “blessed is the one who hopes.” There is hope for a tree that gets cast — and of course, cast in the water over here, we sort of understand why it is that the tree of Marah was this uprooted tree that was thrown in the waters. And it goes back to that play on words that we talked about in our last session: “vayorehu Hashem etz,” right, when God shows Moshe this tree, “uvayashlichehu al hamayim,” and he throws it in the water, evokes “kol haben hayulud hayor tashlichuhu,” what Pharaoh did to our children.

He uprooted children from the bosoms of their mothers and hurled them into the water, and God says, you know what? That's not the end of you. I am going to make sure that you thrive. And if Israel is the tree, I am the larger king here, and I can see to it that one way or the other, this tree, so to speak, lands on its feet. Israel will not be destroyed by your terrible designs, no matter what it is that you choose to do.

Imu: It's exactly what we've been saying over and over again, is that the suffering is transmuted into flourishing. If we just finish the verse, “vayaalehu ra'anan,” his foliage will grow and maybe even — in “ra'anan” is “anan,” the cloud, maybe a cloud of glory, “ovishnat batzoret lo yidag,” and during the times of cold and suffering, he will not be worried, because he, now, that water source which threatened to kill him, is now nourishing him. He's got plenty of water. “V'lo yamish measot peri.” And here's the real clincher: it will not stop from producing fruit. Right? What was the whole reason why Pharaoh threw us in the Nile? “Vayifru vayarbu,” right? He wanted to cut off the fruits!

And now, what's the ironic thing? By throwing us in the water, we will catch root and we will never stop producing fruit. It's so beautiful, how it unpacks the metaphor of throwing the tree into the water — you were thrown in the water to cut off your fruits, well, you know what, Israel? You are a tree. You can withstand this. “Vaya'atzmu” was the source of your threat, and you are an etz, you are a tree, and you will flourish.

Rabbi Fohrman: Right? You can't drown a tree. It might be painful, it might be traumatized, but you can't drown the tree. Look how Jeremiah takes it just three verses later, in verse 13. Mikveh yisrael Hashem, suddenly, we discover, what's the water? What's the water and what's the tree? Well, we know what the tree is, the tree is someone who has faith in the Almighty. And what's the

water? The mikvah of Israel is God. now, mikvah's a funny word, right? Cuz mikvah means two things. It can mean a reservoir of water, a reservoir of water is God, God is the water. And of course, mikvah also has another meaning. Mikvah doesn't just mean a reservoir of water. It means the hope of Israel, right? When you trust in someone.

To trust is to have hope, even in hopeless situations. To have trust is to say, no, I can go on, because I can cling to hope. God is the hope of Israel, as well as the water of Israel. Kol ozvecha yevoshu, another double entendre, anyone who leaves God, yevoshu could either mean, right, becomes ashamed, but it could also mean, becomes dry, just dries out, from the word yavash, right? Vesurei beretz yikatevu, ki azvu mekor mayim chayim et Hashem, because they have left this source of eternal running water, they have left God behind. So God is the waters, right?

And that itself is the sense of hope, the double entendre of mikvah. Mikvah is both a source of water and hope. If the waters are not just the cold, hard waters of chance, waters that just happen to be there, but they're God's waters, then somehow there's hope for the tree. Can the tree have faith, right, that there will be a kind of light to the end of the tunnel, that there's these larger waters, they're God's waters, not just Pharaoh's evil waters.

And Imu, the metaphor that comes to mind here for me is that of Russian dolls. I remember my mom used to have this Russian doll — you open it, you unscrew the thing, and there's another doll inside, there's another doll inside, there's another doll inside. And it makes me feel like the analogy, so to speak, between God and Pharaoh, the king of kings and the local king Pharaoh is kind of like this Russian doll sort of analogy. And to me, I wonder if that is kind of explained the faith here that Jeremiah's talking about.

Let's take the notion of faith and take it back into the story, right? If anybody had faith in the story of Marah/the Exodus from Egypt, right, who do you say is the great paragon of faith in the story? Interestingly, Jeremiah talks about "baruch hagever asher yivtach Hashem," blessed be the man who has faith in God, and yet ironically, the great paragon of faith is not a man at all, right, the "baruch hagever asher yivtach Hashem," is really Miriam, right? Miriam is the great paragon of faith.

Imu: Maybe that's why Jeremiah puts it that way, right? Like, the women don't need the help here. They're the ones who had faith. It's the men who needed it.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yes, it's the men who needed it. And, you know, we've talked before about how the story of the Nile is a kind of microcosm of the story of the sea, and one of the aspects of that microcosm is Miriam's faith playing out on the larger stage of the world. Right? It's not a coincidence that what Moshe tells the people to do is to just be still, when they see the Egyptians coming. And the language for the faith that he asks them to have in God is "hityatzu uruvu et hayeshuat Hashem," stand and watch the salvation that God will perform. And of course there was someone before who stood and watched at the great body of water, and that was his sister Miriam, "vayetatzev achoto merachok yodeah ma ya'aseh lo." She stood and watched from afar.

And I was kind of thinking about this, and I was kind of saying, you know, Imu, if you put yourself in Miriam's shoes at that moment that she stood and watched, what gave her the strength to do that, right? What's going through her head? I think you can sort of think about Jeremiah 17, this notion of "mikveh yisrael Hashem kol ozvecha yevshu v'baruch hagever asher yivtach Hashem." If you think about Jeremiah 17 as being a commentary, the kind of faith of Miriam, the kind of faith that began to lead to this healing at the Song of the Sea and then God almost picks up where Miriam left off, with this stick in the water, it kind of all came together for me.

And here's why. Let's kind of inhabit Miriam at that moment. You have this prophecy, your mother's gonna give birth to the savior of the Israelites, and yet it's all going awry. The stormtroopers are outside the doors, your mother is crying, your mother in an act of desperation puts together this little coffin for the baby, puts the baby in the coffin, and of course, at that moment, could anyone bear to watch? And no one really watches, except for Miriam. Miriam somehow has the strength to watch. And now, if I interviewed you, right, and I said Miriam, why are you watching, what in the world do you think you're going to accomplish by watching? [30:00] What would Miriam say?

Imu: Yeah. The way you're putting it kind of hits me over the head, right, sort of like there are only two people who would watch something horrible like that. One is a sadist, someone who enjoys watching pain, and the other is someone who has hope. This is mikveh yisrael. Someone who has hope that the horrible thing won't happen.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah. And she doesn't know where that hope comes from or how it's gonna happen, but that's not her job to know how it's gonna happen, right? If "mikveh yisrael Hashem," if "mikveh" also means waters, isn't it strange that what scares Miriam is water? Miriam is the girl who is named by her mother perhaps mar-yam, for the bitter waters, and as she looks over those waters and stands and watches, that's when her name is staring at her in the face. There's this huge Nile and it looks endless, it looks like there's no hope, and in a world like that, there's no hope if it's really true that the bitter waters are a yam, if it's really true that the only thing there is is this Nile and the only king there is is this Pharaoh, so how could I ever have any hope? I couldn't! I would give into the same yeush, the same sense of devastation, that everyone else in this story has. But she didn't say that. She stood and watched, because in her mind, there was a larger picture. So there was a king, yes, who hurled children in waters and those waters were very bitter, but at the end of the day she confronts her name mar-yam and says no, it's not true; my waters aren't bitter. Right? There's a larger body of water than this. It's the king's waters, the King of Kings.

And the King of Kings also hurls things in the water. The King of Kings looks at what's happening, what's happening is that we are babies being hurled in water. There's a tree being hurled in water. And it's awful for the tree, but the tree can take root, and she's seeing a larger picture. She's saying Pharaoh was just a local power, and that this too will pass, there's a larger waters here. Now it's almost like she's saying, can I reap myself in those waters, can I leave this little jurisdiction of this little king Pharaoh and say that, no, I'm part of these larger waters, can I feel nourished by those waters, can I feel that hope of "mikveh yisrael Hashem?" And that's what gives her hope.

And it doesn't necessarily mean that in the small picture things will work out, but what she's saying is that in the larger picture, it will. And even if for me it doesn't, to stand and die and to stand and be destroyed — but to be in the jurisdiction of the larger King, the benevolent King, and to say that the greatest force in the universe is not this local king but there's something larger is to say that the world is ultimately in its largest sense a good place. It's not a place of chance and horror.

And, you know, it comes back, Imu — there was this book I read a long time ago, a famous self-help book, Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and he basically says, you know, everybody's got your circle of concern and your circle of control. And he says there are things in life that we can control, but we're always concerned about more than we can control. So our circle of concern is always much greater than our circle of control. And what he counsels people to do is don't give into the temptation to try to control what you can't control, that lies outside of

your circle of control, but in your circle of concern; instead, focus on the small, little circle of control, what you can actually control.

And amazingly, sometimes by doing so, you can strengthen that circle and can slowly begin to grow. And if you think about Miriam at that moment, Miriam was living this nightmare of having a very small circle of control when her circle of concern completely eludes her. What's a circle of concern? Here's her brother, he'll probably drown in this Nile, right? And now the question is, well, I'm terribly concerned about that, but what can I do? And her answer to that is, what I can actually do is so much smaller than this — I can stand and watch. I will be there for my brother. I cannot save him, but I can accompany him, and I will not be intimidated, I can be there with him.

“Vatikazev achoto merachok,” and she defeats the bitter waters. I have the strength to relinquish the circle of concern, and to say that there's a larger body of water. That's up to God. I focus on what I can control, and I stand and I watch.

And isn't it interesting what happens as she stands and watches? Along comes the daughter of Pharaoh, and you would think if there's any time to turn away, this would be the moment. But she still stands and watches, even as Hitler's daughter approaches. And then the amazing thing happens, which is the interaction between the two women that create the salvation, the daughter of Pharaoh on the one hand and Miriam on the other. Miriam's great strength is her faith; the daughter of Pharaoh also has a great strength. It's something else.

It's strange — Divrei Hayamim identifies her as “Bitya,” which literally means “like Batya,” the daughter of God, as if God says, I'm taking her, she's my daughter, and she is, because it is God's values that she follows rather than her father's. Her father makes a national security argument that all the children are vermin and they need to be thrown into the Nile, but one wonders if at the moment her father decrees that, her daughter is horrified. And here's this moment that she actually sees this baby, this Israelite baby, and she hears the baby and she hears his cries, and she sees his pain, much like God says I have seen the cries, I've heard the pain, and she allows herself to be moved by that. If you think about the great thing that we're supposed to learn from the Egypt experience, the very first person we learned it from was actually the daughter of Pharaoh — love the stranger, love the other.

She reached out to the alien, to the one who was different, the horrible, evil snake that needed to be cast into the Nile, she said no, this is a human being, this is a child, and she stretches out her hand and sends her maidservant and fetches the child. She takes action, action that expresses great divine values.

And together, the faith of Miriam and the acts of loving the stranger of the daughter of Pharaoh become two ways, in a way, that these two women take themselves out of the jurisdiction of a small evil king, the father of one of them, the nemesis of the other, and put them into the jurisdiction of a larger king, and a larger king's waters, and the daughter of Pharaoh says I have another father, the king of kings, and I choose to plant myself in his waters.

It's almost like as you leave the story of Marah, together with Jeremiah's commentary, it's almost like those two ways of planting yourself in God's waters, two ways of becoming that tree. And one of them is through faith, as Miriam does. And Miriam says, I can only do what I can do, right? She doesn't have the option that the daughter of Pharaoh does, she can't directly save that child. But what she can do, she can be with him, she says I can just do that. And then God says, you know what? You say I'm in the jurisdiction of the King of Kings. Well, the King of Kings has ways of

making things happen. Here comes Pharaoh, and Pharaoh says I'm gonna destroy the Israelites, I'm gonna throw them in water — you know, it's as if God says, really? Can you control everything? Do you really have the jurisdiction over the whole that you think you have? What if your own daughter has compassion? What if your decree of genocide revolts her and actually causes her to rebel? How can you stop her being the one who becomes the mother, as it were, of the savior of Israel, who nurtures that savior of Israel and actually brings your whole empire down into a calamitous ruin?

And it's this elegant thing, is that God doesn't, He says, look, you have jurisdiction, Pharaoh, you have your local jurisdiction, and I'm not even gonna meddle with your free will. You do your thing. You throw the babies in the Nile. You don't realize, though, that the babies are trees, right, that Israel as a whole is a tree, and one way or the other I am committed to *vaya'atzmu*, I am committed to their flourishing. You don't have as much jurisdiction as you think you do.

To me, these are the great lessons of *Marah*, that at the end of the day, the faith of Israel comes back when God says here's the real ocean, God's waters can destroy the enemy, but God's waters can also nurture, and those are the waters of *Marah*, that are the bitter waters on the one hand, the bitterness and all the tears of Israel that in a way are the same as God's waters. God says, it's all part of My water. I take all of those tears and have seen all of your pain, I'm with you, and yet the world can be good. Pharaoh is a local disturbance — at the end of the day, I'll have My say.

Imu: It's extremely powerful. It's hard to unpack everything you just said because it's so moving. First of all, just the *mikvah yisrael Hashem* idea of the larger waters of God, and even the rest of the verse, right, the end of the verse is “*mekor mayim chayim et Hashem*,” right, to understand, here are these waters that were destructive, and to understand that all waters have a deeper source, and that the deeper source is life-giving waters.

Just, again, going back to what you said about how Miriam could have stood by and watched — you have to know that these waters, these destructive, local waters have a deeper source, there's a larger source. And it makes so much sense now, why she's the one who sings her own song and leads the women in song, because her prophecy came true, her faith was borne out, she is the one who trusted in God, as Jeremiah is sort of praising the ones who trust in God, and this incredible, miraculous thing happens. And she gets it before everyone else does, right?

So you have the next piece with the tree in the water and the people not being able to drink the water — they sort of have to learn the lesson that Miriam does, and maybe they're given this other way, as you were saying, they're given this other way of experiencing a *refuah*, right, there's sort of the easy way, where you may not even need it in the first place, which is have faith in God when you experience sickness, that actually it's not even sickness, that there's something about this that will turn out okay, but for those who can't, there are deeds, there are action, there's law, and that's what happens at *Marah*, is we're given law kind of seemingly, like you're saying, in the same way that Batya was able to, the daughter of Pharaoh, in the same way that she was able to take a horrible decree and turn it into the seas of empathy and eventually the seas of redemption, we ourselves are given law and we're commanded to transmute our horrible suffering, our trauma, into “*veahavtem et hager*,” into taking care of others. So these ideas seem so incredibly deep and powerful and moving.

So, I had wondered, you know, having seen all of this, how would you understand *Refa'einu*? Like, how would you see this prayer that Chazal have decided to found our prayers in sickness, right? So we're talking about people who are sick, people who may have cancer, people who may have

coronavirus. The prayer to say is Refa'einu. And yet, the story it's pulling on is a story of faith, a story of trauma, a story of psychological trauma. Why do you think Chazal picked this?

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, I wonder if every physical trauma, if every sickness, right, comes with its psychological trauma also, comes with this horror. I mean, you just read the news stories, that thank God I haven't suffered illness with COVID-19 to this point, and I pray that I won't, but the stories I've been reading is that one of the things that happens is it's not just the physical illness; there's a sense of real panic and fear that you kind of have to combat if you come down with this or if anyone you love comes down with it. You know, it's a real psychological horror and trial as well, from which we may need healing in its own right.

Maybe on some level that's some of the recognition here, that Refa'einu is just as much for the mind games that terror and devastation play upon us, as much as it is the physical healing. We need healing from that as well. And at some level, maybe one of the things we need to do is to root ourselves in the larger king's waters, to understand that yes, there is pain and there is suffering, but we have two great ways that we can connect to the mekor mayim chayim and be nourished by the great waters of life. And one of them is acts, and one of them is faith. And faith can be a sense that, look, I am going to root myself in what I can do.

You know, the great celebrity coronavirus narrated his way through it, was Chris Cuomo, who on CNN kind of narrated his journey from the bottom of his basement through COVID-19. One of the things that struck me about it is, he thought I'm just gonna lie around and wait for my body to deal with it and get better, and what can I really do, and you know, we have different approaches. You can kind of run for the miracle cures at some level, to grab desperately and expand unnaturally that circle of control, circle of concern.

But, you know, his doctor said, tell me about your breathing, and he says my breathing is really hard, I can't do it. And he said, okay, here's what you need to do. You need to stand up, take this deep breaths, count — I'm giving you these breathing exercises. And Chris said I can't, and he said yes you can. Do this. This is what you can do. And it's a slow expanding of your circle of control. What gives you the mindspace to do that? It's this little thing that I actually can do, which can be ever so slightly helpful, put me in an ever so slightly better position.

And I think that's faith, where you can say, look, there's a larger king here and there's a larger jurisdiction, and if you can gain some peace of mind from that, that in some kind of way, even though I can't see it, it's gonna work out okay, and even if it doesn't work out okay for me, at some level there's a larger picture, and in the larger sense it will work out okay.

It's like my father always used to say — and my father struggled with cancer — and one of the things he used to tell me when he used to tell me these stories, and sometimes the stories were scary, I was a little kid. And he would say to me, David, it's scary in the middle, but it always works out in the end. And if at the end it hasn't worked out, it means it's not the end yet. That is the story of faith. If at the end it hasn't worked out, it means it's not the end yet. The waters that you see are not the whole waters. It's just a river. There's larger waters, and larger things — it's going to work out. And if you could root yourself in that understanding, if you could just take a deep breath and say, okay, what can I do? Let me just focus on that circle of control, and the rest is in God's hands.

Imu: So much was poignant for me while you were talking. I think one of the pieces here is that this prayer of Refa'einu and these points here aren't about how to magically make yourself better. It's not like, oh, say this prayer three times and you'll heal whoever you say it about, right? It's

actually kind of just a way of dealing with sickness. And one of the things that's here is, you know, there may be death, there may be pain, there may be loss. And there are ways to deal with that. And sort of faith for me, in this story, isn't wishful thinking or hopeful thinking, you know, like, oh, you know, just have blind faith and it'll all turn out well. It's actually surrender to a truth, which is, there is a mekor mayim chayim. All waters flow and come from an ocean. There is a larger source for everything, and if you know that, then what's left to you to do is to surrender and have a sort of faith that the larger story is a good story. Whether you survive in that story or whether you do not.

Rabbi Fohrman: And I don't think it's just — I think there's two sides to faith. One is a kind of surrender, that the story's okay on an equanimity that allows me to live, even if things aren't going to be good, I can live with it — that's one side of faith. But the other side of faith, I think, is the actual hope for salvation that increases through faith. Right? Because that happened with Miriam too, right? Miraculously, by standing and watching, she ironically is in a position to do more than stand and watch. The moment that she sees the indecision on the face of the daughter of Pharaoh — it's a Hebrew child, what should I do, I have compassion — she says, can I go and call somebody to nurse the child for you? And she actually becomes the vehicle for salvation by just doing what she can do. And that's the miracle of all of this. It wasn't even a miracle; it was, God says, look, I have jurisdiction here, and if you place yourself in My jurisdiction and you appeal to Me, then even in the moments of great darkness, even the moment of genocide, there is always hope, that it might not work out, but it can.

Imu: What you're saying to me is sort of like a perfect one-to-one for the cholei, right? It's an antidote to the kind of sickness. Because the way you describe this sickness is a sort of buckling under the hopelessness of it all. Right? You talked about survivors' guilt. It's not just that you went through this trauma and then the baby boys are going to be killed, but it's now your left pretending and acting as though you have fewer options than you really do. Right? You walk around and you say, I shouldn't have more kids, and I can't go on with my life. That's because you're plagued with this sort of sickness of this general malaise, this general perception about the world, that this world is a hopeless world and I have no options, there's no path forward for me. The cure for the illness is the hope.

Rabbi Fohrman: There's a deep part of what you're saying, which is that survivors' guilt is itself a confusion between circle of control and circle of concern. I'm so focused on what concerns me, that I give into this illusion that I had some control over it, and I feel guilty because it didn't work out the right way. Which is the flip side of when it doesn't work out, right, that you could be plagued with survivors' guilt. And faith is an answer to that too. Faith says no, that wasn't in my control. That was in control of the king. In this case, that was in control of the evil Pharaoh. My circle, someone else's circle. And the same faith that can allow you to say that there's a larger God in the universe and therefore I can move on, can also say to you, and there is human evil in the universe, and I don't have to take responsibility for that either, and I don't have to be plagued by that. I do what I can do and I will hold my head up high, even in the face of pain and suffering, and I will not take responsibility for what an evil human being does.

Imu: And I wonder if, at its most essential level, at a level even deeper than that, if the basic way of understanding sickness is hopelessness. In that sense, I very much relate to what's going on now during this COVID pandemic, is there's this general hopelessness. I don't even think we're conscious of it, but, like, living day-to-day can sometimes be just utterly depressing, because of the hopelessness that's in the air. And there seems to be a type of bravery, and a sort of healing, in

saying I can have hope. I can have hope that things will get better, I can have hope that this is part of a larger story, part of a larger and, you know, divine plan. And again, I'm seeing how Refa'einu, the prayer, isn't about magically healing anybody; it's sort of about cultivating hope and cultivating and understanding that, you know, you can plant yourselves in larger waters. And just doing that, it just changes the way you behave. It changes the way you experience your days. And we can't — it's so hard to go on under this cloud of hopelessness.

Rabbi Fohrman: Yeah. It's a kind of refuah in itself, right? Faith, in a way, is the first stage in refuah. And I think that's what Miriam brings to the table. Miriam is the first one to heal the women, and somehow her faith at the Nile gives her the ability to lead women in song at the sea, and to be able to sort out what was in my control and what wasn't in my control, and what's the larger king outside of the evil king, and she's able to gently say to the women, there's people being hurled in the Nile, but this is God acting now, and this is the larger waters. This is the end of your nemesis, right?

And that brings us into Marah, a place where we can have the strength to somehow take our bitterness and that kind of expresses itself in these waters that we're so afraid to drink, and to become whole, to be good, to live virtuously, and to find a kind of healing. So I think yes, faith in the small picture allows us to say there is hope — if I'm in the jurisdiction of a larger good king, I can always appeal to God for miracles, and miracles happen, you know?

And the other side of it is, and even if not, I'm part of these waters, and the larger waters are good. And there's an end to the story that I haven't seen, and I can still make peace with an outcome that I cannot change, that I would rather have been different, because I still have faith that there could be a kind of goodness that I cannot see, even in that outcome. And so faith works both ways, I think. And maybe Refa'einu is that blessing for us.

Imu: And faith is only one side of the coin, right? There's this other side of the coin —

Rabbi Fohrman: Which is action.

Imu: Of the chukim, of action itself. That, to me, is chilling here in this story. So there's a way of achieving healing through action, and maybe this is, you know, your circle of control, and —

Rabbi Fohrman: Well, ironically, what is outside of Miriam's circle of control is inside the daughter of Pharaoh's circle of control. Everyone has a different circle of control, and it's precisely there that she can act in a way that Miriam can't. And I think one of the lessons is, what is your circle of control? Sometimes your hopeless friend has a smaller circle of control than you can, but you can be the one to actualize their salvation in a way that they could only have faith in. And you could be God's instrument in making something happen. If you keep God's laws, we have the chance to be instruments to bring healing to all sorts of people that we could never imagine. "V'ahavtem et hager." Your actions can change the worlds of others, when that lies hopelessly out of their circle of control.

Imu: And maybe this is just me, and I'm sorry if this is too dark, but these themes that we're talking about makes me feel like refuah, healing, is even possible after death, it's even possible after loss. Because, you know, the stories about Israelites who did lose many baby boys, and they still needed to come back and to drink from water. And this is the story of how. This was a people that was outcast and mistreated horribly for being geirim, and one of the pieces of refuah here is a

transmutation, and to take your suffering and to turn it into something good, and to turn it into something that outlasts the suffering and transmutes it into something curative.

And what I think about now is, who are we? How are we dealing with this crisis? Are we mourning, are we sharing silly memes on Whatsapp, or is there something we can be doing that transmutes this difficult time where we can start caring about those who are outcast, the people who are sick, alone, can we drive over and safely keep them company, can we take meals to people who can't go out and get groceries, can we stop thinking so much of ourselves and stocking our pantries again and again and again and start thinking of others, and stocking their pantries?

Rabbi Fohrman: And that's another way to bring healing to us. No matter what pain we've experienced, no matter what trauma we've experienced, I think one of the great lessons of this is that you can transmute that pain into a kind of giving to others, and when you do, it brings healing to you. "Shamarta chukuchav kol hamachala asher samti b'mitzrayim lo asim alacha." Not only are you not plagued by guilt, right, but you can transform your bitterness into a force for good. And with that, you can become whole with the part of your experience that you otherwise would become alienated from. And that's part of the healing too. So, yeah, these meditations on Refa' einu and Marah gives one a lot to think about.

Imu: They are deep waters.

Rabbi Fohrman: Deep waters, it gives one a lot to hope for. So, Imu, thank you very much. I think from here, the great — this kind of concludes our first look at the great journey from Exodus to Sinai, and the healing that comes through it, and the way that we recover from Egypt. But it's not the end of that very same story, and that brings us to sefirat haomer, something which never in a million years would you think has anything to do with healing, or anything to do with hope, but I think has everything to do with that. And that's what we'll get into next time we talk.

Imu: Thank you. Thank you again, Rabbi Fohrman, for teaching this to me. It was really impactful, and I'm eager and excited to begin the next chapter of this journey.

Rabbi Fohrman: Okay. See you then.