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**A Parsha Weekly by the Friedman Kollel  
of Metropolitan Washington**

**Parshas Bo  
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## **Bitter Medicine**

**By Rabbi Eliezer Lachman, Rosh HaKollel**

In this week's parsha, we read of the very first pesach-offering, the one that was brought in Egypt on the night of the plague of the first-born, and in whose merit Hashem "passed over" the houses of the Jews and saved them from the plague. This pesach-offering differs in some key respects from the pesach-offerings brought after the Exodus, but with regard to the maror (bitter herbs) obligation it is the same as then. Hashem commanded that maror should be eaten with this offering (Shemos 12:8), and Rashi explains that these herbs serve as a remembrance for the fact that the Egyptians embittered the lives of the Jews. This is very surprising. We understand that in the coming years and generations it is necessary to have a remembrance for what took place in the distant past. But for the people who had just experienced that bondage a short while ago and who had not yet left Egypt - why was it necessary for them to have maror as a remembrance?

There are some other difficulties with the concept of maror that warrant investigation. Granted that in the Pesach seder it is necessary to have a remembrance of the Jews' experience in bondage, but why is the remembrance geared specifically to the aspect of "bitterness?" Why not a remembrance of hard work or of oppression? Also, why is the remembrance accomplished through the mechanism of eating? Generally, eating is understood conceptually as taking something external into oneself and making it a part of oneself. (For example, the Torah explains that one should not eat non-kosher animals because they are tamei (impure), and they will make us tamei if we eat them; see Vayikra 11:43-44). If so, why should the symbol of the bondage in Egypt be eaten? Why would we take the negative experience of slavery and make it part of ourselves through eating, rather than accomplish the goal of having a remembrance in some other manner?

The answer to these questions lies in a deeper understanding of the concept of a person being "embittered." When we talk of a person who is embittered, we refer to a person whose will or desires have been thwarted, who has been frustrated, who expected life to be one way and it turns out another way. Inasmuch as the essence of slavery is to not be able to follow one's own will and actualize it, as a free man does, but rather to follow the will of his master, bitter herbs is an appropriate symbolism for slavery. It may not capture the sense of degradation and pain that a slave feels, or the back breaking labor that he must perform, but it does convey the essence of slavery - that the person cannot act upon his own will.

There is a positive aspect to the feeling of bitterness that a slave feels. Provided that this bitterness does not overpower him and make him either numb, or angry and resentful, it has the effect of increasing the slave's sense of self. The bitterness makes the slave aware that he has desires and a will of his own that he is not fulfilling, and this awareness ultimately increases his capacity for freedom. The sting of bitterness nurtures and develops his consciousness as an independent being with an independent will. In the case of the Jews in Egypt, the bitterness had the effect of developing their Jewish characteristics. Thus, Chazal teach that the bitterness of the slavery in Egypt enabled the Jews to experience the joy of receiving the Torah (see Maharal, Introduction to Derush al HaTorah).

The goal of eating maror on Pesach night is not just to remind us of the suffering of the Jews in Egypt; it is, rather, to make us aware of this entire dynamic of slavery-bitterness-freedom. We want to internalize this dynamic within us through the symbolism of eating, because doing so will ultimately enable us to develop our own identity as Jews, just as it developed the identity of the Jews who were actually enslaved in Egypt. And even the Jews who were leaving Egypt were given the mitzvah of maror, to enable them to focus on, appreciate, and internalize further this bitterness dynamic, which was essential to their becoming the people who could receive the Torah.

## About the Friedman Kollel

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel, located in Olney, Maryland, offers learning opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds. These include one-on-one chavrusas, public lectures and classes for men and women, as well as after-school structured learning for public school teens. The Kollel operates under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Lachman and Rabbi Shaya Milikowsky. For more information or to sponsor an upcoming Capital Torah, please contact Rabbi Elyakim Milikowsky at [FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org](mailto:FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org).

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