

## Parashah One Hundred Forty-Six

Deuteronomy 29:10–30:20; Isaiah 55:6–58:8; Romans 10:1–15

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*notes by Tim Hegg*

### *A Root of Bitterness*

Bitterness is characterized in the Scriptures as a root—a deep growing reality, difficult to see or dig out, but always bringing forth its destructive fruit. The writer to the Messianic Jews says it this way:

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the LORD. 15 See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; 16 that there be no immoral or Godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (Heb 12:14)

In our Torah section for this Shabbat we have very similar words:

Moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them); lest there shall be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from Adonai our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood. (Deut 29:17–18)

In both texts the idea of a “root” is found, and the “bitterness” specified by the Apostolic writer is no doubt a reference to the “poisonous fruit and wormwood” used as a metaphor by Moses. A sure “litmus test” for poisonous fruit is that it is bitter, and wormwood is, apparently, a leaf or seed (pod) that tastes very bitter.

But we should also note that the “root of bitterness” in each case is a person or persons within a community that, unwilling to submit to the rule of HaShem, causes the community to falter. The admonition of the Apostolic writer is directed to the community as a whole: “see to it that...no root of bitterness spring up... and by it many be defiled—that there be no immoral or Godless person like Esau ....”

The same is true in our Torah text: Moses is exhorting the nation as a whole, and warns them about those who would remain among them and, having given themselves over to false worship, would infect the community as a whole with the spiritual disease of idolatry. Thus, in each case the “root of bitterness” is a person or persons who refuse to submit to the rule of HaShem and rather go their own way, as the next verse indicates (29:19[18])—

19 “And it shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, ‘I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered land with the dry.’”

Because the bitterness is within the heart and seems hidden from the community as a whole, the person who stubbornly refuses to submit to HaShem’s rule thinks he is secure and untouchable.

But the next verse is striking: “God will not agree to forgive such a person.” Here we have eternal consequences thrown into the mix! God promises to deal with that which is hidden, in fact, v. 29 most likely has this very thing in mind:

The secret things belong to Adonai our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this Torah.

Some of the Sages have interpreted this to mean that the secret sins “belong” to HaShem in the sense that He will deal with them on His own. Those which are revealed, however, are the responsibility of the community (i.e., “belong” to the community), and God will deal with the community on the basis of how the community deals with the revealed sin within its midst (See Ibn Ezra on 27:15; b.*Sanhedrin* 43a; cp. Mid. Rab. *Num* 3.13). Like the Apostolic author, Moses warns the community that to tolerate a “root of bitterness” is to accept God’s punishment upon the whole community, for the root of bitterness will inevitably poison all who become entangled in their bitter fruit.

How are we to live out this teaching? First, the stern and harsh language used in our Torah text regarding someone characterized as “poisonous fruit” and “wormwood,” should warn us away from bitterness altogether. What exactly is “bitterness?” Interestingly, the Apostle Paul includes it in the list of things which are to be put away in advance of forgiving others:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Messiah also has forgiven you. (Eph 4:31–32)

That v. 32 of Eph 4 begins with the word “and” indicates that it is bound together with the admonitions of v. 31. In other words, the things listed in v. 31 impede forgiveness—they therefore must be “put away” in order for the healing salve of forgiveness to be administered in one’s life and community. “Bitterness” is the result of a lack of forgiveness toward someone who has sinned against me. Rather than forgiving in the pattern of God Who forgave us in Messiah, bitterness rather holds on to the offence desiring to see “justice” done by “getting even” or seeing the offender duly “punished.” I put these words in quote marks because “justice,” “getting even” and “punished” are all aspects of what God does, not what we do. This does not mean that we forego justice. Nor does it imply that forgiveness is only real if restoration with the offending party is realized. Restoration requires not only forgiveness on the part of the one who has been sinned against, but also repentance of the one who has sinned. Moreover, even if both parties genuinely forgive each other, this does not necessarily guarantee their relationship will be restored to what it was before the offense.

Further, it is important to realize that the ability to forgive someone does not depend upon that person repenting. We can forgive someone who has sinned against us even if they never repent or ask to be forgiven. Forgiveness means changing my perspective toward the one who has sinned against me, giving the offence up to God, and allowing Him to discipline and deal with the offender in His way, according to His timing.

Forgiving simply means submitting to God’s method of justice rather than trying to administer our own. Even in the worse case scenario (i.e., capital crimes), we are not allowed to take the matter into our own hands. God has prescribed a method (2 or 3 witnesses, a court, etc.) by which

His justice against the criminal will be realized. If we must follow His prescribed method in the greater matter (capital crimes) how much more should we follow His outlined procedure in lesser offences? “Forgiving” begins by submitting to God and His way of handling things. If He commands me to forgive the person who has hurt me, then this is where I must start. I must change my perspective toward the offending person, putting the matter into God’s hands, and being willing to deal with that person (or persons) with a tender heart of forgiveness. Such a perspective may lead to healing for both the offended and the offender, while a selfish outlook often results in gossip, spreading the bitterness to others. Indeed, Paul (in Eph 4:31-32) links sins of the tongue (“slander,” the actual Greek is βλασφημία, “blasphemy”) with bitterness and those sins which stand in the way of forgiveness.

Bitterness affects not only the offended person and the offender, but the whole community, because the person who harbors bitterness may well be himself a “root of bitterness,” meaning his poisonous fruit is growing within the community. So detrimental is a root of bitterness within a community that God labels it an “abomination”:

There are six things which Adonai hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers. (Prov 6:16–19)

“Spreading strife among brothers” is the constant effect of a “root of bitterness.” Rather than forgiving and experiencing the peace that comes from humble submission to God’s ways, a root of bitterness sows seeds of division and discord.

What is the remedy for bitterness? It is repentance, as the Apostolic author states. In the case of Esau, he recognized (apparently) that repentance was necessary, but though he sought it with tears, it was never to be his possession. We learn from this a startling truth: repentance is a gift from HaShem, not necessarily the automatic possession of any who seek it. If God grants repentance (Acts 5:31; 2Tim 2:25) then it is a gift of unspeakable worth, for repentance frees us from bitterness and allows us to extend the same kind of mercy that we have received in Messiah toward those who have sinned against us. In forgiveness we emulate HaShem; in bitterness we follow in the footsteps of Esau. In mercy we act like Yeshua, in hatred we give way to the devil (Eph 4:25–27). May God grant each of us a heart of *teshuvah* (returning/repentance) that we might forgive others as He has forgiven us:

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (Matt 6:14–15)