



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BAMIDBAR > Matot-Massei

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August 6, 2016  
Matot-Massei

**Bittersweet: A Lesson from  
Almonds**



# Meaningful Sermons

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## ABSTRACT

What lessons in serving our Creator may we learn from the man in the Oval Office?

President Barack Obama recommends almonds – legend has it, seven almonds exactly – as a healthy and delicious snack.

Almonds contain nutrients. They also contain cyanide. Most importantly, they contain profound lessons in serving G-d and turning a life made bitter by devastation into one that is sweet.

The Haftorah of this week, from the Book of Jeremiah, speaks of the devastation visited upon Israel and of the prophecy that we will see justice done in the end.

In the course of this prophecy why does Jeremiah speak of almonds? What do almonds have to do with the Temple's destruction and its ultimate rebuilding?

Everything. Grab a handful of these wonderful nuts, make a blessing, and chew on these foods for thought.

## BITTERSWEET: A LESSON FROM ALMONDS

### 1. Almonds and Obama (Humor)

“Obama Sets the Record Straight on His 7-Almond Habit” reads the headline from *The New York Times* of a July 28th. The article by Michael D. Shear begins:

Does President Obama really eat only seven almonds at night?

As people watched Mr. Obama’s speech at the Democratic National Convention on Wednesday, many took to Twitter to offer a thought: He did such a good job, he deserved to let himself eat more than seven almonds that night...

These observations were referring to a story [in *The New York Times* earlier this month] about how Mr. Obama spends his time in the evenings, reading briefing papers and watching sports in the Treaty Room, often into the early hours of the morning.

Among the details mentioned in the story, and coming from his personal chef and close friend, Sam Kass, was the fact that Mr. Obama was disciplined about not snacking on junk food or drinking soda.

His snack of choice, Mr. Kass said, was seven almonds. “Michelle and I would always joke: not six, not eight,” Mr. Kass said. “Always seven almonds.”

But in an interview broadcast on Thursday, NBC ... put the question directly to Mr. Obama, who seemed eager to set the record straight.

“This is an example of the weird way that the press works,” Mr. Obama said, chuckling. “Michelle and Sam Kass, who was our chef here, one night they were talking about me and teasing me about how disciplined I was, that I didn’t have potato chips or I didn’t have a piece of cake. And this is when Michelle said:

‘Yes, and he just has seven almonds. That’s it,’ to really drive home the point that I needed to loosen up a little bit. And Sam relayed this joke to *The New York Times* in the article, and somehow it was relayed as if I was counting out the seven almonds.”

After the author of the article debunks the myth he himself reported, he concludes with this quote from the President: “You know, almonds are a good snack; I strongly recommend them.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Current Events: Presidential Elections and Nine Days

You don’t have to be a Democrat (or an Obama supporter) to agree that almonds are a good snack. They are healthy, tasty and nutritious.

Nothing in life is random. Least of all almonds. Least of all seven almonds. So what can the President’s snacking habits teach us about our relationship with G-d?

And while we are speaking about the President...

Both nominees for the next President of the United States are now official. Donald Trump has formally accepted the Republican nomination and Hillary Clinton has formerly accepted the Democratic nomination. Let the fireworks begin. No further comment...

Of course, I am reminded that this here is a house of worship, not a political forum. G-d is not elected; G-d is not nominated; G-d cannot be impeached. But I am also reminded that the Jewish calendar covers the gamut of human experience...

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/us/politics/obama-sets-the-record-straight-on-his-7-almond-habit.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/us/politics/obama-sets-the-record-straight-on-his-7-almond-habit.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&_r=0).

There are times of joyous celebration and times of mournful lamentation. Today, the 2nd day of the month of Av, is the second day of the saddest period on the Jewish calendar. Just as we increase in joy with the onset of the month of Adar, the month of Purim, so do we decrease in joy with the onset of Av, the month in which the Temple was destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, on Shabbat we celebrate – we are not sad, we do not lament, and do not mourn. However, with the exception of Shabbat, for the first nine days of Av, leading up to *Tisha B'Av* – the day when the first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans – we do mourn. As part of our mourning, we refrain from eating meat, drinking wine, getting married, washing clothing, listening to music, traveling, swimming, etc.

Indeed, this time-period is called *bein hamitzarim*, “between the confines,” or put another way in English, “between a rock and a hard place.” “Dire straits” is another apt way of putting it.

As we become aware of our vulnerability at a time like this, what can we do? What can we learn about facing challenging times? About turning the days of bitterness into days of sweetness?

And this is where almonds come in (in case you were wondering).

### 3. Matot-Massei: Haftorah of Jeremiah x2

Today we read the two final portions of the Book of Numbers – *Parshat Matot and Parshat Massei*. In the years when these two portions are read separately, they would each have a Haftorah from the Prophet Jeremiah. For *Parshat Matot*, we would read selections from chapters 1 and 2, and for *Parshat Massei* we would read selections from chapters 2 thru 4.

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<sup>2</sup> Taanit 29a.

But when we read both *Matot* and *Massei* together in the same week – as this year – we read Jeremiah chapter 1-2 on Shabbat *Parshat Pinchas* (the first Shabbat of the Three Weeks, which was last week, and then we continue Jeremiah chapters 2-4 this week.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in chapter 1 Jeremiah speaks about almonds, as we shall soon discuss, and then this week we read:

*For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the spring of living waters, to dig for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that do not hold water. Is Israel a slave? Is he a home-bred slave? Why has he become the prey? Young lions roar over him: they have raised their voice, and they have made his land desolate, and his cities are laid waste, without an inhabitant.*<sup>4</sup>

This is as sad of a description as there is. Unfortunately, most of us here know it first hand. Who in this room has not experienced *broken cisterns that do not hold water*, broken dreams that hold no purchase? And, please, show me the person who has never asked: *Why [have I] become the prey?* Why am I being victimized?

This is the question of all questions – one which every one of us in this room has most likely asked at some point in our lives. And, at the risk of painting with the broadest of strokes, this leads to a question that probably most people have asked more than once in their lifetimes: How can I mend myself when I feel broken?

#### 4. Jeremiah and Almonds

Perhaps we could find the answer and better understand the words of Jeremiah's prophecy of this week, if we read his words that come just before – the part about almonds:

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<sup>3</sup> See Tosafos Megillah 31b. Tur and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim Siman 428.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 2:13-15.

*And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: What do you see, Jeremiah? And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree (sho'ked)." And the Lord said to me: "You have seen well, for I hasten (sho'ked) to fulfill My word."<sup>5</sup>*

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, interprets this verse as follows:

The almond tree hastens to blossom before all other trees. I – G-d – also hasten to fulfill My word. As the Midrash Aggadah explains: An almond tree takes twenty-one days from its blossoming until it is completely ripe. This is the number of days between the 17th of Tammuz, when the city walls of Jerusalem were breached, until the 9th of Av, when the Temple was destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Inner Dimension: Learning from Almonds

In the mystical teachings of the Torah's inner dimension, where a concept is dissected to its core in order that we may glean a glimpse of its essence, we find that this verse is read not negatively but positively. G-d works quickly and with alacrity, making an almond branch bloom in the blink of an eye.<sup>7</sup>

Later in his prophecy, Jeremiah expresses another profound idea:

*"And it shall be, as I have watched (shakadati) them [working] to uproot and to break down, to demolish and to destroy and to afflict, so will I watch (eshkod) them [working] to build and to plant," says the Lord.<sup>8</sup>*

In other words: "Redemption will come as quickly as the destruction."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 1:11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Taanit 4:5; Lamentations Rabbah 23; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:8.

<sup>7</sup> See Likkutei Torah, Chukat, 56b; Likkutei Sichot, vol. 33, pp. 194. See also Sfat Emet, Ki Tavo 5643.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 31:27.

<sup>9</sup> See Zohar II, 15b.

It takes a second to break something. It seems like it would take a lot longer to fix it. But G-d Himself says, “Learn from the almond, redemption comes as quickly as I desire – it can be instantaneous even.”

## 6. The Anatomy of an Almond

Almonds teach us some more lessons about this sad period of the Three Weeks and Nine Days.

There are two types of almonds: “bitter” almonds and “sweet” almonds.<sup>10</sup>

The “bitter” almonds are sweet when they are young and become bitter as they mature; and the “sweet” almonds are bitter when they are young and become sweet as they mature.<sup>11</sup> But the “bitter” almonds are poisonous – from them cyanide is derived. This is why all the almonds commercially available today are of the “sweet” variety.

The 20th century Talmudic scholar, the Rogatchover Gaon, says that it is precisely these almonds – that go from bitter to sweet – that are called *sho'ked*. (The other kind is called *luz*.) The fact that the Haftorah chooses to use the word *sho'ked* twice, is coming to teach us that the bitterness of the three weeks of devastation must be and will be transformed into the sweetness of the “sweet” almond.

The point isn't only to remove the bitterness of these twenty-one days, but to transform them into sweetness – into days of joy and celebration.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mishnah Maasrot, 1:4; Chulin 25b.

<sup>11</sup> See Tzafnat Paneach al Hatorah, Matot (p. 300).

<sup>12</sup> Rambam, end of laws of Tannit. See also Likkutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 413.



## 7. Personal Lesson: Turning Bitterness to Sweetness

When you find yourself in a bitter place in a dire strait, think of the “sweet” almond: it starts off bitter and ends up sweet. Focus not on the moment, but on what the moment will bring. Not on the present bitterness, but on the sweetness you will soon experience.

Why do bitter things happen in life? This is a question no human being can answer. But to turn any bitterness in life into utter sweetness is a calling every single human being must answer, and it is an ideal we all must live up to.

This is one among many meaningful lessons that we can derive from the almond: When we are down, or even feeling devastated or destroyed, we have to know that, like an almond, we can go – almost instantaneously – from blossoming to ripening, which is when the bitterness of the almond turns to sweetness.

Another lesson: The Hebrew word for almond, *shakad*, also means to watch carefully and scrupulously. In yeshiva, there is a term applied to studying, *shkida v’hasmada*, meaning “scrupulousness and diligence.”<sup>13</sup> What does this teach us?

When something in life is bitter, once we know for certain that sweetness lies within that bitterness, then all that’s required is scrupulous diligence and persistent commitment to find it.

When we are unsure if within bitterness lies sweetness, then we may find it difficult to commit assiduously and wholeheartedly to the discovery process.

But if we know for certain that bitterness, like an almond, can and will be changed into sweetness, then we will give everything we’ve got – *shekidah* – to see it through; to emulate the *sha’ked* and make the bitter sweet.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf Proverbs 8:34.

The almond analogy thus provides us with a living example of growth and process. Never to get stuck in what appears at the moment, but rather always know that even when things may seem bitter or bleak at the moment, every step is part of the blossoming process, leading to the fruition of a sweet outcome.

## 8. Science Seeks Sweet Disguise (Optional)

Lest you think that turning bitterness into sweetness is a miraculous thing that we have no control over, consider that it is actually within the realm of science. Bitterness and sweetness is determined by the taste perception of our senses. But it is possible – scientifically speaking – to change that perception and taste sweetness where once we tasted bitterness.

The food industry, trying to offer healthier versions of popular foods without affecting the taste, has long been after ways to trick the tongue. In April, the Linguagen Corporation, a biotechnology company based in Cranbury, New Jersey, received a patent for the first molecular compound that will block bitter tastes in foods, beverages and some pharmaceuticals.

The naturally occurring compound, named AMP, is a “bitter blocker.” When added to certain bitter foods or drinks (including coffee) and certain bitter medicines, it blocks some of the acidic tastes from being absorbed by the tongue.

What exactly is a bitter blocker?

Well, as we know the human brain has the ability to recognize a variety of flavors including bitter, sour, spicy and sweet all over the tongue.

The tongue is covered in taste buds. When food mixes with saliva, molecules dissolve on the taste buds, they send a signal to the brain that interprets the flavor of what is being eaten. But when a bitter blocker hits the tongue, it prevents the bitter taste receptors on the taste buds from being activated. Thus, the bitter flavor in the food is technically still there, but the brain is unable to recognize it. And so you may find yourself drinking a smooth, mild cup of coffee without adding cream or sugar.

So far, scientists at Linguagen – after many years of research – have discovered about 20 compounds that block bitter tastes. AMP is the most promising among them, which it hopes to license to food, beverage and medicine manufacturers in the United States early next year.<sup>14</sup>

Reading about this discovery, I couldn't help but think that it has taken these scientists so much effort to mimic a process that occurs in almonds effortlessly and naturally.

## 9. Conclusion: Seven Times Three

I do not know if President Obama was aware of the deep lessons contained in almonds – which go back thousands of years to Jeremiah the prophet – when he chose to endorse them as a righteous snack but, nevertheless, their lesson is clear.

And whether or not the President eats exactly seven almonds a day, the number seven times three equals twenty-one – in other words, three weeks – which is the amount of time it takes for the almond to ripen after blooming, the amount of time it takes to turn bitterness into sweetness.

But G-d has His ways of reminding us of the power of almonds. And whether he knows it or not, the President may have served as a conduit to amplify this message of almonds to all of us.

<sup>14</sup> Adapted from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/26/business/tricking-the-taste-buds-science-seeks-sweet-disguise.html?pagewanted=all>.

May we merit that it is so, as the concluding verse of our Haftorah states:

*“If you return, O Israel,” says the Lord, “to Me you shall return, and if you remove these detestable things from My Presence, you shall not wander. And if you will swear, ‘As the Lord lives,’ in truth and in justice and in righteousness, then the nations will bless themselves by [the Name of G-d] and in Him they will glory.”<sup>15</sup>*

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah 4:1-2.