

# Rav Kook Torah

by Rabbi

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## The Test of Mara

Even before the Torah was revealed at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people received several mitzvot at Mara:

“They came to Mara... there God taught them a decree and a law, and there He tested them” (Sh'mot 16:23-25).

According to tradition, one of the mitzvot that God taught at Mara was keeping the Shabbat (Sanhedrin 56b). It appears that Mara was a prelude of sorts for receiving the Torah at Sinai. How did the mitzva of Shabbat prepare them for the Sinaitic revelation? And in what way was Mara a “test” for the Jewish people?

### Prerequisite for Torah

The area was called Mara because the waters there were bitter (MAR).

“When Moshe cried out to God, He showed him a certain tree. Moshe threw it in the water, and the water became sweet” (15:25).

When a person is ill, that which is sweet tastes bitter. The waters of Mara seemed to be bitter, but in fact they were sweet. These waters are a

metaphor for the Torah itself. The laws of the Torah are sweet to those with a pure soul and a refined character, but bitter to those burdened with coarse personality traits (Rambam, Hilchot Dei'ot 2:1). Mara laid the groundwork for Sinai by reinforcing the positive traits of kindness and compassion that are innate to the Jewish people (Yevamot 79a). The people would then be ready to receive the Torah, as their moral development would allow them to appreciate the sweetness of the Torah's laws.

How did the mitzva of Shabbat accomplish this?

Even though the Shabbat commemorates the creation of the universe, it was not given to all of humanity. Shabbat is a special gift for the Jewish people (Sanhedrin 58b). Why is that?

### Natural Kindness

For the sake of social order and harmony, people need to be occupied with labor. Work relationships and business dealings motivate people to be polite and pleasant to one another. Even if they do not like one another, it is in their self-interest to be friendly and helpful. If they are not working, however, this motive no longer exists. Human nature instinc-

tively looks out for self-protection and survival; without an incentive to gain the good will of others, people will naturally revert back to their self-centered tendencies.

This was the test of Mara. The Jewish people were given the Shabbat day of rest. Would they discover within themselves an innate quality of compassion? Would they remain considerate and accommodating to one another, despite the lack of personal profit to be gained from kindness on the day of rest?

This also explains the special connection between the manna and Shabbat. The manna did not fall on Shabbat, in order to “test them whether or not they will keep My law” (16:4). With their food provided for them, the Israelites had no need to earn a living. The test of the manna, like the test of Shabbat, was whether they would remain considerate to their neighbors without the incentive of personal gain. If the Israelites in the desert remained friendly to one another, it demonstrated that their kindness was not out of self-interest, but part of an innate nature of compassion and generosity. These were traits the Jewish people needed in order to accept the Torah.

The seven mitzvot of the Noahide Code, which obligate all of humanity,

do not demand the refinement of human nature. They just require the avoidance of evil. The Torah, on the other hand, was revealed in order to elevate the Jewish people to be a holy people. The ethical ideals of Israel cannot be based only on expediency and personal gain, but on loving “that which is good and proper in the eyes of God” (D'varim 12:28). Therefore, it was necessary to bolster the foundations for their innate goodness. This was how the mitzvot of Mara paved the way for the Torah's revelation at Sinai.

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