Eitz Chayim Hee: A Torah Commentary for Environmental Learning and Action

Hebrew/English Source Sheet
Torah Portion of B’shalach
“When the Wood Meets the Water”
by Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz

The sources are presented in the order they appear in the commentary.

Psalms 96
1. Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the earth.
2. Sing to the Lord, bless His name, announce His salvation from day to day.
3. Tell of His glory among the nations, among all peoples His wonders.
4. For the Lord is great and very much praised; He is feared over all divine powers.
5. For all the gods of the peoples are nought, but the Lord made the heavens.
6. [They ascribe] beauty and majesty before Him; might and glory in His sanctuary.
7. Ascribe to the Lord, [you] families of peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and might.
8. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; carry an offering and come to His courtyards.
9. Prostrate yourselves to the Lord in the majestic sanctuary; quake before Him, all the earth.
10. Say among the nations, "The Lord has reigned." Also the inhabited world will be established so that it will not falter; He will judge peoples with equity.
11. The heavens will rejoice and the earth will exult; the sea and the fullness thereof will roar.
12. The field and all that is therein will jubilate; then all the forest trees will sing praises.
13. Before the Lord, for He has come, for He has come to judge the earth; He will judge the inhabited world justly and the peoples with His faith.
Genesis 24:1
And the servant ran toward her, and he said, "Please let me sip a little water from your pitcher."

Genesis 29:2
And he looked, and behold! a well in the field, and behold! three flocks of sheep lying beside it, because from that well they would water the flocks, and a huge rock was upon the mouth of the well.

Genesis 30:38
And he thrust the rods that he had peeled, into the gutters in the watering troughs where the animals would come to drink opposite the [other] animals, and they would come into heat when they came to drink.

Genesis 37:24
And they took him and cast him into the pit; now the pit was empty there was no water in it.

Genesis 41:1
It came to pass at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh was dreaming, and behold, he was standing by the Nile.

Exodus 15:25
So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord instructed him concerning a piece of wood, which he cast into the water, and the water became sweet. There He gave them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them.
There He gave them In Marah, He gave them some sections of the Torah so that they would busy themselves with them, namely [they were given the laws governing] the Sabbath, the red cow, and laws of jurisprudence. — [from Mechilta and Sanh. 56b]

and there He tested them [He tested] the people and saw how stiff-necked they were, that they did not consult Moses with respectful language, “Entreat [God to have] mercy upon us that we should have water to drink,” but they complained. — [from Mechilta]

And isn’t it true that fresh water is wasted as soon as you add salt to it? How could [Moshe] put something detrimental into something detrimental and make a miracle? The Holy One Blessed be He said to Moshe, “Such is not my method. Rather I heal with that which I damaged.” Therefore, [he said] “These bitter waters I will heal with a bitter thing.” So too the tzadikim, with the same thing they incited, they repair. An example is that when Moshe complained to G-d, he complained with the word “Az” (since) saying, “Since I came to Pharoa to speak in your name [it has only worsened the plight of the children of Israel].” Moshe said, “with [the word] Az I blemished, so with [the word] Az I shall repair and sing, and he sang the Song of the Sea beginning with the words “Az Yashir.” (translation: Sareet Benayahu)
Ramban Exodus 15:25
And the reason “the Lord instructed him concerning a piece of wood” is that he showed him a piece of wood and said “cast this piece of wood into the water and it will be sweetened.” Since I cannot find a single use of the word “instructed” except regarding learning, [as in] (Proverbs 4:4) “And he instructed me, saying, teach me…” and likewise with all the other [instances], it seems to me that the simple meaning of the passage is that this wood would by its nature sweeten the water, as part of its inherent qualities, and this He taught to Moshe. And our sages have taught (Midrash Mechilta and Tanhuma, Exodus 15) that this tree was bitter, and it was doubly miraculous, as in [the miracle where] Elisha cast salt into the water (Kings 2 2:21). According to this [Midrash] the word “he instructed him” appears because this tree was not to be found in that place, and God guided [Moshe] to its location. Or He miraculously materialized it for him. Again I found in the “Yelamdenu” (Midrash Tanhuma Exodus 15), “And the Lord instructed him concerning a piece of wood”- It doesn’t say “He showed him” rather “He instructed him” [in Hebrew the difference is one letter] meaning, “He instructed him in His ways”. Meaning, He instructed and taught him the ways of the Holy One Blessed be He who sweetens the bitter with bitter. (translation: Sareet Benayahu)

Sources not included
Likutei Sichos 6:393

Unless otherwise noted, All English Translations from Judaica Press, available online at www.chabad.org