

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Chukas

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Chayim Mordechai *ben* Refoel *a''h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

More Than Meets the Eye

One of the tragic events recorded in this week's *parshah* involves the attacks of the *nechashim haserafim*, the "fiery" serpents who injected burning venom through their fangs (*cf. Rashi, Gur Aryeh, Be'er Basadeh to Bamidbar 21:6*). These agents of Divine retribution were unleashed among the nation in response to their complaints over the Heavenly fare with which they had been supplied to date. "And the people spoke, '... There is no (regular) bread and no water, and our souls are repulsed by this light bread (referring to the *mon*, which was absorbed into the body, producing zero waste [*Rashi, ibid. v. 5*]).' And Hashem dispatched the *nechashim haserafim*.. and they bit the people" (*Bamidbar 21:5,6*).

Crime and Punishment

An apparent difficulty arises. We know that Hashem dispenses justice based on the notion of *middah k'neged middah* – measure for measure; the nature of the punishment is tailored to resemble the manner in which the violation was committed. Hence, a murderer who drowns his victims eventually meets his end in a watery grave, as well (*cf. Avos 2:6*). What, exactly, is the correlation here between complaints about the *mon* and scorching snake-bites?

The commentators offer numerous explanations to account for the suitability of the snake selection. Rashi (*v. 6*) cites two possibilities. The complainers actually perpetrated the identical type of sin as the primeval serpent: slander. Attempting to coax Chavah into violating Hashem's command, the serpent had cast aspersions about the Creator and His abilities and motives. In this episode, as well, the people "spoke against Hashem" (*v. 5*). Furthermore, it was the subject of their complaints that warranted this particular response. One of the remarkable qualities of the *mon* was that it assumed all manner of tastes, suiting the desire of the consumer; they ignored this blessing and chose to gripe instead. And so snakes were chosen to exact recompense, highlighting the ingratitude of the perpetrators. Lacking appreciation for this multi-flavored delicacy, they were attacked by the creature for whom all foods taste the same – like dirt (*cf. Bereishis 3:14, Yeshayah 65:25*).

The Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe*) adds another fascinating dimension, which we present below. His explanation helps to clarify another puzzling aspect of this somewhat enigmatic episode – namely, the proposed cure.

When Moshe Rabbeinu appealed on behalf of the stricken people, Hashem revealed the antidote to the plague: "Fashion... (the image of) a serpent, and hoist it upon a pole; anyone who was bitten should look at it and will live" (*Bamidbar 21:8*). Moshe then devised a copper snake, which he suspended on a high pole, and it was through this that the people were healed.

Now, although the American Medical Association has adopted the snake-on-a-pole image as its longstanding official logo, the idea still begs much elucidation. How, exactly, are we to understand this mode of cure? What does looking at a copper snake have to do with staving off the effects of the venom, and how does it work?

Chazal themselves address the issue in an oft-quoted Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah 3:8*), stating:

וכי נהש ממית, או נהש מחיה. אלא, בזמן שישיראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהו שבשמים, היו מתרפאים, ואם לאו, היו נמוקים.

“Can a snake (really) bring about death or life? Rather (the phenomenon is attributable to the following): When Yisrael would direct their gaze upward and subjugate their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would become healed. If (they would) not (do so), they would pine away.”

On at least a cursory level, the Mishnah seems to be stating that the snake, in fact, played no actual role in improving the Jews’ condition. It was the inducement to gaze in an upward direction that caused them to recall where to direct their hearts; this was the true source of their salvation. Through the Chasam Sofer’s following treatment of the subject, we may gain an even deeper understanding of the nature of their recovery, in addition to the affliction itself.

Something to Complain About

The snake episode takes place toward the end of B’nei Yisrael’s forty-year sojourn in the desert, shortly before their entry into the Land. However, this was not the first time complaints were lodged against the *mon*; indeed, once before – toward the beginning of the desert journey – griping was heard. “There is nothing; our eyes (behold) nothing other than this *mon*” (*Bamidbar 11:6*). Now, about forty years later, the new generation suddenly adds its voices to the chorus of dissent. Why did they wake up now?

The Chasam Sofer explains the dynamics: While they enjoyed this multi-taste quality, the original consumers faced a challenge with their eyes. They may have thought of ravioli, they tasted ravioli, but they didn’t *see* ravioli, detracting somewhat from the “full experience.” But their children had no such issue; born in a desert, they had *never seen* ravioli or other foods; the only thing they had ever seen was *mon*. They could savor the taste of an apple without longing for the sight of one, for they knew not what it looked like. But now, as they approached the Land and surrounding civilization, they beheld these foods for the first time. With their newly acquired mental picture, they longed to behold what they tasted; so they, too, lashed out against the *mon*.

Hashem therefore sent the snakes. What was the *middah k’negged midah*? For the duration of their sojourn in the desert, B’nei Yisrael were afforded Divine protection from the desert dangers; no snake or scorpion bit them. Thus, those raised in the desert had no idea that these creatures were even hazardous. Encountering a snake was like seeing a bunny. Now, all of a sudden, these “harmless” creatures turned on them with a vengeance. They had been exposed to the *mon* for years; but having just discovered what food looks like, they now perceived a new element the *mon* lacked and complained about it. And so the previously friendly and familiar snakes also revealed in themselves a “new element”: namely, their venomous bite.

The downfall of the nation had come about principally through their vision and perception: they beheld the newfound sight of fruits and the like, craved to “see” what they were tasting, and felt that there was something lacking in their bounty. All of this contributed to their display of ingratitude. What was the most suitable atonement? An exercise in proper viewing. Now they were to *look* upward upon the copper snake, and ultimately past it, up into the Heavens.