

Chukas: The Snake is Not the Destroyer, Evil Itself Is

By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

In Bamidbar 21:4-9 we read of the incident when Bnai Yisroel complained another time about the man they were being fed. As a punishment, Hashem sent poisonous snakes to bite them. Afterwards, Bnai Yisroel realized that they were wrong so they asked Moshe to pray for them. Hashem told Moshe to make a copper snake and place where it would be high enough for all to see. Anyone who was bitten and looked at the copper snake was saved from death.

On verse 5, Rashi tells us that the snakes were sent as a punishment for complaining about the man since snakes are the symbol of lashon hara which in a broader sense, includes all slander and complaints. Rashi also states that the sending of snakes was an appropriate punishment. This is because the snake does not taste anything so it specifically should punish those who complain about the man which could taste like any food one desired at the time as the Midrashim tell us. Rashi also quotes the Mishna in Rosh Hashanah 3:8 that states the following: ‘Does the snake away and grant life? Rather the purpose of the placing the snake on high for all to see was to cause Am Yisroel to turn their hearts to their father in heaven.’ In truth, it is not the snake that is deadly but one’s sins. The Ramban points out that in this instance it was there was a double miracle. Normally, after being bitten by an animal, chas veshalom, seeing the image of that animal makes the effect of the bite worse. The fact that in this case the image of a snake was healer made it a double miracle.

The Gemara in Brachos 33A illustrates the point of the sin being the real cause of punishment with the tzaddik Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa. The Gemara there tells us that there was a serpent that was in their locale that was a major threat to people. Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa was notified. He went over to the serpent’s hole, got it to

come up and got bitten. The serpent then died. He brought the serpent's body into the Bais Midrash to show everyone that the people's sins were the source of the poison and not the snake itself. The author of Sefer Yismach Moshe asks how Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa could take a risk as big as the one he took. Granted, he was a tzaddik. But we see that even Yaakov Avinu did not want to rely on his merits when he had to face his brother Esav. The Yismach Moshe answers that Chazal tell us that when one sins, his mazel, his guardian angel sees the forthcoming punishment even if he/she does not. Fearing improperly itself is a sin. Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa saw no forthcoming punishment so felt confident and safe to challenge the serpent.

The Sefer Imrai Sechel comments on the Gemara that states after this story, 'woe to the one who meets up with this serpent and woe to this serpent who met up with Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa.' Is the Gemara eulogizing the serpent? The Imrei Sechel answers that the Rambam writes in his Sefer Moreh Nevuchim, Guide for the Perplexed, that all of the ferocious animals would never attack people on their own. The only reason that they ever do attack people is because of their sins. We see this idea brought out further in the fact that in the future, the predatory animals will lose their ferociousness because the world will be perfected. The Gemara was not eulogizing the serpent but rather, the state of mankind that it has such a long way to go to being perfected. This should motivate within us a strong need to do teshuva because as long as we do not, we are responsible for the existence of punishments such as the fierceness of wild animals. Indeed the snake is not the destroyer: Evil in itself is.