

Fiery Serpents and Retzon Hashem: Nesivos Shalom¹

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במדבר כא-ד-ט

וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהַר הַהָרָה דֶּדְרָךְ יָם סוּף לְסַבֵּב אֶת אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם וַתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁ הָעָם בַּדֶּרֶךְ: וַיְדַבֵּר הָעָם בְּאִלְקִים וּבַמֶּשֶׁה לְמָה הֶעֱלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לָמוֹת בְּמִדְבָר כִּי אֵין לָחֶם וְאֵין מַיִם וְנַפְשֵׁנוּ קָצָה בְּלַחֵם הַקֶּלֶקֶל: וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' בָּעָם אֶת הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת הָעָם וַיָּמָת עִם רֹב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל: וַיָּבֵא הָעָם אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חֲטֵאנוּ כִּי דִבְרָנוּ בְּה' וּבָךְ הַתְּפִלֵּל אֶל ה' וַיִּסַּר מֵעַלֵּינוּ אֶת הַנְּחָשׁ וַיִּתְּפִלֵּל מֹשֶׁה בְּעַד הָעָם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל גֹּס וְהָיָה כָּל הַנִּשּׁוּף וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָי: וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נְחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׂמֶהוּ עַל הַגֹּס וְהָיָה אִם נִשּׁוּף הַנְּחָשׁ אֶת אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל נְחֹשֶׁת הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְחָי:

They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against G-d and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." The LORD sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover." Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover.

THE ISRAELITES' ENCOUNTER with the fiery (venomous) serpents in Numbers chapter 2, stands out in a unique fashion from other events of Israelite sinful behavior in the Desert. Their actual sin is not clearly defined. The people were restless and tired, but that was

1. Source: *Nesivos Shalom, Bamidbar* pp. 123–125

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neither necessarily unreasonable nor rebellious. The land of Canaan was in sight, and now they were told they needed to significantly detour around the land of Edom to get there. Why punish them for something you and I may have questioned ourselves? And why punish them with death by fiery venomous serpents?

Additionally, how and why was the cure built into the copper serpent crafted by Moses? In previous situations of sin, Moses prayed to the Almighty for Israelite forgiveness, which was granted in one degree or another. Why here was the response for cure and forgiveness built into making a copper image of the punishment, and required for the bitten Israelites to actually gaze at this? Why the need for this additional action by Bnei Yisrael? Why did the Almighty withhold forgiveness without carrying out this ritual? Furthermore, this event follows soon after the death of Aharon Hakohen; is there a connection?

The most often quoted Rabbinic interpretation for gazing at the copper serpent is found in the Mishnah, Masechet Rosh Hashanah, end of chapter 3:

כִּיּוֹצֵא בַדְבָר אֶתְּהָ אֹמֵר עָשָׂה לָּהּ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אוֹתוֹ עַל יָסַ וְהִיא כָּל הַנְּשׂוּף וְרָאָה אוֹתוֹ וְחִי וְכִי נִחַשׁ
מִמֵּית אוֹ נִחַשׁ מִחַיָּה אֲלֵא בְּזִמּוֹ שִׁשְׂרָאֵל מְסַתְּפְלִין כָּל־פִּי מֵעֵלָה וּמִשְׁעֵבְדִּין אֶת לִבָּם לְאַבְיָהֶם
שֶׁבְשָׂמָיִם הָיוּ מִתְרַפְּאִין וְאִם הָיוּ גִימוּקִים.

Similarly, the verse states: “Make for yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, he shall live” (Numbers 21:8). Did the serpent kill, or did the serpent preserve life? Rather, when the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but if not, they rotted from their snakebites.

Looking up at the serpent was really looking up to the Almighty.

But how did this help correct the sin; and as importantly – why is this found here and not in other sins of the Israelites in the Wilderness?

The Slonimer Rebbe in *Nesivos Shalom* states that one of the worst theological deficiencies (*p'gamim*) that the Jewish people can do is to deny the role of *retzon Hashem* (the will of G-d) and *Hanhaqat Habore'* (the role of the Creator) in our lives. This is exactly what happened at this juncture to the Israelites. The Bible ascribes no specific sin here, for their sin was a more general defect: not seeing and not accepting the will of Hashem and the leadership of G-d in their lives. They were fixated on reaching Israel as quick as they could. Any obstacle or detour placed in their way was not acceptable and could not be reconciled with their life plan. They refused to accept a *retzon Haboreh* which they could not understand, which inconvenienced their lives. They could not entertain that there were some bumps and obstacles inserted by Hashem on their road to Israel, for which they could not plumb the reason.

To correct this it was necessary and required of them to look up through the serpent at the vast heavens to visualize the role of Hashem they could not see, to cause themselves to recognize that life included accepting the *retzon Hashem* that is given to us. Without that, life and faith are not complete, even when we do not understand why or how.

Pirke Avot chapter 6 says clearly *הַשֵּׂמֶחַ בְּחֵלְקוֹ*, *איִזְהוּ עָשִׂיר*, Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot. The purpose of the life of a Jew is to be happy and satisfied with our lot in this world – *chelko*. That includes says the *Nesivos Shalom* – *cheilek Hashem 'amo*, accepting *retzon Hashem* as an integral part of our life goals.

The sin of the primordial serpent in the Garden of Eden was to reject *retzon Hashem*. The original serpent received no benefit from biting Man, but still played the role as the inciter that leads to denying *retzon Hashem*. If such is that *retzon Habore* is to eat from all the trees of the Garden of Eden sans one, then by eating from that fruit of the *etz hada'at*, I am stepping away from the will of the Almighty. Bnei Yisrael in the Desert had manna, water from the well, protective clouds of glory. But their unhappiness stemmed from their inability to fully integrate *retzon Hashem* into their lives.

Pirke Avot Chapter 5 notes that Avraham Avinu was subjected by the Almighty to Ten Divine tests (*nisyonot*):

עֲשָׂרָה נִסְיוֹנוֹת נִתְּנָה אֲבֹרָהֶם אָבִינוּ עָלֵינוּ הַשְּׁלוֹם וְעַמְד בְּכָלֶם, לְהוֹדִיעַ כְּמָה חֶבְתּוֹ שֶׁל אֲבֹרָהֶם
אָבִינוּ עָלֵינוּ הַשְּׁלוֹם.

With ten trials was Abraham, our father (may he rest in peace), tried, and he withstood them all; to make known how great was the love of Abraham, our father (peace be upon him).

The *Nesivos Shalom* points out that a number of Avraham's *nisyonot* (tests) entailed his making conscious choices, such as deciding between the furnace of Ur Kasdim, denial of the Almighty, deciding between taking Isaac up Mount Moriah or not. Yet many of the tests were situations that Abraham simply found himself in a no way out situation: it was not in his own volition, he had no choice. When there was a famine in Canaan and Avraham went down to Egypt, should he instead have chosen to stay and perish and not go to Egypt? Upon arrival when Sarai was abducted by Pharaoh and later by Abimelech, what choice did Avraham have to make? What sort of tests was Avraham being rewarded for? What kind of tests were these?

The Slonimer Rebbe says that Avraham was being tested if he would willingly accept the *retzon Hashem* in his life, without complaint. Abraham passing the test was in his realizing that even when I do not understand the plan of G-d, I still will accept the *retzon Hashem* and *hanhagat Habore*.

The yetzer hara works on us not only to sin, but more insidiously to get us to deny that we are subject to a personal Divine plan for each of us. The ultimate success of the yetzer hara is causing us to fail in our life mission by rejecting the *retzon Habore* in our lives, causing us to feel that we often live lives of random events, with no purpose, no goal and no destiny that allows us to come closer to the Almighty.

Finally: to accept *retzon Hashem* in my life means I need to reach out and connect to members of the Jewish faith community. Love of Hashem is sustained and strengthened by love of fellow Jews. That is why the gateway that led to denial of *retzon Haboreh* at the incident of the fiery serpents was the death and loss of Aharon Hakohen who lived the

value of – *ohav shalom rodef shalom ohev et habriyot umekarvan leTorah* – lover and pursuer of peace and friendship and connectivity to G-d and Torah.