

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Chukas Balak 5786

D. Mordechai Schlachter

A special remedy saves from a unique enemy.

וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחָשֶׁת וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל-הַנֶּגֶס וְהָיָה אִם-נִשָּׁךְ הַנָּחָשׁ אֶת-אִישׁ וְהָבִיט אֵל-נָחָשׁ הַנְּחָשֶׁת וְחָיָה:

“And Moshe made a copper image of the divinity, and he placed it upon a standard; and it was if the divinity enchanted a person and he would gaze upon the copper divinity, and he would live.” (Bamidbar 17:12).

Many translate “nachash” as snake. It also means divinity. (Vayikra 19:26). There are two possible etymological historical paths here. Either, the snake was named after this nachash—divinity. It can also be divinity was named after the snake. Either way, snakes with their forked tongues, slanted eyes, and slithering bodies were symbols of magic in ancient times. Similarly, in this parsha (segment), saraph can be used literally as angelic seraphim. Some interpret it as some “fiery serpent” and the angelic being was named after this serpent. I take the approach that the Torah does not mention snakes at all.

In the Eden Garden it was divinity that tried to enchant Chava. It was able to speak (snakes cannot speak) and it wanted to turn Chava into an angelic being—seeing good and evil before her. It was cursed to remain in the ground. (Bereishis 3:14). The Torah shows several times that magic is attached to the ground. The makos of blood (in the ground water), amphibians (that rose from the ground water), and lice (from dust) all came from the ground. That is why when the Egyptian necromancers could not replicate the lice, they admitted it was the Finger of Hashem. (Shmos 8:15). Further, Moshe cast his staff on the ground and it turned into divinity—on the ground. (Ibid 4:3). Also, this nachash that attacked Bnei Yisroel came from the dusty wilderness ground. That is why Bnei Yisroel asked to be saved from the “nachash” (singular) not the snakes (plural). (Bamidbar 21:7).

Toward the end of their journey, Bnei Yisroel became restless. (Bamidbar 21:4). They complained that without bread and water the manna was starting to become tasteless. (Ibid 21:5). The mida kneged mida punishment was to send this divinity to attack them. The nachash that was cursed that it should consume dust (figuratively, as it was now attached to the ground) came to attack Bnei Yisroel who complained that their manna tasted like dust.

There are many parallels between the Eden Garden narrative and this one. Here, this nachash is seraph-like. A seraph has faces, six wings, legs and hands. (Yeshaya 6:2). Its wings cover its faces and its legs. It came in this image because seraphim surround Hashem’s throne. (Ibid 6:1). The message is that since Hashem was personally seeing to Bnei Yisroel’s needs, how dare they complain. In the garden, the divinity was not meant

to frighten, but to entice. Here the nachash was silent; the imagery was the message. In the garden it spoke because it had to show Chava it was like her.

In the garden Chava is directed to look at something that grew from the ground. Here, Bnei Yisroel are directed to look heavenward to be saved. Chava was pointed toward a tree by the nachash. Bnei Yisroel were directed to look at the nachash on a raised standard. In the garden the nachash caused sinful behavior and the remedy was separation. Here the remedy to the seraph nachash was a copper nachash. This shows that the punishment can be remedied by just refocusing and looking at facts or events in a new light. In the garden looking at the tree led to the sin. Here, looking at the nachash healed. The nachash in the garden caused death to be introduced to mankind. Here, the nachash represented life. In the garden, man was told that from dust he came so to dust he shall return. Here, gazing heavenward, away from the earth's dust, restored life. In the garden the nachash was the stumbling block. Here, the nachash was the remedy.

The great lesson of both narratives is that humanity has to rely on Hashem. In the garden, the nachash enticed Chava that she can become like an angelic being or godlike. She learns humility and mortality. Here, the people complained that Hashem was not doing enough for them. They realize that Hashem is the very source of life.

Nachash divinity was created by Hashem. It was able to speak, in was an intelligent being, and it was different than all animals—all living beings. Its goal in the garden was to reduce Chava from a living thing to a divine being. It was a reduction because the great benefit of mankind is growth. Mankind can grow by choosing correctly. This is something divine beings cannot do. They are created in their lot and position and there they stay. They cannot learn, grow, or change. Therefore, they cannot keep the Torah because they cannot merit choosing correctly. Angelic beings have no choices and therefore cannot “follow” the Torah or “keep” its commands. Mankind is in the unique position to choose and earn Olam Habaoh.

The nachash did have choice. It was intelligent. That is why it was cursed to slither and be among the dust forever. It was doomed to spend its life as a tool for punishment. It was used to punish the Mitzriyim. “Take your staff, the one that you turned into divinity...and it will be used to strike the waters of the Nile and turn it into blood.” (Shmos 7:15,17). It was also used to strike Bnei Yisroel in the wilderness.

Conversely, the same staff that turned into divinity on the ground (ibid 4:3) also was used to save Bnei Yisroel at the Yam Suf. Moshe held the staff in his hand as he split the sea. Also, the copper nachash was placed upon the top of a raised pole. Nachash is a punishment and an evil thing when it forgets Hashem. It then belongs in the dust. However, raise it up, recognize Hashem's gifts, and it becomes life. The lesson of the seraph looking nachash was that these heavenly beings came down, from the Throne to the ground, not to punish Bnei Yisroel, but to remind them to stop looking down—negatively. If they raised their eyes and their perspective they would see heaven; they would see life. The Torah uses the word *hibit* for gaze at. That word is also used by Balak when he blesses Bnei Yisroel that “no sin is in sight (*hibit*) in Yaakov.” Bnei Yisroel learned their lesson and they learned to view events positively. Such *emunah* and positive perspective saves from sin.