

# LIFE IS GOOD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Life is Good<sup>1</sup>

The pattern is fairly simple and uncomplicated. *Bnei Yisrael* sin. *Bnei Yisrael* feel remorse. Moshe beseeches Hashem to forgive them. Hashem accedes to the request.

It happens so often we lose track of the number of times. In one episode in our *parshah*, however, events take a different turn. Dissatisfied with the *mon*, *Bnei Yisrael* project their disappointment upon Moshe and Hashem. Hashem sets fiery serpents upon them; many die. The survivors, overcome with guilt, voice their *teshuvah* to Moshe, who prays for them. But rather than forgive them, Hashem orders that a large copper serpent be erected. Those who are bitten by the fiery serpents are saved from death only by focusing upon the copper image, and directing their hearts towards the One above.<sup>2</sup> Expressing their *teshuvah* was not enough to save them from the effects of the snakebite.

What was exceptional about this failure that Hashem dealt with it do differently? For that matter, we are hard pressed to understand the severity of their punishment in the first place. To be sure, their complaint seems to us to be as "unsubstantial"<sup>3</sup> as the *mon* about which they muttered. Hashem's punishments always match the crime. Did some juvenile sputtering need to be answered by the painful and frightful attack of the serpents?

We must understand what it was that they were really saying with their complaint. They were not hungry; they were not thirsty. The *mon* nourished them while they drank water from Miriam's well. What they rejected was the general order of their lives, which was not quite the way they would have liked it to be. Their dissatisfaction did not stem from any real need, but from the manner in which those needs were fulfilled. They had their own priorities, their own likes and dislikes, and these were not in synch with the choices Hashem made for them. In short, they rejected the life that Hashem chose for them, valuing their own choices above His.

Chazal tell us<sup>4</sup> that the rich man is the man who finds happiness in his lot. We achieve such happiness not by simply adopting a pragmatic and optimistic embrace of one's fate in life. We get there by comprehending the Hand of G-d in it. We can be happy with our lot when we understand that it was custom designed by His providence. By the same reasoning, fundamental unhappiness is a terrible failing, because it rejects His Will. We are unhappy when we insist on superimposing our own will, our own choices upon the providential trajectory that Hashem has selected for us.

Keeping this in mind, we can unlock the meaning of a famous teaching of Chazal. They tell us<sup>5</sup> that Avraham was subjected to ten tests. He passed all of them, demonstrating his preciousness. Some of those tests required responses on his part, and Avraham responded magnificently, such as agreeing to die for his beliefs at Ur Kasdim, and in following Hashem's directives at the *akedah*. Another group of tests, however, afforded him no options. How could the famine in the land and Soroh's captivity in the house of Paroh serve as tests, when Avraham was a passive participant, who had no role in shaping the events?

These tests measured Avraham's attitude, not his actions. He met every new trial and tribulation with happiness and love of Hashem. He was fundamentally pleased with the way Hashem ran his life. This state of mind was every bit as significant as his decision to allow himself to be thrown into the furnace at Ur Kasdim, and to offer up Yitzchok at the *Akedah*. Avraham completely understood that from the Good comes only good. Whatever Hashem had in store for him could only be in his best interest.

The harshest treatment we receive from the *yetzer hora* is to come to deny all this. The *yetzer hora* comes at us with something more potent than the meretricious allure of self-importance, of lusts and desire, of honor. Worse than all of those is the growing feeling within a Jew that he is simply dissatisfied with the way He conducts his life.

A plague of serpents was a fitting response to the behavior of the complainers. The serpent, of course, has been symbolic of evil itself since it led Adam astray in Gan Eden. Moreover, aspects of the serpent's behavior are especially relevant to the human flaw we are discussing. The serpent was cursed to slither on the ground, and eat dust.<sup>6</sup> R. Moshe Midner explained that the ready availability of sustenance was a terrible curse to the serpent, because it meant that HKBH did not it to turn to Him for its needs. "Take what you need, but don't turn to Me. I do not wish to hear your voice!"

Additionally, the Gemara<sup>7</sup> depicts a scene in the future, when other animals will gather around the serpent accusatorily. "We often behaved violently, but we did so to gather prey, to sustain ourselves. You, serpent, lunge at people and kill them without any purpose, and without any benefit."

Taken together, the serpent's profile is one of bitterness and gratuitous damage. It lacks no food, but lashes out nonetheless. The fit is perfect! The complainers in Klal Yisrael also lacked nothing, but still verbally lashed out at Moshe and at Hashem in their unhappiness.

For this reason, their *teshuvah* required the copper serpent. They could easily have overlooked or minimized the gravity of their offense. They had actually done nothing wrong. They needed to look intently at a symbolic representation of their sin in order to properly repent. The copper serpent had to be raised aloft for all to peer at it intently, and come to understand what wrong they had committed, and how grievous a wrong it was.

The fiery serpent episode comes on the heels of Aharon's death. It could not have taken place in the lifetime of the person who "loved peace, pursued peace, and loved people."<sup>8</sup> These qualities are known to lead to love of Hashem. While Aharon lived, his love of Hashem was available in such intensity and bounty that others felt it too. And where there is *ahavas Hashem*, there is satisfaction with the way He runs His world. With his death, with *ahavas Hashem* in shorter supply, dissatisfaction and complaints became possible.

The complaints did not arise randomly. Introducing the story, the Torah tells us that "the spirit of the people grew short on the way."<sup>9</sup> Rashi explains that the rigors of the journey became unbearable to them. The Torah, it would seem, seeks to mitigate their transgression. Their patience was in short supply; they did have legitimate reasons to complain, even if not for the reasons they expressed. In truth, however, the Torah does not mitigate their sin as much as underscore how serious it was. At times a person appears to have good cause to complain. He is dealt blows such that optimism and insight are banished by grave concerns and problems. The Torah tells us that even at such times, dissatisfaction with the lot in life allocated by Hashem is a major failure. Life, presided over by HKBH, is always good.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 123-125

<sup>2</sup> Rosh Hashanah 29A

<sup>3</sup> Bamidbar 21:5

<sup>4</sup> Avos 4:1

<sup>5</sup> Avos 5:3

<sup>6</sup> Bereishis 3:14

<sup>7</sup> Taanis 8A

<sup>8</sup> Avos 1:12

<sup>9</sup> Bamidbar 21:4