

PARSHAS CHUKAS - SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH, A THANKLESS NATION

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth, A Thankless Nation 1.

Hashem let loose poisonous serpents against the people, and they bit the people. A large multitude of Yisrael died. The people came to Moshe and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against Hashem and against you."

The first verb in the pasuk, וישלח, is usually translated as "sent." This is defensible, but not necessarily the only or best translation. In a few other places, the same word is meant in the piel form, rather than the kal. The piel suggests letting something go off in its own way, rather than deliberately pointing it at some target. Noach didn't so much "send" the two birds away. 2. Rather, he released his hold on them, and left them free to fly off to wherever they were inclined to head. The negligent shepherd in Mishpatim 3. does not direct hungry bovine weapons of destructions against an enemy hilltop to denude it of vegetation. He simply leads them somewhere and allows them to follow their eyes and stomachs to do as they please. Paroh did not equip each Jew with a roadmap marked with a large "X" and the slogan "Sinai, forty miles ahead." Paroh didn't direct their journey, he merely indicated to them that they were free to leave and urged them on.

It is quite likely that we ought to read our verse similarly. Hashem did not create hordes of snakes, programmed to pursue Jewish targets. Rather, he removed the restraints He had imposed upon them, and left them free to act as snakes can be predicted to act.

We can point to evidence for this within the pasuk. Hashem does not set nechashim seraphim - poisonous serpents - upon them. The pasuk speaks of ha-nechashim ha-seraphim, or "the" poisonous serpents. The function of the definite article is to point to well-known, identifiable snakes - the ones that we can assume populated the barren wilderness in which the Bnei Yisrael found themselves. (Later 4. the Torah will speak of the hazards of that wilderness, as a place of "snake, poisonous serpent, scorpion, and thirst where there was no water." In other words, poisonous reptiles were as much a part of that landscape as water was lacking from that arid expanse.) Hashem did not have to miraculously arrange for some special agents of death to do His bidding. Those fatal instruments were already in place, were naturally part of the scenery.

This is precisely the point of this episode. Without His merciful protection, they could never have gotten to where they were. Too many would have succumbed to the dangers that made the

wilderness inhospitable to humans. Failing to cherish what HKBH was doing for them around the clock, He took back His gift. He did not have to direct a plague of snakes against an ungrateful people. Free of what had been holding them back, the snakes did what was natural to them, and struck out at the humans who had invaded their habitat.

The antidote to this was nothing more complicated than taking heed of Hashem's protective shield. This was the function of the copper serpent - to restore consciousness of Hashem's protection. Looking upon it, people could focus on the role that He had played in protecting them from myriad unseen hazards and dangers. They would absorb the idea that their lives would have long been forfeit without Hashem's constant care and concern for them.

The wilderness was not that different from the "ordinary" places that people live their lives. Hidden dangers, but natural and man-made, are commonplace, even when they are hidden from our sight and mental focus. Understanding His role in keeping us alive and safe is crucial, if we are not to be seen by our Creator as ungrateful, and run the risk thereby of losing His great gift to us.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 21:6-8
2. Bereishis 8:7-8
3. Shemos 22:4
4. Devarim 8:15