

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS CHUKAS

Sneaky Snake

...Moshe made a snake of copper and placed it on the pole; so it was that if a snake bit a man he would stare at the copper snake and live (21:9).

This week's *parsha* recounts a fascinating incident, one unlike any other in the Torah: Bnei Yisroel are exasperated about retracing their steps and subsequently moving further from entering Eretz Yisroel. They begin to attack Hashem and Moshe, and complain bitterly about the *manna* and lack of water. This in and of itself doesn't seem particularly unusual; after all Bnei Yisroel tested Hashem's patience time and time again while in the desert. What makes this story unique is what happens next.

Hashem sends incredibly venomous snakes to attack Bnei Yisroel, and many die. Almost immediately, the people go to Moshe, beg his forgiveness, and ask him to pray for them. Moshe acquiesces right away, at which point Hashem tells Moshe that he should fashion a snake and place it on a pole and those who had been bitten will look at the snake and live. Moshe created the snake, and so it was that anyone who had been bitten and would stare at the copper snake would live. Rashi

(ad loc) explains; could a snake (made by Moshe) cause death or give life? Rather, as long as Bnei Yisroel casts their eyes upward and subjects their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would be cured and if not they would waste away.

We do have a similar story at the end of *Parshas Beshalach*; when the Amalekites came to attack Bnei Yisroel Moshe lifted his hands toward heaven and as long as his hands were raised Bnei Yisroel were winning, and when his hands lowered Bnei Yisroel faltered. Yet, if all Bnei Yisroel needed was Moshe to lift his hands towards heaven, why didn't he simply do the same here? Why did Hashem instead tell him to fashion a snake and have people stare at it to be cured? Creating a snake that cures seems contrary to our Torah values. In fact, the very same snake that Moshe created was later called *Nechushtan* and used as idol worship in the time of King Ahaz (before being eventually destroyed and burned by the righteous King Hezkiah). Seemingly,



Moshe could have accomplished the same here by simply pointing his fingers heavenward once again.

The Torah uses a curious word to express the concept of "staring" at the snake: "*Vehibit el Hanachash.*" Rashi (in his comments on *Bereishis* 15:5) explains that the word *yabit* refers to looking downward. Hashem is expressing a profound lesson for Bnei Yisroel to internalize. They are being asked to examine the snake within themselves - the part of them that desires to be independent from Hashem. That is what it means to look down at the snake: examine this internal conflict and understand that it is causing a separation between the individual and Hashem. Once one chooses to sublimate the *Yetzer Hara* within, Hashem provides a cure for the snakes on the outside.

Did You Know...

This week, we read *Parshas Chukas*. There is a little known custom to fast on the Friday before this *parsha* is read. This is remarkable because we generally tie events that we commemorate to specific dates – not to particular days of the week. The Magen Avraham (*Orach Chaim* 580) tell us that the reason for the fast day is because on that day (Friday, *Erev Parshas Chukas*), in the year 1242, twenty wagonloads (some versions state twenty-

four) filled with Gemaros and Talmudic literature were burned in Paris by the Church and King Louis IX. Keep in mind that this occurred over 200 years before the printing press was invented, and each of these volumes was a priceless, handwritten manuscript. In fact, this was considered such an enormous loss for the Jews that the Maharam M'Rottenburg, an eyewitness, wrote an elegy deemed important enough to be incorporated into the *Kinos* recited every Tisha B'Av (*Kinah* 41).

However, as stated above, this fast day is unique in that it's not based on the day of the month, but that it's always on the Friday before *Parshas Chukas*. This is because after the terrible tragedy, the great rabbis of the time inquired through *kabbalistic* means, to ask if this was decreed by Hashem or not. The reply they received was just three words "*Da Gezeiras Oraysah*" (this is a decree from the Torah) which is the Aramaic translation for the first three words of *Parshas Chukas*.

A Giant Debt

...Og, king of Bashan, went out against them, he and his entire people, to do battle in Edrei. Hashem said to Moshe, "Do not fear him, for into your hand I have given him..." (21:33-34)

This week's *parsha* ends with the tale of the remarkable encounter between Moshe Rabbeinu and Og, the giant-king of Bashan. Og had been one of the "Nephilim" (those that fell – "fallen angels" see Rashi on *Bereishis* 6:4); a race of giants from the time before the "great flood." He was known as "the escapee" because he survived the destruction of the "great flood" (see Rashi on *Bereishis* 14:13). The *possuk* tells us that Moshe was worried about meeting Og in a war.

At first glance, this seems a little odd. Bnei Yisroel had just soundly decimated Sichon king of Cheshbon, who had a reputation as one of the mightiest warriors in the world. Why was Moshe suddenly worried about fighting Og? Rashi (21:34) explains that almost 500 years prior Og had done a favor for Avraham Avinu. Moshe was afraid that the merit of this kindness to Avraham Avinu would stand for him and, perhaps, render him invulnerable.

What kindness had Og done for Avraham? In *Parshas Lech Lecha* (*Bereishis* 14:1-12), the Torah relates some of the details of the epic war that embroiled nine kingdoms. Four kings went to war against five kings and soundly defeated them and many other nations that were in their path. One of the nations that was utterly destroyed was the *Rephaim*, a nation of giants, and Og was the lone survivor ("fugitive"). In addition, one of the five kings that was defeated was the king of Sodom, where Avraham's nephew, Lot, resided. Og came to Avraham to inform him that his nephew had been taken captive by the four kings. This was the kindness that Og did for Avraham Avinu, that had Moshe concerned about meeting Og in battle.

However, this is difficult to comprehend. Rashi (*Bereishis* 14:13) very clearly states

that the reason Og came to inform Avraham what had happened to Lot was for his own selfish reasons. He desired to marry Sarah, who according to the Gemara (*Megillah* 15a), was one of the most beautiful women to have ever lived. Og hoped that Avraham would feel impelled to enter the war, and in the course of the fighting he would be killed; thereby clearing a path for Og to be with Sarah. Thus, Og had very selfish reasons for giving Avraham Avinu news about his nephew; so how is this act considered such a great merit for him?

Imagine for a moment that someone is attacked by a mugger and struck upon the head. Following this unfortunate event, the victim heads to the nearest hospital to be examined. The doctors decide to perform a CT scan of his head to be sure that there isn't any more extensive damage. Miraculously, the CT scan reveals that while there is no permanent damage from the mugger's blow, there is a tumor that is slowly growing inside the skull that must be removed. This tumor might have very likely killed this person and perhaps not have been caught in time had he not been mugged. Does this victim now owe a debt of gratitude to the mugger?

Of course not. In the case of the mugger, the victim never wanted to suffer a severe blow to the head. That it, providentially, happened to work out is really just the hand of Hashem. However, in the case of Og, Avraham was well aware of risks he was taking by entering a war with the four kings. Yet, Avraham desired to have the information that Og was providing. The fact that Og had his own agenda doesn't lessen the kindness to Avraham; Og was providing Avraham a service that he wanted. Doing a kindness for someone as great as Avraham Avinu was reason enough to give Moshe pause. Hashem

therefore had to reassure him.

The Torah is teaching us a remarkable lesson in *hakaras hatov*, and something most of us strive hard to avoid. We see from this story that we must feel indebted to someone who does us a kindness even if he has his own reason for doing it. Often, we work very hard to try to ascribe a motivation to a benefactor that would seem to paint them as self-serving, or in the very least as not totally altruistic. Naturally, we do this to lessen our feeling of obligation to this person. This is wrong. The Torah is teaching us that we must appreciate any kindness that is done for us, irrespective of the benefactor's motivation.

Did You Know Continued

The rabbis understood the importance of this, and realized that this connection to *Parshas Chukas* is vital.

Additionally, another eyewitness, Rav Hillel of Verona (a *talmid* of Rabbeinu Yonah), considered the burning of the Talmud as a clear sign of Divine retribution for the Rabbis who were responsible for the burning of the works of Rambam. This occurred several times; once, not forty days prior, in the exact same place in Paris! Rambam's writings in those days were very controversial, and even looked at as *apikorsus* (heretical) by some. It has been said that Tosfos didn't quote Rambam because they disagreed with his works on philosophy. Some say Rabbeinu Yona wrote his famous Sefer "*Shaarei Teshuva*" because of this incident and his students who had a part in the burning.

The Magen Avraham brings another reason for fasting on this day. On this very day, two entire cities of Jews were brutally decimated, as part of the *Gezeiras Ta'ch V'Ta't*, the Cossack massacres led by Bogdan Chmielnitsky ym"sh in 1648 - 1649, as recorded by the Shach, who totaled the deaths over the years in the hundreds of thousands.



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