

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Chukat)

Not long ago, I heard a powerful vignette from Rabbi Marvin Heir, former director of the Simon Wiesenthal center.

When Simon Wiesenthal, the famous Holocaust survivor and Nazi-hunter, celebrated his 90th birthday, he insisted the celebration take place in Vienna's Imperial Hotel. When Rabbi Heir asked him why the Imperial, he explained it was Hitler's favorite hotel and he and Himmler had permanent suites there.

That night at the Imperial hotel, Mr. Wiesenthal spoke just after the band played, "Mein Shtetala Belz" (My Little Town Belz), a lullaby that evoked the innocent happiness of childhood. With tears in his eyes, he gazed up at the elaborate crystal chandeliers that lit the room like six million stars in the night sky, leaned to Rabbi Heir and whispered, "You see? Even the chandeliers are shaking because this is the first time they have heard such music in this hotel. Hitler and his pipe dream of a thousand-year Reich is gone, but even here in the Imperial, his favorite hotel, Jews are still alive and still singing."

This week's portion *Chukat*, contains a fascinating, yet somewhat bewildering story.

It seems (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 21:5-9) the Jews are complaining yet again; they want bread and water, tired of the moldy bread they feel they are getting and feeling deprived of water. G-d, seemingly fed up with the complaining, sends poisonous snakes (*Seraphim*; literally 'fire snakes') who bite and kill the Jews at will. So the people come to Moshe admitting their sins and beg G-d to remove the serpents.

And G-d responds with a rather strange set of instructions: the people must fashion a serpent and place it high on a flagpole, and when people will be bitten they will look up at the serpent on the flagpole and once seeing it, will live. So, Moshe makes the snake, and people who are bitten can look at this snake on a pole, and live.

What is this story all about? What have the people done wrong to merit such a terrible plague? And why are snakes the instrument of their suffering? And even stranger, if it is snakes that are killing them, why is a snake chosen as the vehicle for their salvation? After all, as **Rashi** notes, it is not a snake that kills or saves anyone; Hashem is the source of life and death, so even assuming the people are worthy of death, let them die of a plague; why the need for the snakes?

Interestingly, the snake is the first symbol of temptation, downfall, and punishment in the Torah. It is the snake's temptation (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 3) that proves the downfall of Adam and Eve and their consequential banishment from the Garden of Eden. And it is the snake as well that is the first symbol of salvation, as Moshe, instructed thus by Hashem, throws his staff to the ground to see it turn into a snake subsequently swallowing the serpents of Pharaoh, and setting in motion the process that will lead to the long-awaited Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt.

Rashi, quoting the *Midrash*, suggests that when the Jewish people look up to see the snake on the flagpole, their eyes will be drawn heavenwards, and their hearts will be drawn to return to their creator in heaven and they will be healed, otherwise, they will die. But again, why the need for the snake?

There is in fact a powerful idea here worth noting. The Jewish people mistakenly assume that it is the snakes killing them in the first place; the snake, after all, is only the messenger; as **Rashi** points out in his query: it is G-d who allows death or life, so it is precisely the snake the people have fashioned themselves that makes clear it is not really the vehicle for salvation; such is the provenance of G-d, and G-d alone.

In fact, this entire story is strange to begin with: the Jewish people receive manna from heaven every day, yet they are complaining that they want bread? Perhaps they have become so accustomed to the manna they no longer appreciate it as the wondrous miracle that it is. They may be aware of the blessings in their lives, but they have begun to take the source for granted.

Indeed, the issue here is not that what they want, G-d has already given them. Rather, whatever G-d gives us is what we should want. It is not accidental that the solution they are being given is to look heavenwards so that their hearts will be turned as well; there is a connection between the heart and the eyes.

In fact, we read daily in the *Shema*, that we should be careful not to stray after our hearts and our eyes (“*Ve’lo taturu Acharei levavchem ve’acharei eineichem*”). The heart (which is really the mind) represents our desires, and the message of our story is that we can change what we want by choosing to see things differently. And this is what the snake represents; in the hands of Moshe it is the staff upon which we can depend and lean, the straight and true path Hashem directs us to follow.

But thrown to the ground (representing our basest materialistic desires) it becomes the snake: twisting and turning and slithering along a warped path of life which is not really living; it is dying.

And this is perhaps also why the snake which is killing them becomes the instrument of the Jewish people’s salvation: the difference between a meaningless life and a life of meaning is how we choose to channel the desires we have; *how* we see the world *is* the world that we live in. It’s all about the decisions we make when we choose not only what we see but how we see it.

As the **Ramban** notes, the very fact that the same snake that kills also brings life and healing, demonstrates that it is all really in Hashem’s hands; whatever we have is the gift we are meant to have. Ours only to decide what we will do with those gifts. Indeed, the desire itself is the gift; it is after all, a mystery why different people want such different things; Hashem gives us those desires for a reason and ours is to figure out why.

Standing in that hotel, Simon Wiesenthal was making a profound point: same hotel, same chandelier, what makes all the difference is what we want and who or what we think we serve....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman