



“Hashem sent the burning snakes against the people”

The Valuable Lesson to Be Learned from the Harsh Punishment Suffered by Those Who Complained about the Mahn

This week we read parshas Chukas. Thus, it is fitting that we examine the harsh punishment meted out by HKB”H to the members of Yisrael who expressed discontent regarding the “mahn.” Initially, He tormented them with burning snakes, who bit them. Ultimately, HKB”H provided them with a wondrous cure. He commanded Moshe Rabeinu to place a copper snake atop a pole for the victims to gaze upon (Bamidbar 21, 5):

“וידבר העם באלקים ובמשה למה העליתנונו ממצרים למות במדבר כי אין לחם ואין מים ונפשנו קצה בלחם הקלוקל. וישלח ה' בעם את הנחשים השרפים וינשכו את העם וימת עם רב מישראל... ויאמר ה' אל משה עשה לך שרף ושים אותו על נס והיה כל הנשוך וראה אותו וחי. ויעש משה נחש נחשת ושימהו על הנס, והיה אם נשך הנחש את איש והביט אל נחש הנחשת וחי.”

The people spoke against Hashem and Moshe, “Why have you brought us up from Mitzrayim to die in this wilderness? For there is no food and there is no water, and we are disgusted with this rotten bread!” Hashem sent the venomous snakes against the people, and they bit the people; and a large number of Yisrael died . . . Hashem said to Moshe, “Make yourself a serpent and place it on a pole and let whoever is bitten look at it and live.” Moshe made a copper snake and placed it on the pole; and whenever a snake bit a man, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live.

It behooves us to consider the elite nature of the generation of the midbar. They witnessed miraculous feats and divine salvation during the exodus from Mitzrayim and the incredible revelation of Matan Torah on Har Sinai. In fact,

in the Zohar hakadosh (Terumah 147a), the divine Tanna, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, attests to the fact that there will never be a generation on their spiritual level until the coming of the Mashiach. So, how are we do make sense of their lack of gratitude and complaint concerning the “mahn” that HKB”H benevolently sent them from the heavens as nourishment: **“We are disgusted with this rotten bread!”?**

Additionally, what message was HKB”H conveying to Moshe and the people with the command: **“Make yourself a serpent and place it on a pole, and let whoever is bitten look at it and live”?** Undoubtedly, the healing from the snakebites required sincere teshuvah. So, why was it necessary for them to gaze up at the copper snake? The Ibn Ezra writes (ibid. 8): **The truth is that His supreme wisdom is beyond our comprehension.**

The Fascinating Connection between the Complaints about the Mahn and the Harsh Punishment of the Serpents

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by considering how the punishment of the venomous snakes corresponded to the people’s lack of gratitude and complaints about the mahn “midah k’neged midah”—measure for measure. Let us introduce a passage from the Gemara (Yoma 76a). Here the divine Tanna, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, explains why HKB”H had the mahn descend from the heavens on a daily basis:

“שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחי, מפני מה לא ירד להם לישראל מן פעם אחת בשנה, אמר להם אמשול לכם משל למה הדבר דומה, למלך בשר ודם שיש לו בן אחד, פסק לו מזונותיו פעם אחת בשנה, ולא היה מקביל פני אביו אלא פעם אחת בשנה, עמד ופסק מזונותיו בכל יום, והיה מקביל פני אביו כל יום, אף ישראל מי שיש לו ארבעה וחמשה בנים, היה דואג ואומר שמא לא ירד מן למחר, ונמצאו כולן מתים ברעב, נמצא כולן מכוונים את לבם לאביהן שבשמים.”

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s students asked him, “Why didn’t it suffice for the ‘mahn’ to come down from the heavens for Yisrael just once a year?” He replied with a parable. To what is the matter similar? There was a human king who had but one son; he allotted him his meals once a year; consequently, the son only came to see his father once a year. Then, he decided to allot his son meals on a daily basis; from then on, his son came to see him daily. So, too, with Yisrael. A person who had four or five children would worry and say, “Perhaps the ‘mahn’ will not fall tomorrow and, as a result, all of them will die of starvation.” Consequently, they would all direct their hearts toward their Father in heaven.

Thus, we learn that the reason a fresh supply of mahn fell every day was to bolster the people’s emunah in Hashem. Thus, they remained connected with HKB”H every day and looked to Him daily for sustenance. The Divrei Yisrael (Beshalach) provides us with a wonderful allusion from the passuk (Shemos 16, 15): “וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו מִן הָאָדָם—**they said to one another, “It is mahn!”** The words מ”ן הו”א are an anagram for אמונה highlighting the connection between the mahn and emunah in Hashem.

With this in mind, we can appreciate Rabeinu Bachayei’s explanation concerning the gravity of Yisrael’s sin. They complained about the mahn: “**Why have you brought us up from Mitzrayim to die in this wilderness? For there is no food and there is no water, and we are disgusted with this rotten bread!**” Rabeinu Bachayei finds this perplexing. After all, the mahn was provided on a daily basis, and Moshe had provided them with abundant water from the rock. Hence, he concludes that their actual complaint was that they did not receive a supply of food for several days at a time like other nations do.

Thus, we see that Yisrael’s complaint concerning the mahn was due to a lack of adequate emunah in Hashem. As explained, HKB”H intentionally provided them with the mahn

on a daily basis in order to fortify the bond between Himself and Yisrael. Like the king in the parable, HKB”H wanted His children to appeal to Him daily. So, like the king in the parable who allotted his beloved son meals on a daily basis, so that he would see him daily, HKB”H did the same with the mahn.

The Curse of the Nachash

Following this line of reasoning, we will now explain why HKB”H punished Yisrael for speaking ill of the mahn by sending the serpents. In the sefer Matzmiach Yeshuot, he presents an incredible insight attributed to the great Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa, zy”a. He was once approached by a man who was distressed by the fact that someone who did not don tefillin and desecrated the Shabbas was extremely wealthy, whereas those who observe the Torah and its mitzvos struggle to make a living. Rabbi Bunim responded profoundly:

Consider those who were involved in the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as.” There is a significant difference between the punishment of Adam and Chava and the punishment of the nachash. To Adam, HKB”H said (Bereishis 3, 19): “**בְּזֵעַת אִפְיךָ—by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.** To Chava, He said (ibid. 16): “**בְּעֶצֶב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים—**in pain shall you bear children. The punishment pronounced to the nachash, however, was (ibid. 14): “**וְעֹפֵר תֹּאכַל כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ—**dust shall you eat all the days of your life.

Regarding this punishment, the Gemara explains (Yoma 75a): “**קִילַל אֶת הַנַּחֲשׁ, עוֹלָה לִגַּג מְזוֹנוֹתָיו עִמוֹ, יוֹרֵד לַמַּטָּה מְזוֹנוֹתָיו עִמוֹ—**He cursed the nachash (that it should eat dust); **when it goes up to the roof, its food is available; when it goes down below, its food is available.** Elsewhere the Gemara says (Berachos 57a): “**הַרְוָאָה נֹחַשׁ בַּחֲלוּבִים, בְּרַנְסָתוֹ מְזוּמָּנָה לוֹ—**if one sees a snake in a dream, his livelihood is prepared for him. Rashi explains that since a snake eats dust, its food is readily available everywhere. The punishments meted out to Adam and Chava are easy to comprehend; man has to struggle to make a living; women suffer the pains of childbirth. What, however, is the rationale for the punishment of the nachash? At first glance, having its food available everywhere and not having to struggle to find food appears to be a blessing.

So, let us explain. The greatest reward for any creature is to be connected with HKB”H by needing to rely on Him and request sustenance from Him. In the words of Yisrael’s

sweet psalmist (Tehillim 145, 15): **“עֵינֵי כָל אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁכְּרוּ וְאַתָּה גּוֹתֵן: לָהֶם אֶת אֲכֹלָם בְּעֵתוֹ—the eyes of all look to You with hope and You provide them their food at its proper time.** The same applies to animals; they, too, look to HKB”H for their meals, as it states (ibid. 104, 21): **“הַכִּפְּרִים שׁוֹאֲגִים לְטָרְף וּלְבִקֵּשׁ: מֵאֵל אֲכֹלָם—the lion cubs roar for their prey and to seek their food from G-d.**

This, in fact, is the message HKB”H conveyed to Adam HaRishon after he ate from the Eitz HaDa’as and fell from his lofty prominence: **“By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.”** This punishment is actually for your own good. Due to your need for sustenance, you will raise your eyes heavenward and pray to HKB”H for food; thus, you will remain connected with HKB”H. Similarly, when HKB”H announced to Chava: **“With suffering you shall bear children”**—once again, He was informing her: This is for your own good. For, while you suffer the pain of childbirth, you will plead with HKB”H for mercy and forgiveness; thus, you will remain connected with Him.

HKB”H Indicated that He Does Not Want a Relationship with the Nachash

HKB”H wanted a relationship with Adam and Chava; this did not hold true for the “nachash hakadmoni”—the primeval serpent in Gan Eden—the source of tumah that corrupted Adam and Chava. HKB”H wanted to keep it at a distance and was not interested in hearing its tefilah. Therefore, its punishment was: **“Dust shall you eat all the days of your life.”** In other words, its sustenance is available everywhere, so that it will not need to pray to Hashem. This was tantamount to HKB”H telling the serpent: Take your belongings and disappear; I do not want to see you nor hear your voice. Rav Bunim concluded his response as follows: This is why HKB”H sometimes provides the wicked with all of their needs, good health and riches—He does not wish to hear their voice in prayer. This is the gist of his sacred insight.

This explains quite beautifully HKB”H’s rationale for creating man (Yeshayah 43, 21): **“עַם זֶה יִצְרַתִּי לִי תִהְיֶה יִסְפְּרוּ—I fashioned this people for Myself, to sing My praise.** It seems absurd that the Almighty requires the praise of lowly, material beings. So, let us attempt to clarify. The reason HKB”H wants Yisrael to praise Him is for their own benefit; so that they remain connected with Him. Thus, they will

recognize and acknowledge that everything comes exclusively from Hashem. This is the message of the passuk (Devarim 4, 4): **“וְאַתֶּם הֲדֹבְקִים בָּהּ אֱלֹקֵיכֶם חַיִּים כּוֹלְכֶם הַיּוֹם:—but you who cling to Hashem, your G-d, are all alive today.**

This enlightens us with regards to the profound wisdom of HKB”H. He punished Yisrael “midah k’neged midah” for speaking ill of the mahn, complaining: **“There is no food and there is no water.”** They wanted their food and water to be available constantly, for long periods at a time. Therefore, HKB”H punished them with venomous snakes that bit them. On careful scrutiny, we see that their complaint implies that they wanted to be like the primordial serpent, who was provided constant sustenance by HKB”H, so that He would not have to hear or heed its requests. Thus, we can comprehend the wonderful chesed HKB”H did for Yisrael by having the mahn fall for them daily. This reinforced their relationship with their Maker, requiring them to pray to HKB”H for sustenance on a daily basis.

This also explains quite beautifully the amazing tikun HKB”H suggested to Moshe: **“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Make yourself a serpent and place it on a pole and let whoever is bitten look at it and live.’”** Let us introduce a pertinent teaching from our sages in the Mishnah (R.H. 29a): **“וכי נחש מומית או נחש מחיה, אלא בזמן שהיו ישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהם שבשמים היו מתרפאים, ואם לאו היו ניזוקים.”** **Does a serpent kill or does a serpent restore life?! Rather, when Yisrael gazed upward and subjugated their heart to their Father in heaven, they were healed; but if not, they perished.**

By complaining about the fact that they had to receive the mahn anew daily, Yisrael demonstrated a shortcoming in their emunah in Hashem. Therefore, as part of their tikun, they were required to gaze upon the copper nachash, so that they would understand the source of their sin—that they wanted to disconnect themselves from HKB”H, chas v’shalom, like the nachash, by not having to request sustenance on a daily basis. By looking upward, they subjugated themselves to their heavenly Father creating an unbreakable bond.

They Complained about the Mahn because They Wanted to Show that They Could Withstand the Yetzer

Continuing onward on this sacred journey, we will now focus on Yisrael’s regrettable remark: **“We are disgusted with**

this rotten bread!” As we learned from Rabeinu Bachayei, they had already complained about the fact that they had to collect the mahn daily instead of receiving an ample, long-term supply. So, why did they add the derogatory remark: **“We are disgusted with this rotten bread!”?**

I would like to propose an explanation based on the well-known fact that there are several strata among the people of Yisrael—from the simple Jews to those whose reverence of Hashem is exemplary. Perhaps, it was only the simple Jews who complained: **“There is no food and there is no water.”** Whereas those who were on a higher spiritual level understood the value of being connected with HKB”H on a daily basis. They, on the other hand, complained: **“We are disgusted with this rotten bread!”**

To understand their discontent, we will refer to a passuk in parshas Beha’aloscha (Bamidbar 11, 4): **“והאספסוף אשר בקרבם—the mixed rabble among them began to have strong cravings. Then even the Bnei Yisrael once again began to cry, and they said, ‘Who will feed us meat?’ Rashi comments: But did they not have meat? Hasn’t it already been said (Shemos 12, 38): ‘Also a great mixture (‘eirev rav’) went up with them, and flock and cattle, etc.’? . . . Rather, they were looking for a pretext.**

We find a compelling idea in the sefer Bikurei Aviv, authored by the great Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh of Radzymin, ztz”l. We have learned in the Gemara (Yoma 75b) that the mahn was the “bread of the mighty,” it was the nourishment of the ministering angels. So, when Bnei Yisrael consumed the mahn, they lost any appetite for material things and desires. This is the implication of the words **“התאוות תאוה”**—they yearned to have an appetite for physical, material things. Thus, they could serve Hashem by overcoming the yetzer. This, however, was a grave mistake. For, if they failed even once to withstand the yetzer, the result would be a desecration of the honor of Hashem—“chilul Hashem.”

This then was the complaint of Yisrael’s elite: **“We are disgusted with this rotten bread!”** In keeping with the insight of the Bikurei Aviv, they felt that eating the mahn limited their spiritual accomplishments; it prevented them from battling the yetzer hara and serving Hashem on a higher level. Perhaps, this is why they referred to the mahn as **“לחם”**

הקלקל. The term **“קלקל”** can be interpreted as **קל-קל**, meaning extremely easy. Due to effects of the mahn, they did not have to overcome obstacles or challenges to serve Hashem; however, they yearned to serve Hashem by withstanding the challenges presented by the yetzer hara.

Based on this understanding, we can suggest a novel explanation for the punishment meted out by HKB”H—the serpents. Two of our great luminaries—the brilliant Avnei Neizer and brilliant Chiddushei HaRim—explain how the **“nachash hakadmoni”** succeeded in trapping Adam and Chava and causing their downfall. In his commentary, Rashi explains (Bereishis 2, 25): **“They were not ashamed”—the yetzer hara had not been put in him until he ate from the tree; then the yetzer hara entered him, and then he knew to distinguish between good and bad.** Hence, the nachash persuaded Adam and Chava to eat from the Eitz HaDa’as, so that the yetzer hara would enter their beings. Thus, they would have the opportunity to serve Hashem on a much higher level by overcoming the influence of the yetzer—the inclination to do wrong.

Thus, we have learned an incredible chiddush. It was the elite faction of the generation of the midbar that made the derogatory remark: **“We are disgusted with this rotten bread!”** They complained that due to the mahn, they were deprived of the negative influence of the yetzer hara. In reality, the source of all sin can be attributed to the persuasive influence of the primeval serpent, who convinced Adam and Chava to eat from the Eitz HaDa’as, so that they would have a yetzer hara. Therefore, HKB”H punished Yisrael in the midbar with serpents, so that they would understand that the **“nachash hakadmoni”** was still alive and well and exerting its negative, deceptive influence on them.

Elevating the Nachash on a Pole Alludes to the Yetzer HaRa Who Tricked Adam into Believing that He Was Elevating Himself

Following this sublime path, we will now endeavor to explain the command HKB”H issued to Moshe: **“Make yourself a serpent and place it on a pole and let whoever is bitten look at it and live.”** In Orach L’Chaim (Lech Lecha), he presents in the name of the holy Ba’al Shem Tov an interpretation of the Gemara (Shabbas 75a): **“שוחט משום”** **“מאי מחייב, רב אמר משום צובע”**—the Gemara inquires as to when

the “melachah” of slaughtering was performed during the construction of the Mishkan and what is the nature of the liability? According to Rav, the slaughterer is liable for “צובע”. Tosafos write: “אשוחט דעלמא קאי”—the Gemara is referring to the “slaughterer” at large in the world. According to the Ba’al Shem Tov that is none other than the yetzer hara; it slaughters human beings by encouraging them to sin and disregard the mitzvos of the Torah.

Elsewhere, we have learned in the Gemara (Succah 52a): “לעתיד לבא מביאו הקב”ה ליצר הרע ושוחטו”—“le’asid la’vo” HKB”H will slaughter the yetzer hara. In other words, we can interpret the Gemara as follows: Why is the yetzer hara—the “shochet of the world”—guilty and deserving of the death penalty le’asid la’vo? After all, wasn’t it created for this purpose—to deceive mankind and promote aveiros? To which Rav answers: משום “צובע”—here a play on the word “צובע” is employed. Rather than translating it as “dyeing,” it is being translated as being deceptive and misrepresenting the truth. In other words, HKB”H gave the yetzer hara permission to tempt man openly to commit aveiros—not to conceal its intent or employ deceptive tactics. In that situation, a person is able to arm himself and combats a yetzer hara whose intent is obvious.

Unfortunately, the yetzer hara betrayed the Creator of the Universe and altered its modus operandi. Instead, when it fails to induce a person to commit an aveirah overtly, it resorts to deception. It tricks him by disguising the aveirah as a mitzvah and convincing him that this is what he is supposed to do. It was not authorized to operate in this manner. This type of yetzer hara is extremely difficult to combat. Therefore, Rav says that it is guilty and deserves to be slaughtered משום “צובע”—because it distorted the truth; it portrayed an aveirah as a mitzvah; it did what it was not authorized to do.

“Guard my soul for I am devout”

Let us now present the sweet words of the Agra D’Kallah (Korach). He presents in the name of the commentaries an interpretation of the passuk (Tehillim 86, 1): תפלה לדוד... “שמרה נפשי כי חסיד אני”—a prayer to David . . . Guard my soul for I am devout. The Gemara states (Succah 52b): תנא דבי רבי—א ברסא—רבי ישמעאל אמ פגע בך מגוול זה משכחו לבית המדרש—a Baraisa was taught in the Academy of Rabbi Yishmael: If this despicable character engages you, draw him into the Beis

Midrash. We will endeavor to explain why the yetzer hara is described here as a “despicable character”—“מגוול”—rather than simply as the “yetzer hara.”

It is because Rabbi Yishmael is referring here to that particular yetzer hara that misrepresents an aveirah as a mitzvah. It is despicable, because it was not authorized to do this. Hence, the Gemara advises us: “If this despicable character engages you”—who disguises an aveirah as a mitzvah; “draw him into the Beis Midrash”—where you can open up the Shulchan Aruch and the Rambam and verify if this act is indeed a mitzvah or an aveirah.

However, the Agra D’Kallah says that this only works for a person who follows the letter of the law strictly as it appears in the Shulchan Aruch. It does not necessarily apply to a devout “chassid,” who frequently goes above and beyond the strict letter of the law. For, the yetzer hara can cleverly argue: Yes, this mitzvah does not appear in the Shulchan Aruch or the Rambam, but you are a “chassid”; you go above and beyond the letter of the law. This prompted David HaMelech to pray: “Guard my soul”—I require special protection, “for I am devout (a ‘chassid’)”—and tend to do things beyond the letter of the law. Thus, drawing him into the Beis Midrash will not work for me.

Let us add another fascinating thought. Why did David HaMelech in particular compose this tefilah? We know from the Arizal in Sefer HaLikutim (Ha’azinu) that David HaMelech was a gilgul and tikun of Adam HaRishon. In fact, Adam HaRishon donated seventy years of his life to David HaMelech. Clearly, the “nachash hakadmoni” was the very first yetzer hara to disregard and violate its so-called rules of engagement. It misrepresented the aveirah of partaking from the Eitz HaDa’as as a mitzvah. It claimed that eating from the forbidden fruit would allow the yetzer hara to enter man, thereby enabling man to serve Hashem on a higher level.

In this manner, we can interpret the following Gemara (Eiruvin 18b): “רבי מאיר אומר, אדם הראשון חסיד גדול היה”—Rabbi Meir says: Adam HaRishon was exceedingly pious (a great “chassid”). We can suggest that Rabbi Meir is informing us how the nachash managed to trap Adam HaRishon. Since he was a great “chassid,” he strove to serve Hashem beyond the strict letter of the law. This enabled the nachash to convince

him that it is better to serve Hashem with a yetzer hara. That is what prompted David HaMelech to pray: **“Guard my soul”** from the yetzer hara that disguises an aveirah as a mitzvah; **“for I am a chassid”**—I am a gilgul of Adam HaRishon, who was a **“chassid”**—acting above and beyond the letter of the law. That is what enabled the nachash to deceive him and trap him. Therefore, I require special protection.

We can now appreciate why HKB”H commanded Moshe: **“Make yourself a serpent and place it on a pole.”** Yisrael’s derogatory remarks concerning the mahn were attributable to the same deceitful, misguided notion the “nachash hakadmoni” had used to trap Adam HaRishon. The mahn had refined them and rid them of material desires. Yet, they felt that they could better serve Hashem if they had those desires; then they could serve Hashem by withstanding the deceitful persuasions of the yetzer. Therefore, HKB”H commanded Moshe to fashion a serpent and raise it up on a pole, so that Yisrael would understand that they had fallen prey to the deceit of the nachash. It wanted them to think that

its intent was to elevate them spiritually higher and higher. So, HKB”H instructed **“whoever is bitten”**—in other words, whoever was convinced by the nachash that its intent was to spiritually elevate them to better serve Hashem; to **“look at it”**—to recognize that the nachash sitting atop the pole on its lofty perch is deceitful; its intent is not to elevate them but to topple them. Do so **“and live”**—by recognizing the truth and making amends, you will survive.

Hence, our blessed sages teach us: **“Does a serpent kill or does a serpent restore life?! Rather, when Yisrael gazed upward and subjugated their heart to their Father in heaven, they were healed; but if not, they perished.”** The only way to combas the type of yetzer hara that disguises an aveirah as a mitzvah is to engage in Torah-study. And if it argues that this mitzvah is not stated explicitly in the Torah, but you should go above and beyond the letter of the law and do it anyways, your only recourse is to gaze upwards. Pray to our Father in heaven just as David HaMelech did: **“Guard my soul for I am a chassid!”**



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