

Parashat Chukat 5782, 2022:

Looking Upward

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Chapter five of *Pirkei Avot* tells a poignant tale: “With ten tests our forefathers tested Hashem in the desert, as is stated (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:22), ‘... they tested Me these ten times, and did not listen to My voice.’” (Mishna 4) In his *Commentary on the Torah* on this *pasuk*, Rashi (1040-1105) notes that two of the ten challenges against Hashem concerned the manna that He provided to our forebears for 40 years. One of these instances appears in this week’s *parasha*: “The people spoke against *Elokim* and against Moshe, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this desert, for there is no bread and no water, and we are disgusted with this rotten bread [that is, the manna, Rashi].’” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 21:5, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Hashem’s response to this challenge was swift and powerful; “[He] sent venomous snakes against the people, and they bit the people, and many of the people died.” (21:6) Realizing their fundamental error, the people immediately reached out to Moshe, begging him to intervene on their behalf: “The people came to Moshe and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against Hashem and against you. Pray to Hashem that He remove the snakes from us.’ So Moshe prayed on behalf of the people.” (21:7) Hashem then agreed to end the plague of the poisonous snakes and instructed Moshe to undertake the following action in order to achieve this outcome:

“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Make yourself a serpent and put it on a pole, and all who are bitten will look at it and live.’” As always, Moshe fulfilled Hashem’s *mitzvah*: “Moshe made a copper snake and put it on a pole, and whenever a snake bit a man, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live.” (21:8-9)

A well-known *mishnah* in *Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah* 29a presents the classic question regarding Hashem’s solution to end the *makkah* of the snakes and contextualizes it by noting its parallels to our victory over Amalek as found in Parashat Beshalach:

“And it came to pass, when Moshe held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (*Sefer Shemot* 17:11). It may be asked: “Did the hands of Moshe make war when he raised them or break war when he lowered them?” Rather, the verse comes to tell you that as long as the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell. Similarly, you can say: The verse states: “Make for yourself a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, he shall live.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 21:8). Once again it may be asked: “Did the serpent kill, or did the serpent preserve life?” Rather, when the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but if not, they rotted from their snakebites. (Translation, *The William Davidson Talmud*, Koren Press, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal* editor)

The two questions presented in this *mishnah*, “Did the hands of Moshe make war when he raised them or break war when he lowered them?” and “Did the serpent kill, or did the serpent preserve life?” have the same answer: Salvation from trial and tribulation has but one source, *Avinu she’b’Shamayim* (Our Father in Heaven). If we raise our eyes, and turn our hearts and minds to Hashem, we will achieve the outcome for which we long. This essential principle of *emunah* (faith) is reminiscent of one of my favorite chapters from *Sefer Tehillim*:

A song for ascents. I shall raise my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come? My help is from Hashem, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to falter; Your Guardian will not slumber. Behold the Guardian of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Hashem is your Guardian; Hashem is your shadow; [He is] by your right hand. By day, the sun will not smite you, nor will the moon at night. Hashem will guard you from all evil; He will guard your soul. Hashem will guard your going out and your coming in from now and to eternity. (121)

May these powerful words of *Dovid HaMelech* ever be our guide as we strive to sanctify the Almighty in our lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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