



DATA of Plano

Parshas Chukas | 10 Tamuz 5778 | June 23, 2018

Guest Sermon

with Rabbi Shlomo Abrams



THE PROHIBITIVE COST OF A WEDDING

Friday

Mincha: 7:00

Candle lighting: 8:21 (Earliest time: 7:09)

Shabbos Day

Shacharis: 9:00

Latest time for shema: 9:54

Learners' Service: 10:30

Childcare: 10:45

Kiddush following services at 11:45

Mincha: 8:00

Shabbos ends: 9:25

Learners' Service



A MCLAREN, GEFILTE FISH, AND THE RADIO

From the Desk of Rabbi Yitzchik Adlerstein

The Jews and the Snake: Lessons for a Good Life



The pattern is fairly simple and uncomplicated. The Jewish people sin. The Jewish people feel remorse. Moshe beseeches Hashem to forgive them. Hashem accedes to the request.

It happens so often we lose track of the number of times. In one episode in this week's Torah portion, however, events take a different turn. Dissatisfied with the manna, the Jews project their disappointment upon Moshe and Hashem. Hashem sets fiery serpents upon them; many die. The survivors, overcome with guilt, voice their regret to Moshe, who prays for them. But rather than forgive them, Ha-

shem orders that a large copper serpent be erected. Those who are bitten by the fiery serpents are saved from death only by focusing upon the copper image, and directing their hearts towards the One above. Expressing their remorse was not enough to save them from the effects of the snakebite.

What was exceptional about this failure that Hashem dealt with it do differently? For that matter, we are hard pressed to understand the severity of their punishment in the first place. To be sure, their complaint seems to us to be as "unsubstantial" as the manna about which they muttered. Hashem's

punishments always match the crime. Did some juvenile sputtering need to be answered by the painful and frightful attack of the serpents?

We must understand what it was that they were really saying with their complaint. They were not hungry; they were not thirsty. The manna nourished them while they drank water from Miriam's well. What they rejected was the general order of their lives, which was not quite the way they would have liked it to be. Their dissatisfaction did not stem from any real need, but from the manner in which those needs were fulfilled. They had their own priorities, their own likes and dislikes, and these were not in synch with the choices Hashem made for them. In short, they rejected the life that Hashem chose for them, valuing their own choices above His.

The rabbis tell us in Ethics of Our Fathers that the rich man is the one who finds happiness in his lot. We achieve such happiness not by simply adopting a pragmatic and optimistic embrace of one's fate in life. We get there by comprehending the Hand of G-d in it. We can be happy with our lot when we understand that it was custom designed by His Providence. By the same reasoning, fundamental unhappiness is a terrible failing, because it rejects His Will. We are unhappy when we insist on superimposing our own will, our own choices upon the providential trajectory that Hashem has selected for us.

Keeping this in mind, we can unlock the meaning of a famous teaching of another part of Ethics of Our Fathers. There, the rabbis tell us that Abraham was subjected to ten tests. He passed all of them, demonstrating his preciousness. Some of those tests required responses on his part, and Abraham responded magnificently, such as agreeing to die for his beliefs at Ur Kasdim, and in following Hashem's directives at the binding of Isaac. Another group of tests, however, afforded him no options. How could the famine in the land and Sarah's captivity in the house of Pharaoh serve as tests, when Abraham was a passive participant, who had no role in shaping the events?

These tests measured Abraham's attitude, not his actions. He met every new trial and tribulation with happiness and love of Hashem. He was fundamentally pleased with the way Hashem ran his life. This state of mind was every bit as significant as his decision to allow himself to be thrown into the furnace at Ur Kasdim,

and to offer up Isaac on the altar. Abraham completely understood that from the Good comes only good. Whatever Hashem had in store for him could only be in his best interest.

The harshest treatment we receive from our human nature is to deny all this. The evil inclination comes at us with something more potent than the meretricious allure of self-importance, of lusts and desire, of honor. Worse than all of those is the growing feeling within a Jew that he is simply dissatisfied with the way He conducts his life.

A plague of serpents was a fitting response to the behavior of the complainers. The serpent, of course, has been symbolic of evil itself since it led Adam astray in the Garden of Eden. Moreover, aspects of the serpent's behavior are especially relevant to the human flaw we are discussing. The serpent was cursed to slither on the ground and eat dust. Rabbi Moshe Midner, the spiritual leader of the prestigious Slonimer school in Baranovich, Poland in the early part of the 1900's, explained that the ready availability of sustenance was a terrible curse to the serpent, because it meant that G-d did not want it to turn to Him for its needs. "Take what you need, but don't turn to Me. I do not wish to hear your voice!"

Additionally, the Talmud depicts a scene in the future, when other animals will gather around the serpent accusatorily. "We often behaved violently, but we did so to gather prey, to sustain ourselves. You, serpent, lunge at people and kill them without any purpose, and without any benefit."

Taken together, the serpent's profile is one of bitterness and gratuitous damage. It lacks no food, but lashes out nonetheless. The fit is perfect! The complainers among the Jews also lacked nothing, but still verbally lashed out at Moshe and at Hashem in their unhappiness. For this



reason, their teshuvah required the copper serpent. They could easily have overlooked or minimized the gravity of their offense. They had actually done nothing wrong. They needed to look intently at a symbolic representation of their sin in order to properly repent. The copper serpent had to be raised aloft for all to peer at it intently, and come to understand what wrong they had committed, and how grievous a wrong it was.

This fiery serpent episode comes on the heels of Aaron's death. It could not have taken place in the lifetime of the person who "loved peace, pursued peace, and loved people." These qualities are known to lead to love of Hashem. While Aaron lived, his love of Hashem was available in such intensity and bounty that others felt it too. And where there is love of Hashem, there is satisfaction with the way He runs His world. With his death, with love of Hashem in shorter supply, dissatisfaction and complaints became possible.

The complaints did not arise randomly. Introducing the story, the Torah tells us that "the spirit of the people grew short on the way." Rashi explains that the rigors of the journey became unbearable to them. The Torah, it would seem, seeks to mitigate their transgression. Their patience was in short supply; they did have legitimate reasons to

complain, even if not for the reasons they expressed. In truth, however, the Torah does not mitigate their sin as much as underscore how serious it was. At times a person appears to have good cause to complain. He is dealt blows such that optimism and insight are banished by grave concerns and problems. The Torah tells us that even at such times, dissatisfaction with the lot in life allocated by Hashem is a major failure. Life, presided over by G-d, is always good.

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein is the Director of Interfaith Affairs for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Los Angeles-based human rights organization and global NGO. He holds the Sydney M. Irmas Adjunct Chair in Jewish Law and Ethics at Loyola Law School.

Rabbi Adlerstein is a contributing editor to the quarterly Jewish Action, and the founding and senior editor of Cross-Currents, a popular Jewish blog of thought and current affairs.

His writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Tradition, The Los Angeles Daily Law Journal, and other renowned publications.

SAVE THE DATE!

- ☑ **Fast of the Ninth of Av** | Sunday, July 22
- ☑ **Champions Camp** | August 5 - August 10
- ☑ **Jewish Night at the RoughRiders** | Sunday, August 5 @ 7:05 P.M.
- ☑ **Community End of Summer BBQ** | Sunday, August 19



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