



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

CHUKAT

Seeing the serpent

When the Israelites grumbled, they were bitten by serpents (Bamidbar 21).

What happened next? God told Moshe to make a copper serpent and place it on a pole. If anybody was bitten by a serpent, they were to look at the copper serpent and then they would live.

Rashi questions this notion and suggests that if someone suffered they should turn their gaze upward to God and subdue their hearts to their Father in heaven, and this would cure them.

It seems clear that if anyone had sinned the result would be suffering, and only if they appealed to God would they be forgiven and purified.

However, this leaves unanswered the question of the purpose of the copper serpent. Ramban thinks the idea is psychological: if one were suffering, the healing would come from the cause of the suffering. "Healing", said Ramban, "is effected by the very cause of the suffering itself."

Maybe the lesson is that suffering comes from looking away from God, and recovery comes from restoring one's trust in the Divine power.

The secret weapon

A verse in the Torah reading says, "Thus is it written in the Books of the Wars of the Lord" (Bamidbar 21:14).

The Book of the Wars of the Lord is one of those books that are mentioned in the Scriptures but have never been found.

It is understood allegorically by Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin, who used to say, "The nations of the world have military records which list their troops and their triumphs but what we Jews have is the notion that when God has a war to fight, His weapon is a book.

"The book with which God wages war against evil is the Torah which describes the Almighty's purposes for the world and the principles of justice, peace and truth which specify the ideals which He intends will become the tenets of the Divine Utopia." -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH