

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

CHUKAT 5785

(A bit longer than the usual chizuk, I hope you stay with it to its conclusion. Thanks.)

The Jewish people are in their 40th year, on the threshold of entering their Promised Land, and we read, with surprising disappointment, how they quickly lapse into complaining when faced with discomfort and uncertainty. True, in the wake of Miriam's death, the miraculous well that had provided Israel with water vanished. Their appeal to Moshe for water was understandable. However, why does the Torah state that they actually quarreled with Moshe about it, bellyaching and accusing Moshe of having brought them out of Egypt to a place of no water (20:3-5). Wasn't this the carping refrain of their parents, some 40 years earlier? At least then, one could excuse a people who had just emerged from bondage with little to prepare them for the harsh desert conditions. But their children? Hadn't they learned anything over the past four decades in the wilderness?

And not long after this event, following the death of Aharon, the people once again begin grumbling; this time about the manna, that miraculous food that sustained them

in the desert for 40 years. Again, they blame Moshe for taking them out of Egypt "to die in this wilderness; for there is no food and no water, and we are disgusted with this rotten bread [the manna]" (21:5). True, they are not demanding a return to Egypt, but how are we to explain their awful and appalling ingratitude? Their water had been restored and they still had plenty of food - the manna and the quail! Why the crabby discontent?

To understand the mood of the people at this juncture, let us make a number of observations. As mentioned, the people were keenly aware that they stood in their 40th year since leaving Egypt. They were now the new generation who would enter the Land, and with that realization, they knew the time had come to transition from a desert-miraculous existence to a natural one. This transition, however, would be fraught with two tension-filled realities. The first, that although no doubt hardened by their desert-life condition, the people had not been tested in battle. As such, they may have reasonably harbored some doubt about their ability to defeat a land of many nations. And second, with the death of their leaders, the people would certainly be concerned about who would intervene for them with HaShem, ensuring that Gd would continue to provide and protect them in their conquest of the Land. With

this backdrop, we begin our explanation. The analysis will, in part, rest upon the original insights of the Netziv in his Ha'amek Davar who contextualizes these events in terms of the transition that needed to take place.

Chazal explain that the people were traumatized by the deaths of Miriam and Aharon. Even Moshe, in deep grief for his sister, required HaShem's exhortation to cease his mourning and attend to the needs of the people. According to the Netziv what was needed was a leadership that could slowly wean the people away from an existence which relied totally upon the visibly miraculous. In other words, a process of transition would be indispensable and pivotal for success in their eventual settling of the Land. Here were a people poised to enter and conquer the Land, but in Canaan, their victory would no longer be handed to them on the "silver platter" of the supernatural. In the desert, they were coddled - almost spoon-fed, protected and sustained by Gd and led by three great spiritual and moral giants who instilled within them confidence and safety, trust and refuge. When the water suddenly disappeared, the people were naturally deeply troubled. "How will we survive; how can we successfully vanquish the nations of Canaan?" The image of Egypt was immediately

recalled - a place of shelter and security, predictable and comforting - home. And they parroted their parents' complaint by clinging to the old patterns of a previous generation. They doubted their own strengths and worth, and anxiously wondered whether they could handle the unknowns of freedom without a Miriam, without an Aharon. In a word, could they make this critical transition to a real-life mode of living?

When, after the burial of Aharon and the brief battle with Amalek, the people were commanded by HaShem to make an about-face and turn back into the desert and detour around the territory of Edom, the Torah states that people became disheartened (21:4). More, they were frustrated and disgruntled. As Rashi comments: "We were so close to entering the Land, but [now] we turn to our rear!" Their complaining about the manna immediately followed (21:5).

It should be rather clear, as the Netziv contends, that the people's carping about the water and manna was indicative of their difficulty in making this transition from desert to country. On the one hand, they were genuinely excited about finally leaving a barren wasteland for their "Land flowing with milk and honey", but their impatience to get there could not deal with the reality that there was still some additional business to take care of before the

conquest. And yet, on the other hand, they were anxious and apprehensive about transitioning from their metaphysical existence to one of normalcy, of nation-building by dint of their own efforts. This tension exploded with their grumblings and quarreling. "We're tired of the manna sameness; let's get to Israel where we can eat a full cuisine of culinary delights, but where will we get the food and water once we invade?"

In the Mei Meriva (water from the rock) episode, the Netziv argues that Moshe and Aharon failed to teach the people that HaShem would no longer provide water via a miracle. Rather now, it would be prayer - "Speak to the rock" (20:8) - which would accomplish the same. Transitioning to this change in order to elicit HaShem's blessings would be essential for the people's survival in the Land. In failing to do so, Moshe revealed that his leadership was wanting. He would no longer be permitted to enter and lead the people in their new Land.

When later, the people complain a second time about the manna, HaShem devises a different strategy to both address their ingratitude and to help them in making the necessary transition that the Netziv says was both vital and imperative. First, the lack of HAKARAT HATOV. If after 40 years, under the protective canopy of

the Almighty and under tutelage of their three great leaders, they still were of little faith and failed miserably to evince any gratitude to HaShem for His constant providential care, they certainly deserved a harsh lesson. And so, they were quickly abandoned on the desert floor, left exposed to its dangers, and eventually poisoned by the bite of snakes. And this to remind them of HaShem's providential care which they had taken for granted.

But what was it about the snakes per se as a means of punishment; why not some other predatory animal, a different penalty? And how would the curative power of the copper serpent teach and contribute to their ability to transition? The snake, of course, instantly summoned up the primeval serpent of the Garden of Eden. In rabbinic literature, the nachash (snake) was the first manifestation of the yetzer hara. From the very outset, the mission of this "evil inclination" was to lure man away from his divine assignment, to trip him up with all sorts of enticements and/or anxieties. Chazal tell us that there are certain situations in which the yetzer hara "dances" and thrives, and which therefore require Divine assistance to counter. And journeying is one of them.

The people of Israel were on a journey for 40 years. The journey now would

have to change to a different type of march. A major transition was in order. And because all transitions, by definition are periods of flux and instability, the yetzer hara has a "field-day", and takes full advantage of a person's feelings of vulnerability and insecurity during this worrisome "no-man's-land" of transformation and adjustment. Indeed, the pressing need to abandon one's comfort zone and transition is never a simple or tranquil accommodation. And so, the "snake" begins to assault the people with fear and uncertainty, mistrust and ingratitude - anything to thwart their forward movement and derail their journey toward their promised destination. How to battle against this snake-yetzer hara? The remedy for this - as with any yetzer hara for that matter - was to externalize it. When allowed to churn and metastasize from within a person's psyche, this insidious snake can wreak havoc by messing with a person's authentic sense of self, blinding a people to their true identity, convincing a person that he/she is not the person he/she was meant to be. The result: sin, and the eventual unravelling of a person's well-being across every level of his existence, ultimately leading to his complete disintegration. There is no escape. But when the snake-yetzer hara is "placed on a staff" (21:8) and seen from the outside, then with Gd's help, it is seen for what it is

and can be dealt with, fought against, and successfully neutralized.

When the snakes attacked, the people were told to gaze upon the "copper snake", symbolic of the yetzer hara. The message would be powerful and unmistakable: "This yetzer hara, masking as your fears and uncertainties, is not you! It is outside, not part of your pure interior, your soul. But alone, you will not succeed in banishing that snake and its poison from within you. You will need the help of your 'Father in Heaven'! Look to the copper snake and then beyond to HaShem and you can be healed from the deadly bite of the snake-yetzer hara." In the words of the Mishna: "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."

Fortunately for the people of Israel, in their 40th year, both HaShem and Moshe eventually ensured that they would succeed in transitioning from a desert-overt miracle existence to one of a natural hidden miracle normality. But, for us, there would be important lessons to be learned from this experience. First, patience is a virtue. Often, matters do not play out as quickly or in the manner we had hoped or planned for. Waiting and waiting even more becomes neces-

sary and critical. Second, we must never fail to express our appreciation for all that has transpired - to HaShem and to the many people who help bring us to whatever destination we so eagerly seek, who are there to teach us how to fulfill our unique mission in life. And while there's surely nothing wrong with raising legitimate concerns and worries along the way, these issues must always be expressed in such a way so as to reflect the twin moralities of patience and gratitude.

But probably, the most important take-a-way from this Biblical narrative is first, the quotidian and inevitable reality of transition, a basic constituent of every life. And then second, how we must learn to successfully navigate the many challenges of transition and emerge the better for it. In life, we must all progress from child to teen to adult, from couple to parent, from work to retirement, from physical wellbeing to physical limitation, and the list goes on. Each advance has its unique set of yetzer haras that test us and attempt to arrest our uphill push to complete the transition event and grow. But, with HaShem's help, we can always traverse the transition-divide. We can overcome the obstacles, sideline the "snakes", and emerge on the other side of the transition experience, better for the effort and struggle, and greater than we were before! 🙌