

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXXIX: Chukat (Num. 19:1–22:1)

Essay 12. Man can conquer his evil inclination

In Num. 21:4–9, the Israelites became upset with their food, and complained against G-d. As punishment, they were attacked by deadly snakes. They repented, and those who were still alive were spared. This essay discusses another incident involving snakes and sin.

בְּרַכּוֹת פָּרַק ה' מַעֲשֵׂה בְּמַקּוֹם אֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה בּוֹ עֶרּוֹד הָיָה מְזִיק אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת. בָּאוּ וְהוֹדִיעוּ לְרַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶן דּוּסָא. אָמַר לָהֶם: הֲרֵאֻנִי אֶת חוּרוֹ וְכוּ'. וְהִנֵּי עֶקְבוּ עַל חוּרוֹ. יֵצֵא, נִשְׁכּוּ, וּמַת הָעֶרּוֹד וְכוּ'. אָמַר לָהֶם רָאוּ שְׂאִין הָעֶרּוֹד מִמִּית אֲלָא חֲטָא מִמִּית ע"כ.

In tractate **Berachot**, the **fifth chapter**, it is written:

[There was] **an incident in one place where a snake¹ was harming the people. They came and told Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa [and asked for his help]. He told them: "Show me its hole."** They showed him its hole. **He placed his heel over the mouth of the hole. It came out, bit him, and the snake died!** [Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa] placed it over his shoulder and brought it to the study hall. **He said to them: "See, it is not the snake that kills, rather sin kills."** [I.e., the snake has no power over one who is free of transgression.]

- Berachot 33a

וְהַקְשָׁה מֵהַרְשָׁ"א אִיךָ סָמַךְ עַל הַנֶּס בְּמַקּוֹם דְּשָׂכִים הִנִּיקָא, וְכֵן הִקְשׂוּ מִפְּרָשִׁים אֲחֵרִים. וְלַעֲנִיּוֹת דְּעֵתִי נִרְאָה אֵין זֶה קוּשְׁיָא, שְׁהָרִי דְרָךְ הַקַּב"ה לַעֲשׂוֹת לְצַדִּיקִים נֶס בְּתוֹךְ נֶס, דְּכִשְׁעוּשָׂה לָהֶם נֶס אֶחָד יֵשׁ לָהֶם לְבָטוּחַ גַּם עַל גַּם שְׂנִי, כְּמוֹ דְּוָד וּמְרַדְכִי שְׂנִימָן לָהֶם רָמָז וְחֲשׂוּ. וְהוֹאִיל שְׂמַצִּינוּ דְּעֵינֵי דְר' חֲנִינָא בֶן דּוּסָא הָנוּ מִתִּיב דּוּבִי בְּקַרְנֵיהוּ דְּהוּא נִיטָא רַבָּה כְּדִאֲמַרִּין בְּפָרַק ט' דְּמַצִּיעָא (דָּף ק"ו) וְעֵי"ש, מִשׁוּם הָכִי סָמַךְ עַצְמוֹ אַף עַל גַּם זֶה מִשׁוּם שֶׁהָיָה רָאוּי לְכַד.

The Maharsha² asks how [Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa] relied upon a miracle in a place where a harmful [snake] was present, and other commentators have similarly asked this, for

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¹ The word *arod* [עֶרּוֹד] appears once in the Bible, in Job 39:5, where it is considered to be a wild donkey. In this context in the Gemara, it is considered to be a venomous snake or lizard.

² Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels (1555–1631), Polish rabbi famous for his Talmud commentaries, Chiddushei Halachot and Chiddushei Agadot.

we are not supposed to place ourselves in a dangerous situation, expecting a miracle. **In my poor opinion, this does not seem to be a difficulty, for we see the way of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is to perform a miracle within a miracle for the righteous, that when He performs one miracle for them, then they can trust there will be a second miracle, as with David and Mordechai who were each given a hint about something and took it into account.**³ (Esther Rabbah 6:5). **Since we find that the goats of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa brought bears [impaled on] their horns, which was a great miracle, as it says in the ninth chapter of tractate Bava Metzia (page 106a),⁴ because of this first miracle, he relied on this second miracle that he would be saved from the snake, because it was fitting for him to benefit from miracles.**

אָבֵל אֵי קִשְׁיָא הָא קִשְׁיָא, דְּמָה הֵיטָה פְּנוּנְתוֹ בְּמָה שְׁאָמַר רָאוּ שְׁאִין הָעֲרוּד מִמִּית אֱלָא הַחֲטָא מִמִּית? וְהֲלֵא מְקַרָּא מְלֵא הוּא "אִם-יִשָּׂא הַנָּחָשׁ בְּלוֹא-לְחַשׁ". דְּהֵינּוּ שְׁהִנָּחַשׁ אֵינּוּ נוֹשֵׂא אֱלָא לְמִי שְׁנִגְזַר עָלָיו מִלְמַעְלָה, וְאִם כֵּן מַה הוֹסִיף בְּזָה? וְעוֹד שְׁלֵפִי דְבָרָיו שְׁאִין הָעֲרוּד מִמִּית וְכוּ' מַה צּוֹרֵךְ הֵיךָ שְׁיָמוּת הָעֲרוּד? הֲלֵא הֵיךָ דִּי שְׁלֵא יִנְשַׁכְנוּ?

But if there is a difficulty, this is the difficulty: that what was [Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa's] intent when he said, "See, it is not the snake that kills, rather sin kills"? For isn't there a full verse about this: "If the snake bites before it is charmed, there's no profit for the charmer" (Eccl. 10:11)? That is, a snake's nature is to bite people, though that can sometimes be overcome by a snakecharmer. The snake only bites one whom is decreed upon from above, if so, what is added by this statement of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa? Also, according to his words, that it is not the snake that kills, rather sin kills, what need what there for the snake to die? Wouldn't it have been enough for it to have not bitten him? In other words, while he didn't die from the snakebite, the snake did still bite him. If a miracle was going to happen for Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, why did the snake bite him at all?

³ Esther Rabbah 6:6: ". . . Four righteous were given a hint. Two recognized it and two did not recognize it. A hint was given to Moses and he did not recognize it. A hint was given to Jacob and he did not recognize it. A hint was given to David and Mordechai and they did recognize it.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jacob, 'I will protect you wherever you will go' (Gen. 28:15), but he was afraid—a man that the Holy One, blessed be He, promised him was afraid, as it says, 'Jacob was greatly frightened.' (Gen. 32:8). Rather, he said, 'Perhaps when I was in the house of Laban, the impurity ruined me and I became impure.'

[Regarding] Moses, [it is written] 'place it in the ears of Joshua,' that is to say that you [i.e., Moses] will die and Joshua will enter the people to the Land, but it is written, 'and I pleaded with the L-rd' (Deut. 3:23). [I.e., Moses didn't take the hint, and continued to plea.]

But David and Mordechai were given a hint and they recognized it. David said, 'Your servant has killed both lion and bear' (I Sam. 17:36). David said, 'What distinction do I have that I have slain wild beasts? But perhaps something is destined to happen to Israel, and they are destined to be saved by me.'

[Regarding] Mordechai: 'and each and every day Mordechai went before the courtyard of the harem' (Esther 2:11). He said, 'is it possible that this righteous woman will be married to a non-Jew for naught? Rather a great future thing will happen to Israel and she will conquer this future thing.'

⁴ The story is explained more fully in Taanit 25a: "Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa had some goats. [His neighbors] said to him: [Your goats] are damaging [our property by eating in our fields]. He said to them: If they are causing damage, let them be eaten by bears. But if [they are] not [eating your property], let each of them, this evening, bring a bear [impaled] between its horns. That evening, each one brought in a bear [impaled] between its horns."

וַיִּשׁ לֵאמֹר דְּאֵי מִקְרָא דְ"אִם-יִשְׂדֵּךְ הַנֶּחֱשׁ" וְכוּ' וְאֵיתָא בַּמִּדְרָשׁ רִישׁ פְּרָשְׁתָּא אָמַר שְׂאֵמַר הַנֶּחֱשׁ אֶפְשָׁר דְּאַנָּא עֲבַד כְּלוּם אֱלֵא אִם מִתְאַמֵּר לִי מִן עֲלִיּוּתָא עֵכָ"ל. הֵיּוּ יְכוּלִים יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר כְּשֵׁם שְׂהַנֶּחֱשׁ נוֹשֵׁךְ כְּשִׂאוּמְרִים לֹא מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, כִּף הַיִּצְרָר הָרַע, שְׂבַנּוּ נוֹשֵׁךְ בְּנֻוּ לְפִי שְׂכָף אוּמְנוּתוֹ וּבִשְׂבִיל זֶה נִבְרָא, וְכִף אֶמְרוּ לֹא מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם. וּמַעֲתָה אֲנוּ כְּמוֹ אֲנוּסִים.

It can be said on the verse, “If the snake bites before it is charmed . . . ,” and it is brought in the Midrash on parshat Emor (Vayikra Rabbah 26:2), that the snake said, “Is it possible for me to do anything without me being told from on High?” Israel could theoretically say, “Just as the snake bites, when they tell him from Heaven to do so, so too is the evil inclination, which is within us biting us, i.e., inciting us to sin. For thus is [the evil inclination’s] nature and for this reason it was created, and this is what they told [the evil inclination] from Heaven, and from now on we are like people who are compelled [to sin].”

אֲבָל עֲכָשׁוּ שְׂאֲנוּ רוּאִים שְׂנֵה הָעֶרּוּד שְׂבָא שָׁם כְּדֵי לְהַזִּיק הַבְּרִיּוֹת דְּשָׁמַע מִינָהּ שְׂשִׁלְחוּ אוֹתוֹ שָׁם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִלֵּךְ נְמִי לִישׁוּף לִר' חֲנִינָא בֶן דּוּסָא עֲצָמוּ. וְלֹא דֵי שְׂלֵא עֲשֵׂה לֹא שׁוּם נִזְק אֱלֵא אֲדַרְבָּא מֵת הָעֶרּוּד. שְׁמַע מִינָהּ שְׂאֵף הַיִּצְרָר הָרַע הַנוֹשֵׁךְ אֵת הָאָדָם כְּדֵי לְהַחֲטִיאֵהוּ אִין מִמֶּשׁ בְּנִשְׂכָּה זֶה אֱלֵא הָאָדָם יְכוּל לְהַנְצִיל מִמֶּנּוּ וְלְהַרְגוֹ, כְּמוֹ שְׂמַצִּינוּ בְּדוּד דְּכַתִּיב, "וְלִבִּי תָלַל בְּקַרְבִּי". וְאֶמְרוּ ו"ל שְׂדוּד הָרַגוּ לִיִצְרָר הָרַע, וְהִכִּי אֶמְרִינּוּ בְּפִרְקָא קַמָּא דְּקִידוּשִׁין וְאִם אֵתָהּ רוּצָה אֵתָהּ תִּמְשׁוּל בּוּ.

But now that we see that this is the snake that came there in order to injure people, we hear from it that they sent it there from Heaven, and it came also to bite Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa himself. It’s not enough that it didn’t do any harm to him; rather, to the contrary, the snake died! Hear from this that even the evil inclination, which bites the man in order to make him sin, has nothing within its bite that the man is not able to conquer and destroy, as we find with David, as it is written, “my heart is pierced within me” (Ps. 109:22), meaning that the evil inclination in his heart was nullified, as if his heart had died. [The rabbis] of blessed memory said that David destroyed his evil inclination,⁵ and thus it says in the first chapter of Kiddushin (30b), “and if you wish, you will rule over it, as it is stated, ‘But you may rule over it’ (Gen. 4:7).” Thus, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa’s statement recognized the snake was analogous to the evil inclination. The snake biting him showed that he had an evil inclination, but the fact that the snake died showed that he was able to conquer his evil inclination. The rest of Israel should also recognize that we can conquer our own evil inclination.

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⁵ Yerushalmi Berachot chapter 9, halacha 5.