
Affliction, Healing, and a Bronze Serpent

Numbers 21 depicts yet another flashpoint in the God-Israel relationship. This time the people are so close to the promised land, yet they fall into the same old habits of grumbling about their situation. The struggle that ensues between them and the Lord, with Moses as mediator, involves a bronze serpent. Read it in 21:4-9.

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. (21:6)

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." (21:8)

What can we make of this curious story of affliction and healing in the wilderness? With the help of Torah teacher Nehama Leibowitz,¹ let's ponder it carefully, its detail, its characters, its repetitions.

Perhaps you noticed that although it is the same old complaint, this time the people lodge their complaint directly against God as well as Moses. Also, they contradict themselves: in one breath "there is no food," and in the next they "detest this miserable food." And later, for the first time in their wilderness journey, the people admit that their grumbling is a sin.

Perhaps you noticed that in v.5 we read 'God' but in later verses we read 'Lord.' Also, no comment of Moses is recorded. We are told that he prays for the people, but not what he said. The repetition in vv.8-9 is interesting, with its subtle variations. Perhaps, too, you were attentive to how the figure of the serpent is involved in both the affliction and the cure. So much to ponder! How do these observations affect your interpretation of the text?

Turning to Jewish tradition we take an interpretative lead from the 19th century German-Jewish rabbinical leader S.R. Hirsch:²

"The serpents were sent to show the people that danger beset their every step and it was only thanks to the miraculous and perpetual intervention of Divine Providence that they were able to proceed unharmed."

In other words, having been bitten the victims were required to concentrate on the bronze image of the serpent. In doing so, they were led to realise how blessed they were to have travelled safely in the wilderness until now, and how dangerous was the path ahead, thus calling for a heightened appreciation of the protective hand of God in their lives. Hirsch continues:

"Nothing is more calculated to make a person more satisfied with his lot than the knowledge of the chasm that ever yawns beneath him, and that it is only Divine mercy that bears him safely over, as if on eagles' wings..."

The healing power of the serpent, then, is the healing power of gratitude to God, and humility in the face of one's need of divine assistance.

However, the rabbis issue a note of caution. Gazing upon a serpent image... could this not imply or lead to idol worship? The famous Midrash in TB Rosh Hashanah 29a anticipates this concern:

"Shall indeed a serpent [on a pole] kill or resurrect? But note, when the Israelites will direct their sight towards Heaven [upwards toward the serpent on the pole], and subdue their heart toward their Father in Heaven, they would be healed. If not: they will wither away."

The great challenge of faith, as held by Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (late 19th c. scholar), and expressed in the *Shema*, is: where is my heart and belief system centered? Do my eyes mislead my heart, or direct it to God? This desert story depicts a movement of healing and life, following affliction and death. The physical geography, with its dangers and deprivations, mirrors the inner landscape of fragile humans as they negotiate their terrors and learn to trust God.

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1. Nehama Leibowitz – a great teacher of Torah in 20th century Israel.
 2. See Leibowitz, 264.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York). Scripture: NRSV.

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