



PARSHAS CHUKAS – R. JONATHAN SHOOTER

Fiery Snakes There is a section in our parsha of historical interest. The Jewish people wanted to travel through the land of Sichon, the king of the Emorites. When permission for free passage was denied, the Bnei Yisroel went to war and defeated them in battle. One of the cities they captured was called Cheshbon. The Torah relates how Cheshbon used to be in Moav's territory, yet now they conquered it from Sichon. The verse says "Therefore those who speak in parables (*moshlim*) say 'Come to Cheshbon, let the city of Sichon be built and established'" (Bamidbar 21:27). The Gemora in Bava Basra (78b) explains this verse as alluding to something else entirely. The word *moshlim*, can also mean those who rule. Here it means those who rule over their inclinations. When the verse continues "come to Cheshbon", the word cheshbon means to take an accounting. The verse is saying that they should come and take an accounting of the world, the loss for (not performing) a mitzvah against what can be gained from it, and what one gains from doing a sin, compared to what one stands to lose. If one does this then he will "build" in this world, and be "established" in the world to come. Why does the Torah use this incident to teach us this lesson? Originally, Cheshbon was in the territory of Moav, but the Bnei Yisroel have a commandment not to wage war with them and it was therefore off limits. However, Sichon went and conquered Cheshbon. Now that it was under their domain, the Bnei Yisroel could conquer it. In other words, because of what Sichon did, helped to rid the land of the previous occupants, and was now suitable to be taken by the Bnei Yisroel. Rav Eliya Lopian says that at this place it is appropriate to tell people of the lesson of taking account of the world, because of what occurred. Sichon had just waged a successful campaign against Moav, and had been celebrating his victory. What he didn't realise that he was just a puppet in Hashem's grand plan for the Jewish people. Hashem wanted them to have Cheshbon, but it belonged to Moav who they couldn't attack, so He let Sichon take it from Moav, so that His people could now inherit it. This is the irony of history. We cannot fathom why events happen as they do. History is replete with many ironies, and we have to realise that we are unable to control it. Rather all that is upon us is to examine our ways and make sure we do what is right.

What does it create? The people were once again complaining, this time against not only Moshe, but against Hashem. "And Hashem sent amongst the people fiery serpents" (Bamidbar 21:6). The Ohr Hachaim deals with the question of why Hashem sent snakes in particular and why were they also fiery? He says that when one does a sin, he creates something which is in kind to the particular sin performed. The Gemora (Eirchin 15b) says that they asked the snake the following; 'a lion claws its victim and then eats it, so too a bear. But you, after you bite, what pleasure do you get? The snake answered 'and what pleasure is gained by someone who speaks *loshon hora*? what is going on in this Gemora, surely two wrongs don't make a right? The answer is that the snake is symbolic of *loshon hora*. In fact it only exists because of it. There were two punishments going on here, first snakes, and on top of it, they were fiery. When one sins, the punishment is not just out of revenge, rather it comes from the very sin itself, it is an after-growth. The snakes came because they spoke *loshon hora* against Moshe. Chazal say that whoever speaks *loshon hora*, and even more so against his teacher, a snake should bite him. A snake was therefore the natural result of their slander. Furthermore, when they spoke against Hashem, the snakes became fiery. This was symbolic of the burning of something metaphysical, namely the destructions of the soul which they were causing. The Chofetz Chaim poses 3 questions regarding the incident of the fiery snakes. Firstly, why does it say that they bit, "the people", but then uses a different expression when it says that they killed many "from Yisroel"? Secondly, Moshe prayed that "the snake" should be removed, that there was only one snake, yet surely we are told that there were many "fiery snakes"? Thirdly, why didn't Moshe's prayer help in this instance, instead he had to build a bronze snake for the people to look at? The snakes came because of the sin of *loshon hora*, "and the people spoke about Hashem and against Moshe". The Chofetz Chaim says that when one does a sin it creates an accusing angel. This angel doesn't have to actually say anything; his presence is the accusation. When it reaches judgment day, that angel will be there. The sin of *loshon hora* is different. The accusing angel works measure for measure and has the power to actually speak and accuse, verbally spelling out the severity of the sin. The Medrash says that Hashem does not have too much pity for those that speak *loshon hora*, and that the only solution is not to speak it in the first place.

Just hide The Sifrei Zuta says that Hashem said "For all suffering that comes I can save you, but for *loshon hora* you will have to hide yourselves." This can be compared to the following parable. A wealthy man had a friend who lived in the city. The man went to visit his city friend, and found in the middle of the city a mad dog biting and killing people. The wealthy man said to him "If you owe anyone money you don't have to hide as I'll pay your debt. If that dog comes near you, just hide." It is the same with *loshon hora*. The verse says "From six troubles Hashem will redeem you...but from scourge of the tongue you must hide" (Iyov 5:19-20). The Zohar says that Hashem is forgiving of all things, except for *loshon hora*. If accusers come before the Heavenly throne for other sins, Hashem will in His mercy remove that sin. Whilst Hashem usually likes to have mercy, here, because of the noise, in the heavenly court it cannot be merely swept away, rather justice has to be seen to be done. With this we can answer our questions. At first they are called 'the people' who complained because of the journey. However the sin then became one of 'Yisroel' because the leaders should have prevented them from going so far as to speak against Hashem and Moshe, therefore it says "And many died from Yisroel". As to the second question of why Moshe prayed for the removal of the snake, whilst there were in fact many snakes, the answer is that he wasn't just praying for the removal of the physical snakes, but that the snake represented by the prosecutor in heaven should be removed. Finally, regarding why Moshe's prayer didn't help and he had to build the bronze snake, the answer is that Hashem said that it was impossible to remove this type of accuser, rather he gave a solution, that they build the copper snake and whoever would look at it would live. The Mishna in Rosh Hashana (29a) says that it wasn't the act of looking at the snake that made people live or die; rather they would look upwards and set their hearts to heaven. If they would do that, then they would not come to stumble through improper speech. I would like to add that on one hand you have the physical snakes which killed many people, and on the other hand you have the bronze snake which had the power to cure people. This was so much so that the Meshech Chochma says that whoever had any other illness and would look at it, would also be cured. As mentioned, *loshon hora* is symbolised by a snake. We see from this that just as in this incident the snake had the power of life and death, so too, *loshon hora* has the power for life and death. Chazal say that life and death is in the power of the tongue. Many *gedolim* would relate how tremendous *yeshuos* and healings were brought about by taking on further commitment and adherence to the laws of *loshon hora*.