

And it will be that anyone who had been bitten will look at it and live. (21:8)

The ungrateful slanderers who defamed the *manna* were treated to a unique form of punishment. They were bitten by serpents whose venom caused their victims to feel that they were burning. The *nachash ha'kadmoni*, primeval serpent, had slandered Hashem to Chavah and received a fitting curse that it would no longer experience the enjoyment of tasting food. The punishment was fitting, because the *manna* which these ingrates had slandered was multi-flavored; a person could, indeed, experience any flavor that his heart desired.

The sinners repented and sought penance for their deed. Moshe Rabbeinu fashioned a copper serpent, which healed a sinner who had been bitten, when he gazed upon it, while he was simultaneously lifting up his eyes Heavenward and subjecting his heart to Heaven. *Rashi* adds that the healing process applied not only to those who had been bitten by the fiery serpents, but even those bitten by a dog or donkey would be cured. There was, however, a difference between the two "bites". One who was bitten by a dog or donkey would suffer harm and gradually deteriorate to the point of death. In contrast, one who was bitten by a serpent died quickly. Likewise, when one who was bitten by a dog or donkey gazed upon the copper serpent, he was immediately healed. One who was bitten by the serpent did not have it so easy. He had to gaze on the copper serpent with extreme devotion, concentrating on his sin and repenting with sincerity. We wonder why there was such disparity between the two punishments and their cures. They both caused death. Why should the cure not work at the same pace for both?

Horav Shlomo Teichtal, zl, distinguishes between the two forms of sin which precipitated these diverse punishments. One person falls prey to sin as a result of the many challenges he must deal with in this world. The pursuit of financial stability drives a person to lose sight of his true purpose in this world. He forgets that life is all about achieving spiritual perfection. Instead, in his mind, it is about amassing more money, greater luxury and even greater power. Rather than settling for less, so that he can devote more to serving Hashem, it becomes all about superlatives: more, bigger and greater physical / material excess. Nonetheless, despite his drive for material abundance, he has not shirked his responsibility to Hashem. He maintains his faith, perhaps on a more abbreviated level, but he still has it. He believes in reward and punishment and pays respect to Torah and its disseminators. He even learns! It is just that with regard to the pursuit of his livelihood, he tends to become a little lax in his spiritual obligations. Somehow, he has forgotten that it all comes from Hashem and that, on *Rosh Hashanah*, Hashem decides what he will earn that year. His sin is that he places spirituality in a far second place, not realizing that, indeed, life is first and foremost about spirituality.

The second sinner has taken the pursuit of the material to a new low. He long ago reneged his belief in Hashem. It is all about excess, luxury and materialism. Spirituality, Torah, and its disseminators have no meaning or value to him. This man is truly smitten with a spiritual illness

from which it is difficult to emerge. The cure is as difficult to tolerate as the sin. The greater and more life threatening the disease, the more serious and painful is the protocol of therapy.

Both illnesses/sins will, over time, bring about one's spiritual (and physical) demise. The difference is in how much time. The first sinner believes that he still has a crutch upon which to rely. He can still turn it around with the proper therapy and return to a life not relegated by spiritual indifference. He believes in *tzaddikim*, righteous Jews, to whom he will listen (upon occasion); he will seek their guidance (when necessary) and will (usually) stick to their prescription for spiritual health.

The second fellow has severed all ties with the Torah community. He denies the Torah, Divine Providence, Hashem's power over him – even Hashem! This man lives in utter darkness. He will have to look hard and long to perceive Hashem within his life. A *tzaddik's* blessing will have little effect on him, because, firstly, he will not go or listen to what he is told. Perhaps after he is punched between the eyes, he might wake up and see how far he has descended into the nadir of depravity.

These are the two people represented by the two "bites". The bite of the dog is not as intense. It will, at first, maim and, over time, if it is not addressed, kill. This person has to only "look" at the copper serpent, acknowledge his sin, recognize his distance, and return. The second person, who was bitten by the serpent, is in mortal danger. He is just about gone. Thus, his repentance requires deep thinking, a long, hard look – which is continually supported and maintained. Only then can he be nursed back to spiritual health. The cure is concomitant with the disease. Likewise is the duration of the therapy. The further one has strayed, the greater the distance that he must travel to return.