

Then Hashem let the poisonous snakes loose against the people ... They said, “We have sinned” ... that everyone who is bitten when he looks upon it he shall live. (21:6,7,8)

It was not the first time; once again, the people did not receive what they perceived they needed. Their first reaction was to complain, “This is no good; that is no good.” Immediately, they directed their discontent against Hashem. They did not doubt the authenticity of Moshe *Rabbeinu’s* leadership; they had issues with Hashem’s guidance. They would never reach the Promised Land if they were to continue along this path in the wretched wilderness. Veritably, they had nourishment from the *manna*, but what about some real food and drink? Furthermore, obtaining *manna* was effortless, almost monotonous. They wanted some excitement in their lives. Life was too easy. They had become so accustomed to Hashem’s beneficence that they took it for granted. When we take something for granted, we fail to appreciate not only our benefactor, but also the value of the gift. The people had convoluted and slanted the excellent quality of their gift, processing it as if it were insufficient for them.

How does one punish an ingrate? Simply retract the gift, allow him to see that all of the protection and good life to which he had become accustomed was not natural; it was the super-natural result of Heavenly intervention, or miracle.

Vayishalach has been translated, “Then (Hashem) let loose,” rather than “(Hashem) sent.” *Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl*, explains the difference between “sending” and “letting go.” *Shlach*, send, in the *kal* form (*vayishlach*), means to send something in motion towards a goal. *Shaleach*, in the *piel* form (*va’yeshalach*) predominantly means to let something go, to allow it to follow its natural course, to refrain from holding it back. *Rav Hirsch* explains that here, too, Hashem did not send the serpents, but rather, let them go; He did not hold them back.

These serpents made their home in the wilderness. They were standard fare of which the wilderness travelers should be wary. Hashem withdrew His restraining power, and the serpents returned to their natural habitat. When the people came to the stark realization that their “boring” life was actually far from monotonous; when they opened their eyes to see the constant dangers which dog a person’s steps as he journeys through the wilderness of life, they realized – and were prepared to acknowledge – that their “monotony” was a miracle. Their Heavenly Father, concerning Whom they had been complaining, had sponsored this miracle.

The cure? When the snake bit an individual he had only to fix his gaze upon the image of the serpent and allow it to be embedded in his mind. In this way, he came to grips with the reality of life, with the verity that each and every Jew must repeat and hold dear: Every breath we take in our life is a fresh gift from Hashem’s might and goodness. The next time that they might be moved to complain, the people would remember what it means to live without the Heavenly protection to which we have all become accustomed. The image of the serpent will be permanently impressed

upon the mind of the one who has been bitten. There is no more effective therapy.