

Chukat, Numbers 21

Manna, the Copper Snake, and the Growth of Human Agency

The Complaint About Manna

Numbers 21:4–5

They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses:

"Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food."

Numbers 11:4-6

The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna."

Questions

1. How are the complaints different from those that came before?
2. What exactly are the people complaining about?
3. Why might manna no longer satisfy this generation?

Or HaChaim:

וידבר העם באלוקים ובמשה, The people spoke out against G'd and against Moses.

Although the people were perfectly aware that everything Moses did he did at the command of G'd, this did not prevent them from speaking out against him as they felt he should not have agreed with G'd's route for them but should have pleaded that G'd lead them through a more hospitable country. It would appear that the people's complaints in this instance did not justify G'd decreeing a major punishment as was the case when they had complained after hearing the majority report of the spies in Numbers 14,3. At that time the Israelites had demanded to return to Egypt. This time they "merely" indulged in slander against Moses and G'd. G'd punished them by letting snakes loose

against them, seeing snakes symbolise slander ever since the time Eve was tricked by a snake into eating from the tree of knowledge (compare *Taanit* 8). . .

This is the reason the Torah introduced their complaint by mentioning the detour around the territory belonging to the kingdom of Edom. Our sages in *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19,21 say that the people who said all this were the remnants of the earlier generation who had nothing to look forward to but death in the desert during the coming months as they were destined to die before the Israelites would enter the Holy Land. They were fed up with their very lives. The same did not apply to the younger generation who had much to look forward to in the immediate future.

Rashi: The Problem of a Food Without Waste Numbers 21:5

בלחם הקלוקל THIS LIGHT BREAD — because the manna was miraculously absorbed into their limbs (and was not excreted) they derisively called it “light”. They said: this manna will at some time or other swell up in our stomachs, for is there any mortal (lit., anyone born of woman) who takes in food and does not eject it? (Yoma 75b; cf. Rashi on Avodah Zarah 5b).

Manna as Angel Food Talmud Bavli Yoma 75b

"Bread of the mighty did a person eat" (Psalm 78:25) — Rabbi Akiva says: This was bread that the ministering angels eat. Rabbi Yishmael said: Angels do not eat bread! Rather, it means bread that was absorbed into all 248 limbs.

Questions

1. Why would a miraculous food make people uncomfortable?
 2. Is being "angel-like" an ideal?
 3. Why might people prefer being ordinary humans to being like angels? How are we different?
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Hizkuni: A Desire for Independence Hizkuni on Numbers 21:5

"Because there is no bread"— Until now we thought we would soon enter the Land and eat from its produce. Alternatively: "Miserable" means it does not give a person strength.

Questions

1. How does Hizkuni shift the focus of the complaint?

2. Discuss the motzie - בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ; Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who brings forth bread from the earth.
 3. Re-read Rashi, What does it mean to be someone who only "takes in" and never "puts out"?
 4. Is the people's complaint about food—or about autonomy?
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The Copper Snake Numbers 21:6–8

GOD sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.

The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against GOD and against you. Intercede with GOD to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people.

Then GOD said to Moses, "Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And anyone who was bitten who then looks at it shall recover."

Questions

1. Why does God respond with a snake?
 2. What is troubling about using an image as a source of healing?
 3. Where else do we know snakes from?
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VI. The Mishnah: The Snake Doesn't Heal

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8

The verse states: "Make for yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, he shall live" (Numbers 21:8). Once again it may be asked: Did the serpent kill, or did the serpent preserve life? Rather, when the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but if not, they rotted from their snakebites.

Rashbam on Numbers 21:8

"And he shall look at it"— He should look upward toward Heaven.

Da'at Zekenim on Numbers 21:8

עשה לך שרף, “make for yourself a fiery serpent, etc.” the reason why G–d instructed Moses to construct a serpent, the symbol of everything negative since time immemorial, was to demonstrate that this very negative symbol would miraculously heal them from snake bites if used in the proper manner. It is only the Lord Who can use destructive instruments equally well for constructive purposes.

Questions

1. According to the Mishnah, what actually heals?
 2. What lesson about dependence upon God is being taught?
 3. What does the Da'at Zekenim add? How can bad be used for good?
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The Copper Snake Reappears

II Kings 18:4-5

King Hezekiah (c. 715 to 686 BCE) destroys the copper snake because the people had begun worshipping it.

He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post. He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan.

He trusted only in the ETERNAL the God of Israel; there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those before him.

Questions

1. Why might people begin worshipping the snake itself?
 2. What happens when a symbol becomes more important than what it symbolizes?
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Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and the Value of Innovation

Talmud Bavli Hullin 6b-7a

The Gemara resumes its discussion of the statement that the righteous would not experience mishaps. **Rabbi Yehoshua ben Zeruz, son of the**

father-in-law of Rabbi Meir, testified before Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi about Rabbi Meir that he ate the leaf of a vegetable in Beit She'an without tithing or separating *teruma*, as he holds that Beit She'an is not part of Eretz Yisrael and therefore is not sacred with its sanctity. **And Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi permitted all the produce of Beit She'an on the basis of his testimony. His brothers and his father's household united against him and said to him: In a place where your fathers and the fathers of your fathers treated untithed produce as forbidden, will you treat it as permitted?** Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi interpreted this verse to them: **"And he broke in pieces the copper serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan"** (II Kings 18:4). Is it possible that they burned incense to it and **Asa, a righteous king, came and did not eradicate it, and Jehoshaphat, a righteous king, came and did not eradicate it, and it remained until the time of Hezekiah? But didn't Asa and Jehoshaphat eradicate all objects of idol worship in the world?**

Rather, it must be that in not eradicating the serpent, his ancestors left Hezekiah room through which to achieve prominence [*lehitgader*]. I too can say that my ancestors left me room through which to achieve prominence by permitting untithed produce from Beit She'an. The Gemara adds: **From here one learns with regard to a Torah scholar who states a new matter of *halakha* that one does not move [*mezihin*] him from his position; and some say: One does not disregard [*maznihin*] him; and some say: One does not attribute his innovative statement to his conceit [*mazhihin*].**

Questions

1. What does Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi learn from Hezekiah?
2. Is faithfulness to tradition the same thing as repeating the past?
3. What responsibilities do we have to future generations?
4. How do we balance receiving what previous generations have given us with creating something new of our own?
5. Where in your life are you being called not only to absorb, but also to produce?