



Parashat Bereishit 5766

If we look through the entire *sefer Torah*, we find, very interestingly, that the נחש escorts the world from its very creation until the eve of בני ישראל's entrance into ארץ ישראל. It is the נחש who causes the downfall of אדם and חווה by convincing them to eat from the הדעת. When Yosef's brothers throw him into the pit, we find the נחש once again. The *passuk* says, regarding Yosef's pit, "והבור ריק אין בו מים, And the pit was empty, there was no water in it" (בראשית לז:כד). *Chazal* (שבת כב ע"א) comment, "מים אין בו, אבל נחשים ועקרבים יש בו," There was no water in the pit, but there were snakes and scorpions." We again find the נחש in Moshe's very first encounter with הקב"ה. Moshe argues that there is no point in sending him to talk to בני ישראל in מצרים, since they would not believe that הקב"ה appeared to him. Thereupon, הקב"ה instructed Moshe to throw his staff to the ground, at which point it transformed into a snake. Moshe grabbed the snake by the tail and it transformed back into Moshe's staff. The נחש makes one more appearance on the eve of בני ישראל's entrance into ארץ ישראל, as mentioned earlier. נחש ע"מ ישראל complains that there is no bread and water, so הקב"ה punishes their lack of *emunah* with a plague of snakes, killing many of the Jews. Moshe constructs a נחש נחושת according to הקב"ה's instruction, and thereafter any Jew who was bitten by a snake would be healed by simply looking at the נחש נחושת. Why does Hashem choose the snake to appear in these different places and times ranging from בריאת העולם all the way through ארץ ישראל?

When הקב"ה punished the נחש for enticing אדם and חווה to eat from the הדעת, the Torah tells us that the נחש was given two curses, "על גחונך תלך," On your stomach shall you crawl," and, "ועפר תאכל כל ימי חייך," The dust of the ground will you eat all your days." The curse of "ועפר תאכל" is very clear: Since dirt can be found almost anywhere, the נחש would never be without food and would thus never need to turn to הקב"ה for help. In other words, the curse of "ועפר תאכל" meant that the נחש was completely cut off from הקב"ה. The curse of "על גחונך תלך" is somewhat more perplexing. Is this punishment the removal of the נחש's legs? This isn't much of a punishment, considering that snakes can move quite fast on their stomachs, even without legs. Rather, this punishment is also one of cutting off. An animal that crawls on its stomach can only move in a zigzag. A snake therefore cannot move in a straight line. When a person walks in a zigzag, everyone who sees him avoids him, since this strange way of walking suggests deviousness. The curse of "על גחונך תלך," then, serves to distance the נחש from the rest of "society" in addition to being distanced from הקב"ה.

Understanding the נחש's curses, we can now move a step further in analyzing the concept represented by the נחש. We find the נחש once more in *Parashas Shemini*, listed among the non-kosher animals. The *passuk* says, "כל הולך על גחון וגו' לא תאכלום כי שקץ הם," Any animal which crawls on its stomach...do not eat, for they are abominations" (ויקרא יא:מב). The letter ו"ו in the word גחון is larger than the rest of the letters, which brings *Chazal* to expound that this letter is at the very center of the Torah (קידושין ל ע"א). This, *Chazal* explain, is the *chiddush* that the קדמונים revealed to us, and it is the reason they are called סופרים, because they counted all the letters and taught us that this letter is in the very middle of the Torah. This *chiddush* is difficult to understand, though, because seemingly anybody with a little patience could count all the letters in the Torah and come to the realization that this ו"ו is the halfway point of the Torah. The explanation, rather, is that the קדמונים were not revealing technical and numerical facts of the Torah, but the lesson that everything that happens in life, whether

to the יחיד or the צבור, can be seen in one of two ways. We can look at these events through our own emotions and understanding, in which case a person might see things one way at the time it happens, differently after a few months, and even more differently after several years. His views oscillate rather than remain constant. Alternatively, one can look at these events not through his own emotions and feelings, but rather through the teachings of his *rabbanim*, which they received from their *rabbanim* – the מסורה. Through this way of looking at life, one realizes that even if the journey is challenging and difficult to understand, perhaps even illogical at times, when he ultimately looks back on his life he will find that the entire way he had gone straight, living a life of ישרות.

This is the central point of the Torah. If a person follows his own heart and his own feelings, he will find himself crawling on his stomach on a crooked path. If he follows the מסורה, the guidance and direction of his *rabbanim*, he will find himself on a path straight like a וא"ו. Here lies Man's choice.

Yosef understood this lesson when he saw that the pit in which his brothers placed him was full of snakes, and yet he survived. He realized that the day would soon come when he would be reunited with his brothers, yet he would not obey his emotions and retaliate against them, rather he would help them lay the foundation for their stay in מצרים, realizing that only הקב"ה can mete out punishment.

This was also the lesson הקב"ה taught Moshe when he doubted that בני ישראל would listen to him. הקב"ה transformed his staff into a snake and back in order to teach Moshe that if you follow your own beliefs, you will find yourself going in a zigzag like a snake, but if you follow Me, even when it seems difficult, even if you don't understand, you will be on a path as straight as the staff in your hand. And with this very staff, representing straight, unwavering *emunah*, Moshe struck מצרים with the מכות and brought about the miracles of יציאת מצרים.

ארץ ישראל was taught this lesson on the eve of their לארץ, when the nation, openly displaying their lack of *bitachon* in הקב"ה, complained about the lack of bread and water. הקב"ה sent the נחש to show them exactly what they resemble. Appropriately, the cure for the bite of the snake was to look at the נחש נחושת and be משתעבד. This lesson was necessary before the entrance into ארץ ישראל, because you cannot enter ארץ ישראל without *emunah*, and you cannot live there without *bitachon* in הקב"ה.

We now understand why the נחש escorts the world from the time of Creation until בני ישראל's entrance into ארץ ישראל. The concept represented by the נחש is expressed by Noah as well. When Noah left the *teivah*, the Torah says, “ויחל נח איש האדמה ויטע כרם וישת מן היין וישכר וגו'” (בראשית ט:כ-כד). The *gemara* (ע"א) says that the letter וא"ו appears 13 times (attached to verbs) in these *pesukim*. The explanation is that Noah had the opportunity to start a new world in a ישר way, enabling the world to last forever, yet the moment he got off of the *teivah* he began with the גפן, which, while it has a positive side, providing יין for קידוש and הבדלה, also has a negative side, שכרות, drunkenness. In this way, Noah lost the opportunity to start the new world with ישרות. Planting the גפן was an expression of Noah's worldview, as the גפן is the only tree that grows crooked, in a zigzag. This is hardly the tree with which he should have begun the new world. Amazingly, the same *gemara* in *Sanhedrin* brings R' Meir's opinion that the עץ הדעת, from which אדם הראשון ate improperly, was the גפן. הקב"ה told אדם הראשון, “Every tree is a reflection of you, כי האדם עץ השדה, For Man is the tree of the field” (דברים כ:יט), except for the גפן. Every tree is ישר, except for the גפן.”

אדם הראשון and Noah were both lowered because of the גפן, but then Avraham came along. The Torah tells us that Avraham planted an אשל, a tree, bringing ישרות back into the world. It is because of his ישרות that Avraham is called עמוד של עולם, the pillar of the world. From Avraham's tree, Yaakov took some branches on his way down to מצרים, understanding that the way out of גלות is to exhibit ישרות in one's relations with his fellow man and with הקב"ה. Yaakov planted those branches in מצרים, where they sprouted other trees, from

which בני ישראל built the משכן, the place of השקנה, of עצי שטים עומדים, representing *emunah*, *bitachon*, and ישרות. This is why ספר בראשית is called ספר הישר, as the נצי"ב writes in his *hakdamah*, because the essential quality of the אבות was not their צדקות or their חסידות, but their ישרות. With ישרות, you can attain everything, and without ישרות, even if you have everything, there is nothing.

How do we acquire this ישרות? The Torah teaches us in שירת האזינו. The *passuk* says, “זכור ימות עולם בינו שנות”, Recall the days of old, contemplate the earlier years; ask your father and he will relate it to you, your elders and they will tell you” (דברים לב:ז). The Torah commands us here to learn the history of the world and to turn to our elders for their experience. Certainly the Torah doesn’t mean here that we should simply learn about the destruction of the המבול, דור הפלגה, and אנשי סדום. The simple history is written explicitly in the Torah, זיל קרי בי רב הוא, and is not something one would have to ask his elders about. Rather, the Torah wants us to examine the potential of the earlier generations, what these generations failed to bring into the world. Let us analyze what exactly this potential was.

The דור המבול had the potential to receive the Torah. The *gemara* (זבחים קטז ע"א) says that when בני ישראל received the Torah, אומות העולם’s voice was so loud that the *הקב"ה*, who were not fit to receive the Torah, thought another מבול was coming to the world. In other words, we see that a מבול comes in the absence of קבלת התורה. The *gemara* (חולין קלט ע"ב) asks, “משה מן התורה מניין?”, Where is Moshe’s מקור in the Torah?” The *gemara* brings the *passuk* immediately before the מבול, “בשגם הוא בשר והיו ימיו מאה ועשרים שנה”, For he is flesh and his days shall number one hundred twenty years” (בראשית ו:ג). Rashi explains that משה is בשגם in fact lived for one hundred twenty years. If the דור המבול had the potential to receive the Torah, *Moshe Rabbeinu* must also be there in potential form. How amazing also that Moshe was named Moshe because “מן המים משיתו”, From the water I drew him” (שמות ב:י). What water was he saved from? From the water of the מבול, where he would have emerged had the דור המבול fulfilled its potential, he was saved for a later generation.

The דור הפלגה had the potential to explain the Torah. “ויהי כל הארץ שפה אחת”, The entire world spoke one language.” They could have used this gift of clear communication to explain the Torah truthfully, but instead they used it to rebel against *הקב"ה* by coming together to build מגדל בבל. We see that this was the potential of בבל, because years later בבל produced the תלמוד בבלי, which remains with us to this day, explaining the תורה שבכתב. Unfortunately, however, this potential was not realized by the דור הפלגה.

אנשי סדום had the ability to create strong connections between man and fellow man as well as between man and בין אדם לבין אדם. Instead, however, they did the opposite, completely perverting any concept of לחבירו. Their failed potential was realized many years later, when דוד המלך, a descendant of מואב (רות), who was born as a result of מהפכת סדום, said, “ואני תפילה”, I am prayer” (תהילים קט:ד). תפילה is a connection between man and *הקב"ה* and between man and fellow man, as we constantly pray for the צבור and for individuals in the צבור.

We see from this that the pillar of the world is Torah, the way to understand Torah is through שבעל פה, and once you understand this you can build great relationships with your fellow man and with *הקב"ה*. These three things together create ישרות. This is כל תורת חיינו, the eternal Torah. Our task is to remember that we were created on יום ו' and are therefore all ישרים like א"ו. Man was created ישר. We must fix the crookedness of the נחש. The harder we strive for this, the faster we will approach the גאולה העתידה. This is why the קדמונים tell us that משיח is גמטריא in נחש. The harder we try to fix the crookedness of the נחש and live our lives with ישרות, *bitachon* in *הקב"ה*, especially in our times, when we really see everything coming apart and the only thing that stands strong is the ישרות of Torah, the more we will merit to walk the straight path and bring more כבוד שמים, becoming עצי שטים עומדים, standing straight for all eternity.

Shabbat Shalom!
Meir Goldwicht

Rav Meir Goldwicht's weekly sichah on the Parsha and Moadim is a service of YUTorah, the online source of the Torah of Yeshiva University. Get more parsha shiurim and thousands of other shiurim, by visiting www.yutorah.org.