

Parashah One Hundred and Fifteen
Numbers 20:14–22:1; Obadiah 1; John 3:1–21

notes by Tim Hegg

Traveling with God

Our *parashah* this Shabbat continues to outline for us the travels which we made after leaving the land of Egypt. Most significantly it details the difficulties we had with our traveling partner, God. Our expectations that He would make our journey trouble free were dashed from the beginning. In fact, our greatest difficulty was trying to understand why our God, who had promised His faithfulness and love, and who had demonstrated His ability to overcome every difficulty, would not only allow us to encounter trouble on the way, but would actually bring hardship to us! The journey was confusing to say the least, and the lessons we were supposed to learn still confront us.

First in the list of troubles was Edom’s refusal to let us pass through his land. Why would our own relative refuse passage when we had assured him that we would not even drink the water without his permission? His refusal caused us no small trouble, since going around his land was really out of our way! (See the map on the last page.) What lesson did God intend for us to learn from this? That short-cuts are not always His plan for us. *Sometimes the harder road is the one which He has designed for us, to mold our character for His purposes.*

The second trouble we faced was even more discouraging—the death of Aaron, one of our leaders. Aaron had been with us from the beginning, and he had been charged with the duties of the High Priest. He had consecrated the Tabernacle and ministered before the Lord on our behalf. Right when we needed strong and tested leaders, the Lord takes his life! What a discouragement. Our sorrow was manifest in that we mourned his death for a full 30 days, as is our custom, sitting *shivah* to remember and reflect on the life of the one who has been taken from us. In addition to losing Aaron, we had to get use to Eleazar taking his place. Transitions like this are always difficult! What lesson did God intend for us to learn at this point? That while human leaders are important, they are not ultimately important. *God wants us to remember that He is the One who leads us and we must constantly look to Him for His divine guidance.* Leaders can be replaced—God cannot.

The next trouble we encountered was war! Arad, a Canaanite king thought he could defeat us as we were traveling, but God gave us the victory over him. Still, the whole issue of fighting means that we are vulnerable and that there will be others who will also try to wipe us out. Why does everyone hate us?!? We’re not out to hurt anyone else—when we fight we’re only defending ourselves! But everywhere we go we’re shunned, or worse yet, attacked! It was good of our Lord to give us victory, but one would think that God would be able to turn the hearts of the people so that we wouldn’t have to fight in the first place! What lesson did He intend for us in this? *That in a fallen world where sin exists we must expect the battle between good and evil to always be raging. Furthermore, as the people of God, He expects us to engage that battle, not run from it.*

As if that were not enough, the next trouble we encountered on our journey was the worst of all! O.K., so we grumbled a little bit—wouldn’t you grumble if just because a relative refused to let you take a short-cut through his land you had to go hundreds of miles out of your way to get to your destination? It was impossible for us to think of spending all that time and energy to make such an “out-of-our-way” trip. We didn’t have enough food and water as it was! And, our kids had simply had it with this journey. We had promised them that we were only a few days away from

our destination, and then we had to try to explain to them that just because Uncle Esau wouldn't let us through his property, we were going to be months on our journey rather than days. Man—that did not go over well! So we grumbled against the whole situation—against Moses and even against God. Can you blame us? Be honest: what would you have done?

So the Lord punishes us—not with a little spanking, but with snakes—poisonous snakes! People were dying left and right. It didn't take us long to admit that our grumbling was sinful and that we had rebelled against the Lord. Moses interceded for us, and God gave us a way out. But once again His way was strange to us. If He brought the snakes, why not just take them away? But no—instead He had Moses make a copy of the snake in bronze and put it on a pole in the middle of the camp. God had promised that anyone bitten by a snake, who would look at the bronze copy, would be healed and not die. And it worked! This simple act of obedience was rewarded with life in the place of death! What a miracle. But what lesson did He intend for us to learn from this? *That God deals with sin, not by taking it away, but by conquering it through its own methods, through death.* God wanted us to learn that our sin causes death, and that only through death can we live. He intended for us to see that He would make life possible for us through the death of death. And He wanted us to understand that *true faith is always marked by simple obedience, and that such faith was the means by which we would be given this life, purchased through death.*

In our Apostolic reading (Jn 3:1–21), Yeshua makes a direct reference to this event described in our *parashah*, and applies it to Himself:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. (Jn 3:14–15)

What was it about God's command to Moses, to make a snake and put it up on a pole, that foreshadowed and paralleled Yeshua's own death by crucifixion?

A number of interesting things stand out to us as we look at the details of this section in our Torah portion. Note that the problem begins when the people become impatient (קָצַר, *qatzar*) because of the detour they had to make around the region of Edom (21:4). They apparently considered the additional hardship to be both unreasonable and unnecessary. Why couldn't God simply provide a way through Edom rather than making them go around it, extending their already difficult journey? So 21:5 tells us

The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.

Here, the people not only evidence their discontent and lack of faith, but they actually charge God and His servant Moses with having planned to bring Israel into the wilderness in order to destroy them! This accusation is akin to the words of the serpent to Chavah in the garden of Eden, for there he plants in her mind that God has not told her the whole truth, and that in fact, He has hidden from her His true intentions, that is, to prevent them both from becoming His equal. In short, the lie of Satan in the garden and the accusation of Israel against God and Moses have this in common: they portray God as having an evil hidden agenda.

As a kind of proof that this was the case, the people charge God with having failed to provide their needs thus far in their journey: "there no food and no water." What? God has miraculously

given them water from the rock as well as the manna from heaven and meat from quail! But the real issue is described in the next phrase: "...and we loathe this miserable food." The word translated "loathe" is קיץ (*qutz*), and it is found four other times in the Tanach. In Gen 27:46 Rivka tells Yitzchak that she "loathes living because of the daughters of Chet." In Ex 1:12, the Egyptians "loathe" the Israelites because they were multiplying. In Lev 20:23, God explains to Israel that the pagan practices of the Canaanites caused Him to "loathe" them. And in Num 22:3, Moab "loathes" the Israelites because they were numerous and presented a genuine military threat. Interestingly, the same consonants, קיץ (*qutz*) form the Hebrew noun meaning "thorn." Thus, to "loathe" something or someone may have the sense that the object loathed has become a "thorn" in one's flesh. Not only has Israel charged God and His servant Moses with an evil scheme to destroy them, but they have also mocked and despised the miraculous provision of food and water given to sustain their lives.

It is this that arouses HaShem's anger and He sends poisonous snakes to punish His wayward children. The severity of this punishment matches the severity of the sin, for they have essentially called God a liar and described Him as evil. It was this severe punishment which brought Israel to their senses, for in the next verse (21:7) we hear, for the first time, Israel confessing their sin and pleading for an intercessor.

So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against Adonai and you; intercede with Adonai, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

In the previous times when Israel's disobedience brings about God's discipline, we do not hear such a confession. When the people received the evil report of the spies (Num 14:36ff) and grumbled against God and Moses, they never make a confession of their sin. Instead, against the very word of God that they would not enter the Land but would die in the desert, they prepare for battle the next morning. Likewise, in the rebellion of Korach (Num 16), we see God's discipline of the rebels, but we never hear an open confession of their sin.

So this is the first time that we read of Israel's confession: "we have sinned..." Moreover, they name the sin in which they have engaged: "we have spoken against Adonai and you." No more trying to shift the blame—the people have accepted their guilt. And their next words are equally important: "intercede with Adonai, that He may remove the serpents from us." Having accepted their guilt and confessed their sin, they recognize that they are helpless as they stand before God's righteous wrath. They admit that apart from Moses' intercession on their behalf, they would perish.

But would not Moses' role as intercessor be enough? After all, the people have demonstrated genuine repentance. Why then the need for the serpent on the pole? Here is the clear connection with our Apostolic portion, for the serpent represented both the sin of the people (for throughout the Scriptures the figure of the serpent is inevitably tied to the role of Satan in tempting Adam and Chavah) as well as the consequences of their sin, that is, death. It was not enough for the people simply to repent. They needed to understand that faith in God—faith that He alone was able and willing to overcome the sin problem—was necessary for reconciliation to Him.

Thus God instructs Moses to make a serpent, but (unlike other times where God commands Moses to make something) He does not tell him specifically out of which material to construct it. Moses chooses bronze, perhaps because the Hebrew word for "serpent" (נחש, *nechash*) has the

same sound and consonants as “bronze” (נְחֹשֶׁת, *nechoshet*). But it is interesting to consider that the altar of sacrifice as well as all of its utensils was also made with bronze, and thus the serpent on the pole has a material connection with the altar of sacrifice.

But even more to the point is that the symbol of death and sin is put on a pole, picturing the death of death and the death of sin. It is this picture which Yeshua connects to His own impending crucifixion. Just as Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness, which pictured the death of death and the death of sin which causes death, so the Son of Man would be “lifted up,” that is, crucified so that He would bring about the death of death and the end of sin.

But how was the picture of the serpent on the pole to bring salvation to those who were dying of the viper’s poison? By looking to the object itself, and thus trusting that what God had promised He would fulfill. And indeed, when they looked, they were healed. So Yeshua’s words in our Apostolic portion are the prelude to what is perhaps the best known verse of the Apostolic Scriptures:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (Jn 3:16)

It is this reality, that sinners who are destined to perish under the just wrath of an infinitely righteous God may be healed of sin’s disease by looking to Yeshua as the only Savior, that forms a primary theme throughout the Scriptures. The words of Paul come to mind:

He made Him who knew no sin to be a sin offering on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2Cor 5:21)

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (Col 2:13–14)

When Yeshua hung at the execution stake, He was treated by the Father as sin and death itself, even as the serpent represented the same. But in His death, He conquered sin and death, and rendered powerless the one who had the power of death. Thus all who receive Him are healed and live.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. (Heb 2:14–15)

The final leg of our journey (as told in this week’s *parashah*) is a list of victories that the Lord gave to us as we travelled. Everyone wanted to fight us—no one welcomed us as guests or even as travellers. We had to engage in battle every step of the way! But the Lord was faithful to us, just as He had promised. We defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, as well as Og king of Bashan. These were well established empires, and the Lord gave them to us through giving us the victory in battle. Still, battles leave wounds, and the journey continues to be hard. Couldn’t God have simply fought

the battle for us so we would not have to suffer the pain and wounds of war? *But His ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts.*

And how glad we are of that, for none of us would have thought to give up our own son for the life of others. The lessons He was teaching us in our journey were, in the end, all pointing toward this final act of His mercy—the sending of His Messiah, Yeshua, who would likewise be lifted up on a pole so that all who were dying in sin might “look and live.” Surely, His mercies are beyond our understanding and His love exceeds our grasp!

It is interesting that the lessons of our journey remain true in every generation. This text may be used to illustrate that we have not yet reached our final destination and the rest we will enjoy when we arrive at the Promised Land. So now we must be content with the wonderful promise that God is with us, and that as we submit to His kingship, following in His ways, we can be assured that we will, indeed, come to that promised rest. It is this assurance of hope that gives us strength along the journey. Learning to walk with God is the journey we are on, and in the midst of a fallen world in which we seek to sanctify His Name, we regularly experience the reality of this rest even before we reach our final destination. This is because we have come to realize that ultimately our rest is wrapped up in His presence—His being with us (Is 43:1f). “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32)

