


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 27 June 2014 - 29 Sivan 5774
Sedra Chukat


ILLUMINATIONS

LIFE AND LIGHT ARE OFTEN PAIRED TOGETHER. WE SEEK LIFE, AND WE SEEK LIGHT. Yet sometimes we seem to hit a patch of darkness. The darkness may be outside, or it may also be inside. What happens then? We try to illuminate the darkness, to change dark to light. The new light is very beautiful, stronger than ever...

An incident in the Sedra¹ expresses this idea, when looked at through the lens of the teachings of the Sages. In itself, the incident is mysterious and supernatural, but it does not take long to describe.

The Jewish people, travelling through the desert towards the Promised Land, and now close to the end of their journey, began complaining, speaking against G-d and against Moses. The result was that they were beset by poisonous snakes which attacked them and many died. The people came to Moses and apologised for their complaints: “we were wrong to speak against G-d and against you”. In order to heal them, G-d told Moses to make a copper serpent and put it up on a pole. Anyone bitten by a snake would look up at the copper serpent and be healed².

The Torah with its laws and its stories teaches us about the



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possibilities in our inner lives. Complaining against G-d and Moses means entering a dark and negative realm. There are different ways this might happen in our lives today, such as giving in to the wrong kind of temptation. This might even lead to us seemingly being trapped in a very negative situation, feeling that we are “stuck”, unable to break free. Really this means we are trapped in our own inner darkness, the opposite of life and of light.

Darkness of this kind comes from the Serpent, the force of evil and spiritual darkness described in the Book of Genesis (Bereishit); the Serpent is also the source of death. Are we defenceless against this force?

No. The power of Repentance reaches to the infinity of G-d, beyond the darkness, with the power to change dark to light, death to life. The Jews in the desert regretted what they had said, and they were given the opportunity to reach towards G-d with the full power of Repentance. The Sages tell us that the purpose of setting up a copper serpent on a pole was as a cue to the Jewish people to lift their eyes and their hearts heavenwards, reaching to G-d, knowing that G-d is infinitely beyond the Serpent, the force of evil and death³. From G-d comes pure goodness and life.

By reaching to G-d in this way they were able draw life and light into their own selves, bringing them healing, and also into the world as a whole. The account of this mysterious incident in the Torah is teaching us that we too can do the same. There may be patches of darkness in our lives and in the world around us. Through renewed connection to G-d, by each of us individually and by the Jewish people as a whole, these can be transformed. We can bring about a world of goodness, of light and of life⁴.

Imparting this and similar teachings to our generation was the life's work of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, whose 20th Yahrzeit is this Tuesday (1 July). The Rebbe believed that the luminous teachings of the Torah have boundless power to transform our own lives and, ultimately, the lives of all humanity. May his memory be for a blessing.

1. Numbers 19:1-22:1. 2. Numbers 21:5-9. 3. See Rashi on 21:9. 4. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.13 pp.71-77.

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SEDRA CHUKAT

FAIR?

David had an angry look on his usually cheery face as he stomped into the kitchen. He dumped his schoolbag on a chair and took an apple from the fridge, slamming the door. His father looked at him in surprise.

“What’s up, Dave? Why such a happy expression? Things aren’t that great, you know!” he said jokingly.

“It’s not fair!” the nine year old burst out. “Mr Brown gave me a massive punishment today, just for drawing a picture of him. And it’s the first time I’ve ever been bad. I’m always really good for him.”

“Hmmm! What sort of picture was it” queried his father.

“We-el, I suppose it was a bit of a rude picture. But other boys do much worse things and they’re not punished so much - I had to miss break and I have to write fifty times ‘I must not draw silly pictures when I am supposed to be listening to what the teacher is saying’. Other boys just get lines, or no break, not both. And such a long line to write! It’s just not fair!” he repeated.

“You know David,” said Dad “I was just reading this week’s Sedra, and there’s a similar sort of story.”

“Really? I didn’t know they had schools in the Torah”, said David in surprise.

“No, it’s not about school but I think it’s relevant. In this week's Sedra, Chukat, the Jews are in the desert, when their well dries up, the well which gave them water. They complain to Moses and Aaron, who pray to G-d. G-d tells Moses that he should take his staff, and in front of the whole Jewish community, speak to a rock, and from this rock water would come out. So the whole Jewish people assembled, to see this miracle.”

“I know,” said David. “Then Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it.”

“Quite right,” said his father. “He hit it, and water came out, but G-d was angry with Moses, for not listening properly. So Moses was punished: G-d told him he could not enter the Holy Land.”

“Poor Moses” said David. “That's not fair - he'd brought the Jews out of Egypt and worked so hard, and now G-d isn't letting him go to Israel. And he was such a great man.”

“That's why”, explained his father. “Because he was a great man, there were higher expectations. For a regular person, it wouldn't have been so bad to do what he did, but for him it was terrible.”

“Oh, I think I see what you mean! Because I'm usually good, Mr Brown thought what I did was much worse, so he gave me a harsh punishment...”

“You could look at it that way,” said his father. “It’s really a kind of compliment...”

David looked a bit happier now. It wasn't so bad, being in the same position as Moses! And it wouldn't take him so long to do those lines, if he started them now and didn't waste time...

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