

RUNNING AWAY FROM SNAKES

A commentary on *Parashat Chukkat*

By Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen

Along with around 12 million others, you may have seen the terrifying scene of an iguana being chased by a swarm of snakes in David Attenborough's Planet Earth. Apologies now to those who suffer from ophidiophobia (a fear of snakes). In this petrifying clip we see a young iguana miraculously escape from this pit of snakes. At first the iguana stands stock still in an attempt to mislead the snakes whose vision is poor and who only react to movement. But the scene soon intensifies with the reptile being forced to run over rocks as more and more snakes appear from crevasses in the rocks. From a seemingly peaceful landscape it is, almost immediately, flooded with snakes from every direction.

In *Parashat Chukkat* we are introduced to a very similar scene when, in response to the Israelites' moans about the hardship of the wilderness, G-d sends fiery serpents amongst the people. Unfortunately, the Israelites do not escape from harm, as our iguana did, but rather suffer from fatal snake bites. This pit of snakes attacks and is victorious. With the help of the Planet Earth clip we can imagine the horror of this scene. We hear the Israelites' desperate plea to Moses to ask Adonai to remove the serpents. We can only

imagine how heartfelt Moses' prayer would have been that day. The

next part of this narrative is very surprising. After instructions from Adonai, Moses builds a brass serpent upon a pole. When a snake bite victim looked into the eyes of the serpent they were healed and lived to tell the tale.

Why was this serpent built?

What was its significance? I think Rabbi Abraham

Joshua Heschel may be able to help us. In his book, 'Between G-d and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism' Heschel also employs the use of the image of people (rather than iguanas) being chased by snakes. The image is, again, horrifying. He says that 'for each snake the desperate men slew, ten more seemed to lash out in its place'. Heschel then, crucially, states that 'our world seems not unlike a pit of snakes'. He continues by saying that we had descended into the pit of snakes generations ago and that 'the snakes have sent their venom into the bloodstream of humanity, gradually paralyzing us, numbing nerve after nerve, dulling our minds, darkening our vision'. This image is far more terrifying than that presented by Planet Earth. Here we are, human beings in our families, communities and relationships slowly being surrounded by snakes, multiplying at a rate of knots. The snakes of poverty, inequality, racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, hate and malnutrition have already surrounded us. They are upon us and one of the most worrying things is that we tend only notice them when we get bitten – when we are directly affected.

In our sacred narrative we see that the bitten person is only healed once they look in the eyes of the snake. That is, once they see what is before them and look into the eyes of prostitution, modern slavery and trafficking. If we close our eyes to what is going on around us we will be surrounded and attacked and society as we know it will descend into the apocalyptic vision which Heschel paints. We cannot simply try and plaster over the cracks in our society for the snakes will still come. But instead we must address the root problems. I'll end with the words of one of the people being chased by the snakes in Heschel's story:

'If we remain here, we shall be dead before the snakes. I am searching for a way of escape from the pit for all of us.'

Our duty is to follow the Iguana's example and run for our lives – run to find ways to escape from the toxic ills of our environment. We must look the snake in the eye. It is what G-d commands and expects of us.

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