



## 5 ways

### to go forward in gratitude and trust

The story of the bronze serpent at first glance seems a strange way to depict the saving hand of God in the lives of those God loves. Yet the creative insights of Jewish commentary (overleaf) reveal a story that teaches the healing power of gratitude. With this in mind, think about the “wilderness” treks in your own life:

- 1.** The Israelites are close to their destination, yet their complaints obscure their awareness of this. What about us? We may feel we are getting nowhere, when in fact we have already come a very long way in the journey of faith. Take stock. Give thanks for each step of our walking with the Lord.
- 2.** The desert route is ‘the road less travelled.’ It is difficult, yet it is a path leading away from slavery, towards freedom and promise. In our own lives, how can we embrace that path, seeing it as a gift and not a burden?
- 3.** How can we develop a healthy sensitivity to life’s fragility and human weakness? We should not be too proud when we see others struggle; for “there but for the grace of God go I.” Pray for the gift of humble gratitude in receiving the blessings of each day.
- 4.** Affliction can help us to appreciate wellness. Life is too precious to be wasted on ‘complaining.’ Welcome each gift of life, even amidst suffering.
- 5.** Reflect on the power of speech. The Israelites learn that destructive speech patterns have serious consequences. As we go forward in life’s journey, may we harness our verbal power for good not evil, for truth not gossip, for peace not disharmony.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 19:1—22:1

*Chukat:*  
*‘law [that]’*

## Why reflect on Torah?

The following excerpt, from an exchange between a Rabbi and a Cardinal (now Pope Francis), speaks of the grace of our times whereby Christians and Jews walk a path of reconciliation and dialogue.

**Rabbi Abraham Skorka:** “*It has been many years since we first met and a brotherly bond has been forged between us... I believe that undoubtedly the most important thing that brought us together was, and still is, God, who caused our paths to cross and allowed us to open our hearts to each other.*”

**Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio :** “*What a great word: ‘path!’ In my personal experience with God I cannot do without the path. I would say that one encounters God walking, moving, seeking Him and allowing oneself to be sought by Him. They are two paths that meet...*”

*The initial religious experience is that of walking: walk to the land that I am going to give you [Gen 12:1].”*

See *On Heaven and Earth* (Image Books, 2013).

In its own way, *Light of Torah* seeks to walk this path of reconciliation, by inviting Christians to engage with the insights of Jewish Torah commentators.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Numbers 19:1—22:1

Today's Torah portion depicts yet another flashpoint in the God-Israel relationship. This time the people are so close to the promised land, yet they fall into the same old habits of grumbling about their situation. The struggle that ensues between them and the Lord, with Moses as mediator, involves a bronze serpent. Read 21:4-9 and reflect on the story, with a friend, in *havruta*..

1. Cited in Leibowitz, 264.
2. Eminent Torah teacher, 20th c. Israel.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda).  
Scripture: NRSV.

## Tasting Torah

*Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. (21:6)*

*And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." (21:8)*

What can we make of this curious story of affliction and healing in the wilderness? Ponder it carefully, its detail, its characters, its repetitions. If you were turning it into a stage production, how would you designate and name the sequence of acts?

## Touching Torah

Perhaps you noticed that although it is the same old complaint, this time the people lodge their complaint directly against God as well as Moses. Also, they contradict themselves: in one breath "there is no food," and in the next they "detest this miserable food." And later, for the first time in their wilderness journey, the people admit that their grumbling is a sin.

Perhaps you noticed that in v.5 we read 'God' but in later verses we read 'Lord.' Also, no comment of Moses is recorded. We are told that he prays for the people, but not what he said. The repetition in vv.8-9 is interesting, with its subtle variations. Perhaps, too, you were attentive to the fact that the figure of the serpent is involved in both the affliction and the cure. So much to ponder! How do these observations affect your interpretation of the text?

## Depthing Torah

Turning to Jewish tradition we take up an interpretative lead from the 19th century German-Jewish rabbinical leader S.R. Hirsch:<sup>1</sup>

*"The serpents were sent to show the people that danger beset their every step and it was only thanks to the miraculous and perpetual intervention of Divine Providence that they were able to proceed unharmed."*

In other words, having been bitten the victims were required to concentrate on the bronze image of the serpent. In doing so, they were led to realize how blessed they were to have travelled safely in the wilderness until now, and how dangerous was the path ahead, thus calling for a heightened appreciation of the protective hand of God in their lives. Hirsch continues:

*"Nothing is more calculated to make a person more satisfied with his lot than the knowledge of the chasm that ever yawns beneath him, and that it is only Divine mercy that bears him safely over, as if on eagles' wings..."*

The healing power of the serpent, then, is the healing power of gratitude to God, and humility in the face of one's need of divine assistance.

## Doing Torah

This wilderness story portrays a movement of healing and life, following affliction and death. The physical geography, with its dangers and deprivations, mirrors the inner landscape of fragile human beings as they negotiate their terrors and learn to trust God. Do you agree? Discuss as you engage with the sacred text.



### Another view

Gazing upon a serpent image... could this not imply or lead to idol worship? The famous Midrash in TB Rosh Hashanah 29a anticipates this concern:

*"Shall indeed a serpent [on a pole] kill or resurrect? But note, when the Israelites will direct their sight towards Heaven [upwards toward the serpent on the pole], and subdue their heart toward their Father in Heaven, they would be healed. If not: they will wither away."*

The great challenge of faith, as held by Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (late 19th c. scholar), and expressed in the *Shema*, is: where is my heart and belief system centered? My eyes can mislead my heart, but my eyes can also direct me to humbly love and worship the Lord God.