

# *Hisstory of the Speaking Serpent*

PARSHA INSIGHTS - BERAISHIS (5758)

## WAS THERE REALLY A TALKING SNAKE?

“The serpent was more sly than all the beasts of the field which Hashem had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has Hashem said, You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” (3:1). We all know that this dialogue led to the sin of eating from the forbidden tree.

First of all, I will mention a *Chizkuni* which Rabbi Nechemiah Kibel [z”l - of blessed memory] brought to my attention years ago. This early commentator declares that the snake apparently ate from the *aitz hada’as* [tree of knowledge] before this conversation with Chava. Otherwise, how did he become so cunning? The Torah makes a strong statement about his intelligence, so he must have gained it by ingesting some of that tree. The *Chizkuni* points out that this was legal for the snake to do, since the prohibition of eating was only directed toward Adam and Chava. In addition, the snake was able to talk, says the *Chizkuni*, only because G-d opened his mouth and gave him this special power. He compares this to the episode where Hashem opened the mouth of Bilam’s donkey and enabled her to reprimand Bilam. In other words, we must conclude that the snake’s consumption of the *aitz hada’as* was NOT sufficient to give him the gift of speech (rather, it merely gave him advanced intellectual powers); for speaking, his mouth was opened by Hashem.

☞ Others, noted by Rabbi Moshe Menachem Aharon, argue and claim that it became the NATURE of the snake to talk - probably because he ate from that tree - it was no special occasion or “opening of his mouth” to be able to converse with Chava. The main point is, however, that THE SNAKE DID TALK according to this.

If this is so, something else becomes quite obvious. He has since lost his ability to speak! When did this transpire? The *Lutzker Rav*, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, brings in the name of the *meforshim* [commentators] that the curse pronounced by Hashem upon the serpent apparently decreed that he no longer possess the faculty of speech. But if this is true, why does the Torah not mention his loss of *dibur* [speech] among the curses? It is surely important enough to be part of the Torah’s narrative of the consequences for advising Chava to eat from the *aitz hada’as*. In fact, the *Oznaim L’Torah* feels that this punishment was the worst one suffered by the snake. So why is it not written clearly in the Torah?

The *Lutzker Rav* provides two solutions. One approach (unlike the *Chizkuni*, but based on *Gemara*) is that in fact, the snake NEVER actually talked the way a human does. Rather, he communicated in a similar fashion to the “conversation of the palm trees”, recorded in the *Gemara Succah* 28A. There, we are informed that the great sage, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai, was fluent in every aspect of Torah wisdom, plus some other incredible branches of knowledge. One was “*sichas dekalim*” [the talk of palm trees]. This is obviously not regular human communication, yet it does exist on its own level. We can therefore say that the snake was able to communicate on some different plane, and that might be the meaning of the dialogue of the snake and Chava. It is clear that Chava was adept at carrying on a conversation in this manner. Thus, the Torah never mentions that the snake lost his power of speech, because he never really possessed this ability beyond what animals and trees normally do! When he talked to Chava, he was doing the same thing he does even today. It is just that humans do not generally understand this language in this day and age. He really did NOT lose his power of speech.

To prove this point further, Rav Sorotzkin directs us to the bottom of *Gittin* 45A. There, the *Gemara* records that a certain man “knew the language of birds”. And in the *Gemara Chulin* 57B, there is a fascinating story about a sage who observed the behavior of some ants, and he overheard their conversations! All this shows that animals have their own means of communication, and some people have been able to tune into their special frequencies. Adam and Chava, formed by the very “hands of G-d”, were undoubtedly capable of comprehending this amazing form of speech. Yet another proof to this (not actually cited by Rav Sorotzkin here) is in *Melachim Alef* [Kings 1] 5:13. It states that Shlomo *Hamelech* [King Solomon] “spoke regarding domesticated animals, birds, creeping animals, and fish”. One explanation for this, written in the *Meam Loez* on page 83, is that King Shlomo spoke WITH the animals and knew their language. If Shlomo, who ruled in the years 2924 through 2964 after Creation, was able to do this, all the more so Adam and Chava.

So far, we have seen one answer to our original question concerning the Torah's omission of facts regarding the snake's loss of speech. We established that the snake NEVER spoke the way a person does, so he never really lost this ability. The following is the *Oznaim L'Torah's* second approach.

In fact, we can say that the snake DID talk like a person. If so, why doesn't the Torah tell us that his causing Chava and Adam to sin cost him this ability? The answer is that the Torah DOES tell us this! "You shall go on your belly, **and you shall eat dust all the days of your life**" (3:14). Traveling around while hugging the ground creates the likelihood that dust will enter the snake's throat all the time. "You shall eat dust" is the Torah's way of teaching that the serpent is unable to talk like a person anymore. His mouth has been plugged up by dust. It is well known that even a little bit of dust impedes one's ability to speak. This can be illustrated by two *psukim* [verses] in *Aicha* [Lamentations] (3:28 - 29). Yirmiyahu the *Navi* [prophet] states that a person who has suffered tragedy, *chas v'shalom* [heaven forbid], must sit silently (without complaining or questioning G-d's judgement) and anticipate salvation from Hashem. Immediately after, the *pasuk* [verse] says that he should "put his mouth in the dust..." This, says Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, demonstrates that "dust in one's mouth" is an indication of silence, the absence of speech. Another confirmation of this truth is also found in the *Oznaim L'Torah*; explore if you so desire. The bottom line is that the speech mechanism is extremely delicate. Even a small particle of foreign matter can disrupt its normal functioning. This is especially true of dirt and dust, which spread over and under the tongue, plus into the sides of the mouth. Consequently, it is likely that the curse of eating dust for his whole life included the inability to speak like a person anymore.

In short, there are at least two answers to the question of why the Torah did not mention the punishment of the snake, that he lost his faculty of speech. Perhaps he never actually spoke like a person; Chava simply communicated with him the way some humans are able to carry on conversations with animals. In fact, it was animal language the whole time, so he never lost anything. The second approach is that he DID lose that original talent of speaking like people, and the Torah DOES mention his loss of this. Dust consumption (and crawling on his belly) point to this punishment.

We know that the serpent's main transgression was with persuasive, damaging speech, as explained by *Chazal* [our Sages]. It is quite fitting that he lost his ability to speak. May this serve as a lesson for us to heighten our observance of the laws of *shmiras haloshon* [guarding one's speech].

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