

CHUKAS (NUMBERS 19:1-22:1)

Tattle-Snakes & Copperheads

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

From the earliest Biblical times, the snake has been reviled. The original snake brought death to the world by convincing Eve to eat from the tree that G-d had forbidden. The snake, “he who speak with forked tongue,” is the symbol of gossip and falsehood.

When G-d wanted Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt, he objected, “... *but they won’t believe me ... they will say “G-d didn’t appear to you.”*” (Exodus, 4:1)

G-d responded to Moses’ claim by turning his stick into a snake. G-d wanted to illustrate to Moses that by describing the Israelites as non-believers, he had slandered them. Seeing his stick turn into the symbol of slander and deceit, he understood that G-d was displeased with the way he had spoken.

Later on, Moses was almost killed by an angel in the guise of a snake. (See “Mrs. Moses Goes Home to Father”.)

On his deathbed, Jacob blessed each of his twelve sons. Dan, the forebear of Samson, was described as “...*A snake on the highway ... that bites a horse’s heels so its rider falls backward.*” (Genesis, 49:17) The Commentaries interpret this as a reference to Samson killing the Philistines. (Although Samson is considered a righteous person, and his killing of the Philistines necessary, we still see in this verse that the snake is a source of death and destruction.)

The People of Israel were frustrated. They had been wandering in the desert for thirty-eight years, and they didn’t see an end in sight. Aaron had died, ("The Kiss of LIFE") and their most recent travels had distanced them further from the Land of Israel. And, they were tired of eating Manna:

The people spoke against G-d and Moses: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this desert? There is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food!” (Numbers, 21:5)

Although they received all the food and water they needed in a miraculous manner, they lacked the faith and appreciation that they should have showed. They sinned egregiously by speaking against G-d and Moses. They had not learned to avoid the sin of the snake -- the sin of slander. It was time for them to learn a deadly lesson:

G-d sent snakes (and) fiery serpents against the people and they bit the people. A large multitude of the nation died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned. We have spoken against G-d and against you! Pray to G-d that he remove from us the serpent." Moses prayed for the people. (Ibid, 6-7)

They had learned the error of their ways. Many had died. Many were dying. They were sorry for speaking that way. They had apologized. They had repented. But was it too late?

G-d said to Moses, "Make for yourself a fiery serpent and place it on a pole. Anyone who has been bitten will look at it and live." Moses made a snake out of copper and placed it on a pole; so it was that anyone who had been bitten would stare at the copper snake and live. (Ibid, 8-9)

There, you have it. The people sinned, and G-d began to punish them. The people repented and Moses prayed for them. G-d accepted their repentance and provided a miraculous cure.

The symbolism is beautiful. Like the snake in the Garden of Eden, they sinned with their tongues. Since they acted like snakes, they were punished with snakes. After sinning with their mouths they repented with their mouths. They corrected the wrong by using their mouths properly. Moses undid the poison of the miraculous punishing-snakes with a miraculous healing-snake.

Great! Just one question. What's the deal with the copper?

Rashi explains that G-d did not tell Moses to make the snake out of copper; that was his own idea. G-d asked for a snake. The Hebrew word for snake is "*Nachash*." The Hebrew word for copper is "*Nechoshes*." Since the two words are essentially the same, he made a "*N'chash N'choshes -- copper snake*."

Does that answer the question? What is the significance of making the snake out of a material that sounds like the word, "snake"?

I found a beautiful answer to this question in the Commentary of Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin.

I translated Verse 6 as "*G-d sent snakes (and) fiery serpents against the people and they bit the people*." I added the "(and)" to the translation based on Rabbi Diskin's commentary. He explains that there were two types of snakes. G-d sent two types of snakes into the camp as a punishment for the TWO sins of "*the people spoke against G-d and Moses*."

The first type was a *NACHASH* -- snake. This generic type of snake was a punishment for speaking against G-d. The second type, a much more vicious variety, was a *SARAPH* -- fiery serpent. This fiery serpent, whose venom burnt the victim like fire, was a punishment for speaking against Moses. G-d is

even more defensive of the honor of the righteous than he is of His own honor. “If you speak against Me, it’s one thing. But how dare you speak against My beloved servant Moses?!”

After Moses prayed to G-d to forgive the people, G-d told him to “*Make for yourself a SARAPH -- a fiery serpent, and place it on a pole.*”

*“Make for yourself a SARAPH”. (*Note the term “*FOR YOURSELF*”; G-d was saying that the fiery serpent was FOR MOSES; i.e., for sinning against Moses.)

G-d was telling Moses, “A *NACHASH* -- a regular snake, is no longer necessary, since I have forgiven them for speaking against Me. But I haven’t forgiven them for speaking against YOU! Therefore, they still need a *SARAPH* to provide a miraculous atonement for sinning against you.”

Moses, however, took the exact opposite approach:

Moses made a snake out of copper and placed it on a pole...

Why copper? Why the play on words? By making it out of *NECHOSHES*, copper, Moses was emphasizing that the snake on the pole was a *NACHASH*, a snake defending G-d’s honor, rather than a *SARAF*, a fiery serpent defending the honor of Moses.

G-d’s statement to Moses and Moses’ statement to G-d were almost synonymous: “I have already forgiven them for sinning against me; it is up to you to forgive them for sinning against you!”

In the Talmud, (Avos, 4:1) Ben Zoma asks us: Who is honored? He who gives honor to others.

Conversely, it seems that those who are most concerned about their own honor miss the boat. Last week we read of Korach, a man who was so caught up in his own honor that he destroyed himself and those around him. (See “True Blue” and “There’s More to Being Right than Just Not Being Wrong”) G-d and Moses both show us that it is much more important to worry about the other person’s honor.

Worry about the other guy’s honor, and your own honor will take care of itself.

There is a prayer recited on the eve of Yom Kippur in which we spell out many of the sins we have committed. Yom Kippur is a time to make amends for the wrong we have done. We turn to G-d in repentance and ask Him to forgive us.

G-d is very receptive to our prayers, but there is a caveat: Regardless of how contrite we are, G-d is only willing to forgive us for those sins that are against Him alone. Perhaps we have not taken our religious obligations, such as observing the Sabbath and Kosher laws, praying daily, etc., seriously enough, and we

resolve to try harder in the future. If we sincerely resolve to improve, we can look forward to G-d accepting our prayers.

If, however, we have sinned against our fellow man by stealing, gossiping, or insulting them, G-d withholds His forgiveness for those sins until we have cleared things up with the aggrieved party.

He who hurts my child, hurts me. He who picks on my baby brother will have me to contend with. When we speak against our fellow man, G-d takes it personally.

Beware of starting up with that 90-pound weakling. He has a very strong Big Brother.

Have a great Shabbos

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