

Parshat Chukat 2004
Jesse Grauman

Numbers/Bemidbar 21:4-9

ד ויסעו מהר ההר, דרך ים-סוף, לסבב, את-ארץ אדום; ותקצר נפש-העם, בדרך. ה וידבר העם, כאלהים ובמשה, למה העליטנו ממצרים, למות במדבר: כי אין לחם, ואין מים, ונפשנו קצה, בלחם הקלקל. ו וישלח יהוה בעם, את הנחשים השרפים, וינשכו, את-העם; וימת עם-רב, מישראל. ז ויבא העם אל-משה ויאמרו חטאנו, כי-דברנו ביהוה ובך--התפלל אל-יהוה, ויסר מעלינו את-הנחש; ויתפלל משה, בעד העם. ח ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, עשה לך שרף, ושים אתו, על-נס; והיה, כל-הנשוך, וראה אתו, וחי. ט ויעש משה נחש נחשת, וישמהו על-הנס; והיה, אם-נשך הנחש את-איש--והביט אל-נחש הנחשת, וחי.

4 And [the children of Israel] journeyed from mount Hor by the way to the Red Sea, to compass the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became impatient because of the way. 5 And the people spoke against God, and against Moses: 'Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, and there is no water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.' 6 And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 7 And the people came to Moses, and said: 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us.' And Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Make thee a fiery serpent [seraph figure], and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall live.' 9 And Moses made a serpent of copper, and set it upon the pole; and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of copper, he lived.

Rashi, Bemidbar 21:4

“And the soul of the people became impatient because of the way” – because of the difficulties of the journey which were so hard for them. They said, “Now we are close enough to enter the land, and yet we have to turn back. Just so had our fathers to turn back and they stayed in the wilderness 38 years until this day,” consequently their soul became discouraged because of the hardship of the journey.

Midrash Rabbah, Parshat Chukat

כב. (כ"ה) אי שלח ה' בעם את הנחשים השרפים - מה ראה לפרע מהם בנחשיהו לפי שחש פחד בלשון הרע תחלה ונתקל ולא למדו ממנו אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: יבא נחש שהתחיל בלשון הרע תחלה ויפרע ממספרי לשון הרע, שנאמר: (קהלה, ח) ופרץ דבר ישכנו ונחש דבר אחר: למה ופרע מהם בנחשיהו בהנחש אכלו אוכל כל מעדנים טבעולם מהותפכים בפיו לעפר, שנאמר: (ישעיה ס"ה) ונחש עפר לחמו, ואלו אוכלין את הנחש שנתפך למטעמים הרבה, שנאמר: (תהלים ק"ו, ט"ז) ויתן להם טאלחם ואומר: (דברים ב') זה ארבעים שנה ה' אלוקיך עמך לא תסרת דבר. ויבא נחש שאוכל מינין הרבה ויכריע טעם אחד, ויפרע מן אוכלים מין אחד וטעמין מינין הרבה. בנחשים השרפים ששורפים את הנפש ה' יודין ואומר: הנחשים השרפים, שהיה העין שורף אותם ועושה אותן דבר למחנה. להנודיע ונסים שעשה להם הקדוש ברוך הוא - אותן גרה בזה.

“And God sent fiery serpents among the people...” What reason did He see for punishing them by means of serpents? Because the serpent, who was the first to speak slander, had been cursed, and they did not learn a lesson from him. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore, said: “Let the serpent, who was the first to introduce slander, come and punish those who speak slander.”...Another reason...even if the serpent eats all the daintiest things in the world, his food changes in his mouth to dust, as it says, “Dust is the serpent’s food...” (Isaiah 65:25) These people, however, ate the manna which changed into many tastes...Let the serpent, who eats many kinds of food and has but one taste in his mouth, come and punish those who eat one kind of food and experience the tastes of many...Rabbi Judan explains that those same serpents (*seraphim*), so called because the cloud [of glory] used to burn (*s.r.f*) them and make of them a wall around the camp so as to acquaint them with the miracles the Holy One, blessed be He, was working for them – those very serpents He let loose upon them.

S.R. Hirsch, Bemidbar 21: 6

V. 6. וישלח ה' בעמם. וישלח in the Kal means to send to put something in motion towards a goal. But שלח in Piel predominantly has the meaning of letting something go, to leave it to its natural way, not to hold it back. Thus שלח לכם את אחיכם (Gen. VIII,7 & 8) וישלח את היונה, וישלח את העורב (ibid. XLIII,14) וישלח את בערה (Ex. XXII,4) ויהי בשלח פרעה (Ex. XIII,17) and elsewhere very frequently. Here too, not God sent serpents, but, let them go, did not keep them back. Hence not נחשים שרפים but הנחשים השרפים, they had always been there in the wilderness, but hitherto they had been kept back by God’s careful protecting Power. Now God withdraws this restraining power, and the serpents of the wilderness follow their natural traits to which the people succumbed. Thus in Deut. III,15 Moses describes the wilderness through which they had wandered unscathed through God’s miraculous protective power as נחש שרף ועקרב (”Who led you through the great and terrible wilderness of poisonous snakes, scorpions and drought”). So that נחשים שרפים are as much a natural appendage of the wilderness as thirst. וינשכו, נשך phonetically related to נזק to injure, נשק to burn נשק armour (see Gen. XLI,40).

Rashi, Bemidbar

A serpent of copper: He had not been told to make it of copper, but Moses said, “The Holy one blessed be He, terms it *nachash* [serpent]; I will therefore make it of *nechoshet* [copper] – one word resembles the other [in sound].

Ramban, Bemidbar 21:9

...the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Moses to make for them the likeness of a fiery serpent...and it is well-known that these fiery serpents have red eyes and wide heads, and their bodies at their necks are like copper. Therefore, Moses could not fulfill His command to make a fiery serpent except by making a serpent of copper, which appears similar to a fiery serpent...

II Kings 18:3-4

ג ויעש הישר, בעיני יהוה, ככל אשר-עשה, דוד אביו. ד הוא הסיר את-הבמות, ושבר את-המצבת, וכתת, את-האשרה; וכתת נחש הנחשת אשר-עשה משה; כי עד-הימים ההמה היו בני-ישראל מקטרים לו, ויקרא-לו, נחשתן.

3 And [King Hezekiah] did that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. 4 He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah; and he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called Nehushtan.

Mishna, Tractate Rosh Hashana 3:6

ג, ה] "והיה, כאשר ירים משה ידו--וגבר ישראל. . ." (שמות יז,יא), וכי ידיו של משה עושות מלחמה או ידיו שוברות מלחמה: אלא כל זמן שהיו ישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלן, ומכוונין את ליבם לאביהם שבשמיים--היו מתגברין; ואם לאו, היו נופלים. כיוצא בדבר אתה אומר "ויאמר ה' אל משה, עשה לך שרף. . ." (במדבר כא,ה), וכי הנחש ממית ומחיה: אלא כל זמן שישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלן, ומשעבדין את ליבם לאביהם שבשמיים--היו מתרפאין; ואם לאו, היו נימוקים.

"And, when Moses raised his hand, Israel prevailed..." (Exodous 17:11) – Can Moses' hands win or lose a battle?! Rather, whenever [the children of] Israel looked upwards, and directed their hearts towards their Father in heaven, they would prevail; and if not, they would fall. Similarly, it says, "And God said to Moses, 'Make thee a fiery serpent...' (Numbers 21:8) – Can the [copper] serpent cause someone to die or live?! Rather, whenever [the children of] Israel looked upwards, and subjected their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would be healed; if not, they would pine away.

Ramban, Bemidbar, 21:9

[God] removes injury by means of the cause of the injury, and heals illness by means of the cause of the sickness...it is a well-known medical principle that all people who become bitten by poisonous creatures become dangerously ill when they see them...in view of this, it would have been correct that the Israelites...should *not* look upon a serpent, and should *not* mention it or bring it to mind at all...but the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Moses to make for them the likeness of...[the creature] that killed them. This was to make them realize that it is God "*who sends death and makes alive.*"

S.R. Hirsch, Bemidar 21:8

V. 8. 'זיהה כל הנשוך וגו', ויאמר ה' וגו'. The serpents' bite had the sole purpose of letting the people see the dangers which dog a person's steps when he goes through the wilderness, and that it was only the miraculous power of God which had hitherto kept them far from them, so far indeed that they did not even have an idea of their existence. One, who had been bitten had only to fix the image of a serpent firmly in his mind so that he realises that even when God's gracious power will again keep the serpents at a distance he will remember that the danger is still in existence, dangers that daily and hourly the special care of God lets us escape quite unconsciously. So that every breath we take in our life is made into a fresh gift from God's might and goodness. Nothing is so thoroughly calculated to conciliate us in the everyday disappointments in life which so easily sting us to impatience — every big prize in the lottery which God has failed to let us win — and to mix them with the exalted feeling of God having saved us, and the joy of being granted a new life, than the conviction of the abyss on the narrow edge of which the whole path of our life treads which the loving Hand of God veils from what would be our giddy sight, nothing so much but to see, to realise the נחשים השרפים which lurk invisibly on our path, and which only the Almighty Power of God knows how to impose the ban of impotence to injure us on them. Hence the punishment of these בטויי טובה, these "ingrates", as our sages call them, by God removing the protection and the evil which hitherto had made the poisonous tooth of the serpent hidden and innocuous in the wilderness; hence the remedy, that one who had been bitten impresses on his mind to remember permanently the picture of the serpent — זיהה כל הנשוך וראה אותו וזי

Sfat Emet, Parshat Chukat

[The explanation of the Mishna from Rosh Hashanah] is difficult; it should have been sufficient for them to look towards the heavens — why the copper serpent? Therefore, the serpent must have had the ability to heal; God put healing inside it...as Ramban said, it is the way of God to sweeten the bitter by means of the bitter...the intention is that [an Israelite], while concerning himself with his physical health, will look up [at the snake] and direct his heart toward the heavens...even when they are far from the heavenly world and concerned with nature, even so, they should subject their hearts — namely, look at the heavens and show that they desire to leave the prison of idol worship and nature and to become closer to God.

בפסוק עשה לך שרף כה. צמחנה. וכי נחש
 מורה ברי משי. אלה צמון. שמוסכלין
 כלפי מעלה ומשעבדן. לנס לאביהם שבשמים ומתפאין.
 וקשה הי' לרדף להיחם הסתכלות לשמים צלנד למה
 נחש נחשת. אכן צמחנה הי' הנחש מקובל לרפואה
 א ששם הקציה צו רפואה זו וכתיב רעבן זיל קדרבו
 של הקציה לנחוק. מר גמר לבן. אף שדרך העצב
 מי שנקדק. עלב. ורואה אותו וזיק לו יותר שם
 הקציה כאלן להיפך שמי' הרחי' יתרפאו עיני. אעפ"כ
 זה הרטון שנהיה עוסק צרפואה הנשמי' יסחכל
 מהי' לנו לשמים עיני' שמישג עליו וכי כחש. משי'
 חיה. שאמר מוסכלין ומשעבדן לנס. פי' אף שהם
 החוקים וממלס העליון ועוסקים צמנע אעפ"כ ישעבדו
 לנס פי' להסחכל לשמים ולהראות שחפלים ללאח
 ומחשק עורין והעצב. ולהסדק צו ית'. והו עשה
 כך שרף הוה הסתכלות האדם לדנוק צו ית' כחיל:

Chukat @ the DC Beit Midrash

Tuesday, June 22, 2004; 3 Tamuz 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The Chumash (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. Each week, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion, or *parasha*. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion. Every week, a sheet summarizing the Torah portion of the week and the other sources the teacher will use will be provided to aid you in your study.

This Week's *Parasha* (Torah Portion):

Numbers (*Bemidbar*), 19:1–22:1

In this *parasha*, Chukat, we find an overwhelming concern with death. At the beginning we find the mysterious laws of the Red Heifer, a very rare animal which is burnt in a special fire outside the camp. Its ashes are then used to ritually purify those who have become impure due to contact with a dead body. The portion then jumps 38 years to the end of the Israelites' wandering in the desert. We read the brief description of the death of Miriam, the prophetess who was the older sister of Moses and Aaron, and then an incident about the people's need for water. These two events are in fact connected by the Rabbis, who notice that stories with Miriam are always associated with water. The people complain about thirst, and Moses is instructed by God to speak to a rock, which will then produce water. Seemingly frustrated and saddened by his sister's death, Moses strikes the rock instead of speaking to it. Water does flow, but Moses is chastised by God for his lack of trust, and he is told that he will not be allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land. We then read of Aaron's death, and the people's mourning for him for thirty days. The portion ends describing a number of battles the Israelites must fight as they travel through the wilderness.

(http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/bemidbar_summary.html)

This Week's Sources

Ramban (Nachmanides)

1194–1270

Ramban (Nachmanides) was the foremost *halakhist* (Jewish legal scholar) of his age. Like *Rambam* (Maimonides) before him, Ramban was a Spaniard who was both a physician and a great Torah scholar. However, unlike the rationalist Rambam, Ramban had a strong mystical bent. His biblical commentaries are the first ones to incorporate the mystical teachings of *kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism). He was well-known for his aggressive refutations of Christianity, most notably, his debate with Pablo Christiani, a converted Jew, before King Jaime I of Spain in 1263.

(Adapted from www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Nachmanides.html)

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Isaac)

1040–1105

This French sage is regarded as medieval Judaism's greatest teacher. Since his death almost 900 years ago, Jews who study either the Torah or the Talmud invariably do so with the help of his commentary. As a young man, Rashi studied Talmud in Mayence (Mainz) and Worms. When he was about 25, he returned to Troyes, France and opened his own Jewish school. However, Rashi refused to draw a salary for his work, earning his living instead from several vineyards that he owned. The last years of his life were marred by the anti-Semitic Crusades that swept over France and Germany starting in 1096. In his Torah commentary, Rashi explains terms both on the basis of *peshat* (literal meaning) and *drash* (homiletical or sermonic meaning). He also makes use of words in his vernacular, Old French, for clarification. Rashi's Torah commentary achieved such wide acceptance that it became mandatory for Jews to review the weekly Torah portion with his commentary. In 1475, Rashi's commentary became the first book printed in Hebrew, even before the Torah itself was.

(Excerpted from Fields, TCFOT, p 10–12, and Telushkin, Jewish Literacy, p 180–183.)

Midrash

300–1200

Midrash comes from a Hebrew root which means "to search out, to investigate." Thus, this is a Jewish method of exegesis which sought to discover deeper meanings in the text beyond the literal one. Since the rabbis greatly venerated every letter of the Hebrew Scriptures as of Divine origin, every detail was seen to be significant. Sometimes Midrash is used with the legal portions of the Torah (*halacha*) and sometimes it is used with the non-legal portions (*aggadah*), such as stories about the main protagonists in the Bible. There are many different collections of Midrash. The largest collection is called *Midrash Rabbah* (The Great Midrash). Other collections include *Pesikta* (Divisions), *Mechilta* (Treatise), *Sifra* (Book), and *Sifre* (Books). The material of the Midrash is mostly from the time of the *Amoraim*, the rabbis of the *Gemara* (200–500 CE). But some of the Midrash (particularly *Mechilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifre*) can be traced back to the *Tannaim*, the Rabbis of the Mishna (400 BCE–200 CE). Different Midrashim were written down at different times, over a period of almost a thousand years. The compilers of the different collections of Midrash are generally unknown.

Mishna

c. 200

Coming from the Hebrew word for “repetition,” the Mishna is a compilation of precepts passed down as an oral tradition and collected by Yehudah ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) in the north of the Israel a little bit more than a century after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The scholars cited in the Mishna are known as the *Tannaim*. The Mishna forms the earlier part of the Talmud. Tractate Rosh Hashana (the new year) deals with the proclamation of the New Year and the setting of the calendar as well as the festival of Rosh Hashana.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

1808–1888

One of the most important nineteenth-century European Jewish leaders. Born in Hamburg, Hirsch was raised in an “Enlightened” environment. He had a full secular education at a German public school, and studied Talmud at home with his grandfather. Hirsch worked for the legal emancipation of Austrian and Moravian Jewry, and in 1851 he began 37 years of service as a rabbi in Frankfurt. In his *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, Hirsch defends the rationality of traditional Judaism in the form of a fictional dialogue between a rabbi and a young intellectual. Though in some senses a reformer himself, Hirsch ultimately became a harsh critic of developments in the Reform Jewish community of his time. Hirsch’s Torah commentary “seeks to derive the explanation of the text from the words themselves.” He emphasized the divinity of the Torah text, and vehemently opposed the notion that the Torah tradition was subject to historical development or change.

(Adapted from Harvey J. Fields, A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p 13, and the Jewish Virtual Library: www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Hirsch.html)

Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Lieb)

1847–1905

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, was an eminent Chassidic sage and the second Gerrer Rebbe. Raised to be a scholar, he distinguished himself at a young age by devoting 18 hours a day to the study of Torah, mastering Talmud, the Zohar, and Chassidic classics. In 1870, at the age of 23, he succeeded his grandfather as the second Gerrer Rebbe. His monumental work, *Sefat Emet al HaTorah*, is a commentary on the Torah in five volumes. His comments stress the moral and ethical lessons to be derived from the text, and he offers many kabbalistic allusions. The title, *Sefat Emet*, comes from Proverbs 12:19: *Sefat emet tikon la’ad*—“Truthful speech abides forever,” which was the last verse on which he commented before he passed away. Rabbi Leib himself then came to be known by the title of his most popular work. He died in Ger, Poland in 1905.

(Adapted from <http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/commentator.htm#sefasemes>)

This Week’s Teacher

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Jesse Grauman has been living in Washington for a little over two and a half years. He currently works as a speechwriter for Senator Christopher J. Dodd (D-CT).

This Week’s Food Sponsors

Jana Landau-Seiden and Josh Goldwyn in honor of their chavruta time together and his (sadly) departure from Washington to study in Haifa.

This Week’s Food Shleppers

Josh Goldwyn and Simma Asher

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