



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Chukat

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Moshe and the Snake that Heals

By Ari Loren

In this week's *parsha*, *Parshat Chukat*, we read what at first glance appears to be an odd story. In chapter 21, *B'nei Yisrael* complain about not having food and water in the desert. Unlike other times when *B'nei Yisrael* complained, *Hashem* didn't simply solve the problem by bringing *manna* from the heavens or water from a stone. Instead, *Hashem* sent *Seraphim*, serpents (usually translated as "fiery serpents"), that proceeded to inject poisonous venom into the people through their bites. *Hashem* then instructed *Moshe* to make a *Seraph* himself and to put it on a pole. Anyone who was bitten would be healed once they gazed at the *Seraph* on the pole.

To a casual observer, it seems perilously close to *avodah zara* — the idea that gazing on a man-made bronze image of a serpent would heal one from a divine punishment seems antithetical to the second of our ten commandments! The *Mishna* in *Masechet Rosh Hashana* (3:8) explains that it wasn't a matter of gazing upon the *Seraph* that healed the bitten victims, but instead that by looking up at the *Seraph* on the pole, the afflicted were looking towards the heavens when asking *Hashem* for healing and forgiveness. This physical act of looking up at *Hashem* according to the *Mishna* brought the healing.

This is not the only instance where we are taught that our physical posture or position can make a difference in the effectiveness of our *tefilah*. In *Parshat Beshalach*, during the battle with *Amalek* at *Rephidim*, we learn (*Shemot* 17:11) that *Moshe* took a position at the top of the hill. When *Moshe* raised his arms, *B'nei Yisrael* was stronger, but *Amalek* had the advantage when he dropped his arms. The same *Mishna* in *Rosh Hashana* brings this story as another example of the importance of SIMPLY BEING PRESENT, facing upwards and calling out to *Hashem* rather than looking passively into an abyss.

In June 2021, we find ourselves truly returning to our *shul* life to a nearly pre-pandemic level of normalcy. We can come together and we can see each other's faces. We have returned to communal prayer in larger and larger numbers. And we can once again enjoy a hot *kiddish* together!

Just as it was crucial for *B'nei Yisrael* to turn in the direction of heaven to have their *tefilot* accepted, we are finally able to come together as a community. We are finally able to face our beautiful *Aron Kodesh* together. And we are finally able to *daven* to *Hashem* as a reunited *kehillah*.

May our prayers always be heard and accepted, and may we always remember to deliver those prayers with "our eyes towards the heavens."

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Ari and Miriam Loren are very active members of the YIS community. Ari is a member of CSS, Miriam co-produced the video for the last dinner, and both readily volunteer to do whatever is needed. Ari grew up in our shul — his parents, Norma and Mark, z"l, are founders of YIS. Miriam and Ari are proud to raise their 5 sons in the community.



One more thing ...

Many think that the snake-wrapped pole referred to in our *parsha* is the inspiration for the symbol commonly used by many doctors and medical organizations.

To this, we say, it's complicated.

First and most obviously, a Caduceus includes two snakes and is topped with wings — that's certainly not what the Torah describes. The Caduceus is the symbol of Hermes, who, according to Greek mythology, was the god of merchants, thieves and oratory. Mercury was his Roman equivalent. The symbol is based on a legend that Hermes threw his staff and separated two fighting snakes creating peace between them. None of this has anything to do with healing or compassion.



Caduceus



Rod of Asclepius

The Rod of Asclepius, also a feature of Greek mythology, is a single serpent wrapped around a rod. Asclepius was a Greek deity associated with healing and medicine. The snake on this rod recalls the non-venomous snake that Asclepius used in healing rituals. The original Hippocratic Oath began with the invocation "I swear by Apollo the Healer and by Asclepius ..."

According to a survey taken by the US Library of Medicine at the NIH, 62% of medical professionals use the Rod of Asclepius as a symbol of their profession while 76% of commercial establishments use the more picturesque Caduceus.

But that's not all: In 1984, the Crown Heights division of *Hatzalah* sent an invitation to a Hatzalah fundraiser to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe instructed Hatzalah to remove the symbol of the snake coiled around a staff from their logo since it comes from Greek idolatry. Most Hatzalah divisions now use a slightly altered symbol without a snake.



The fate of *Moshe's* serpent is given to us in II Kings: "He [*King Hezekiah*, reigned from 562-533 BCE] did what was pleasing to the LORD, just as his father David had done. He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post. **He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made**, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called *Nehushtan*." (18:3-4, emphasis added)

As noted, it's complicated.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
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