

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

The Truth About Snakes In the Bible

Growing up on the East Coast, I was never scared of garden snakes, which I often discovered in my backyard.

When I moved to California and started hiking in the mountains, I encountered my first rattlesnake. Although I did not panic, I developed cautious respect for these poisonous reptiles.

Snakes play a pivotal role in this week's

Torah portion Chukas (Deuteronomy 19:1-22:1).

While in the Sinai desert, God provided for the needs of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the Jews complained when they grew "*sick and tired of the [manah] light bread*" God had given them. In response, God "*released burning venomous snakes that bit the people and many people died*" (Numbers 21:5-6).

These "burning" snakes allude to the primordial snake which entices people to burn with an unrestrained passion for pleasure and excitement. It was this lack of self-control that led to their dissatisfaction with God's gifts.

Those who had not succumbed to the poison confessed their transgression and asked Moses to pray to God that they be healed. God instructs Moses to "*make a copper serpent and place it on a high pole, and all who gaze at the copper snake will live*" (Numbers 21:9).

This story used to confuse me. On the one hand, how could God prohibit graven images and now request that Moses make a copper snake? This apparent contradiction provides an important spiritual lesson.

Graven images are forbidden when we adorn, worship, and rely on them. In the case of the copper snake, the lesson was to recognize that graven images are powerless, and the true power of healing comes from God. Our sages discussed this point in the context of another episode in Jewish history when the Jewish people battled the Amalekites.

Moses sat on a hill, during the battle, and “*whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed*” (Exodus 17:11). The sages explain that Moses’ hands were not a magic wand or talisman. Moses’ hands were pointed toward heaven to remind the Jews to rely on God’s divine help.

“Did the hands of Moses make the battle, or did his hands break the battle? Rather, as long as Israel gazed upward and directed their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed; but when not, they fell” (Talmud – Rosh Hashanah 29a).

The Talmud continues to explain that similarly, the copper snake was placed on a “*high pole*” so that it would also serve to direct the Jewish people’s hearts to God. “*Does the serpent kill or does the serpent grant life? Rather, as long as Israel gazed upward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed.*”

This spiritual lesson reminds us that we should direct our prayer only to God and not make the mistake of worshiping intermediaries.¹ This explains why Moses was revered but not worshiped. Moses, who was “*exceedingly humble*” (Numbers 12:3), only desired that the Jewish people learn from him to direct their prayers to God alone.

Misdirected allegiances have been a pitfall for many people. Some worshiped the sun, stars, trees, and even bugs, while others worshiped human beings whom they considered God in the flesh. The prophet Jeremiah bemoaned this behavior when he said, “*Can man make gods for himself? Yet they are not gods*” (Jeremiah 16:20).

Our personal relationship with our infinite God provides us with an immediate and intimate connection with the Almighty, who transcends all finite limitations including human form.

This Shabbos, may we be blessed to seek and find God through thoughtful prayer and meditation, as King Solomon said, “*those who seek Me shall find Me*” (Proverbs 8:17).

Shabbat Shalom,

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¹ The righteous King Hezekiah destroyed the copper snake in the 6th century BCE because certain Jews mistakenly attributed divine healing powers to this inanimate object rather than to God – (2 Kings 18:4).