

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Chukat
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פרשת חקת
ז' בתמוז תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 19:1-22:1

In this *parasha*, Hashem instructs Moshe and Aaron regarding the *parah adumah* (red heifer); Miriam dies; to bring forth water, Moshe hits a rock rather than speaking to it; Aharon dies.

One of the more bizarre episodes in the Torah appears in this *parasha*: the story of the brass serpent (21:4-9):

ד וַיִּסְעוּ מֵהַר הָהָר, דָּרָךְ יַם-סוּף, לְסַבֵּב, אֶת-אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם; וַתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁ-הָעָם, בַּדֶּרֶךְ. ה וַיִּדְבֹר הָעָם, בְּאֵלֵהִים וּבַמֹּשֶׁה, לָמָּה הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר: כִּי אִין לֶחֶם, וְאִין מַיִם, וְנִפְשָׁנוּ קָצָה, בַּלֶּחֶם הַקָּלֶקֶל. ו וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' בָּעָם, אֶת הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרְפִים, וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ, אֶת-הָעָם; וַיָּמָת עַם-רַב, מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל. ז וַיִּבֹא הָעָם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חֲטָאנוּ, כִּי-דִבַּרְנוּ בְּה' וּבָדַד--הִתְפַּלֵּל אֶל-ה', וַיִּסַּר מֵעֲלִינוּ אֶת-הַנְּחָשׁ; וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה, בְּעַד הָעָם. ח וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף, וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ, עַל-גֹּס; וְהָיָה, כָּל-הַנְּשׁוּף, וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ, וְחָי. ט וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נְחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת, וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל-הַנָּס; וְהָיָה, אִם-נָשׂוּף הַנְּחָשׁ אֶת-אִישׁ--וְהָבִיט אֶל-נְחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת, וְחָי.

4 And they journeyed from Mount Hor by the way to the Reed Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became impatient because of the way. 5 And the people spoke against Hashem, and against Moshe: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, and there is no water; and our soul loathes this light bread.' 6 And Hashem sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died. 7 And the people came to Moshe, and said: 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against Hashem, and against you; pray to Hashem, that Hashem take away the serpents from us.' And Moshe prayed for the people. 8 And Hashem said to Moshe: 'Make for yourself a poisonous serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' 9 And Moshe made a serpent of brass, and

set it upon the pole; and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any person, when he looked at the serpent of brass, he lived.

Rashi explains that the mechanism for being cured of a poisonous snake bite was to look at the brass serpent, thereby raising one's head heavenward in search of the Creator and "subjecting their hearts to their Parent in Heaven, they were healed." The brass serpent itself did not heal; it was the instrument through which the individual sought forgiveness from God.

The Brass Serpent did not disappear immediately after this episode. It continued to exist for some 800 years, until Chizkiyahu (Hezekiah), one of the few good kings in Judea, destroyed it. *Melachim Bet* (2 Kings) 18:3-4 says:

He (Chizkiyahu) did that which was right in the eyes of Hashem, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah; and he broke in pieces the brass serpent that Moshe had made; for in those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called Nechushtan.

The Rabbis in the Talmud greatly praise Chizkiyahu for doing this. What had been created as a tool for connecting with Hashem took on a "divine life" of its own in the existence of the nation.

This may serve as an admonition to us. We need to make sure that although we respect many things in Judaism, we do not begin to venerate them. A Torah is precious not in and of itself, but because it contains holy ideas and the word of God. We need to remember that it is God who is behind every physical object that we treasure on earth, and that it is God and God alone who is worthy of worship.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Fourth of July.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think the Jewish people began worshipping the brass serpent instead of Hashem?
- There is an expression that some people "worship the almighty dollar," i.e., they worship money. What do you think that means? Why would people worship money?
- What other physical things on earth might people worship?