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PARSHAT CHUKAT פרשת חוקת

DVAR TORAH THE DOWNSIDE OF PRIVACY

Israel had just fought a successful battle against Sichon and his Emorite nation. The Torah mentions the victory almost matter-of-factly: "They fought against Israel, and Israel smote them." It is now strange that when Og King of Bashan and his nation go to war against Israel, Moshe is afraid. God has to reassure Moshe: "Do not fear him, for I have given him over into your hand" (Bamidbar 21:34). Why was Moshe more afraid of Og than of Sichon?

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, quoted by Rabbi Yochanan (Niddah 61a), makes a seemingly strange suggestion: Moshe was afraid that Og would win the war in Avraham's merit. Our Sages identified Og as the "fugitive" who escaped from the battlefield during the war of the four kings against the five (Bereishit 14:13). He was the one who informed Avraham that Lot was captured in battle and would benefit from Avraham's merit. Moshe was afraid, says Tosafot on that Gemara, even though Og had vile intentions (he had hoped that Avraham would be killed in battle and would then marry Sarah! See Bereishit Rabbah 42:8) and even though he and the entire People of Israel were Avraham's own descendants!

This certainly shows how far-reaching a good deed is, and how, like Moshe, we should not be so sure of ourselves. But we are also inspired to probe more deeply into what was so great about Og's lending a hand to Avraham rescuing Lot in the war. Furthermore, why did Og's merit surface now?

To explain this, Harav Chaim Goldvicht, of blessed memory (see Asufat Maarachot 5, pp. 222-226), shares a bundle of sources that show the importance of the Lot-component in forming the future kingdom of Israel. The Kotzker Rebbe, ztl (quoted in Shem Mishmuel Shavuot 5670) says that Israel did not have the concept of malchut, royalty, and we needed to get it from Amon and Moav, nations descending from Lot's daughters and grandchildren. The natural unity of Israel makes royalty a foreign concept that needed to be imported from outside, through Ruth the Moabite and Naamah the Amonite. How can any one of Israel, that is like one body, rule over any other? The loftiness of spirit necessary for a king was a trait that those nations possessed and we attained through them. They enabled us to produce a King David and, eventually, the Melech Hamashiach, the messianic king.

Og had a hand, not only in tipping off Avraham that his nephew is in distress, but in allowing Avraham to preserve the seeds of the future Jewish kingdom by saving Lot. As Israel stood on the threshold of the Land of Israel, ready to create a monarchy based on Torah, Moshe feared one who had helped Avraham set the stage for it. However, Og, whose intentions were devious, was vanquished by Avraham's descendants; Moshe and the people were indeed victorious. God reassured Moshe that there is nothing to worry about.

Originally Published in 5774

DESTRUCTION

The *nachash hanechoshet*, the copper snake our Parshah speaks about, has an interesting history: it was made and used by Moshe Rabbeinu, preserved for at least 710 years, and, finally, destroyed by one of King David's descendants, King Chizkiyahu.

· Why did Chizkiyahu destroy something made by Moshe and that had been preserved so diligently?
· What message did Chizkiyahu's act communicate to his and to later generations?

Let us look at the copper snake's beginning and its end. Its beginning was lofty. The order to make the copper snake came from God himself, and it brought about wondrous things. After complaining against God and Moshe, the nation was attacked by poisonous snakes. Then came God's command to Moshe:

Bamidbar 21:8-9		במדבר כא:ח-ט
8. God said to Moshe: Make for yourself a serpent and place it on a pole, and anyone who is bitten will see it and live. 9. Moshe made a copper snake and placed it on a pole. It happened that if the snake bit a man he looked at the copper snake and lived.		(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לְךָ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל נֵס וְהָיָה כָּל הַנָּשׁוּךְ וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וָחָי: (ט) וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נְחַשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיְשִׂמֵהוּ עַל הַנֵּס וְהָיָה אִם נָשַׁךְ הַנָּחָשׁ אֶת אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל נְחַשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וָחָי:

Why does God call it a "saraf" and Moshe calls it a "nachash"? One theory is that of the Ktav Sofer, quoted by the Talner Rebbe, shlita, in his article on the copper snake in Volume 4 of המה ינחמני. The people spoke against God and Moshe. The nachash is reminiscent of the snake who spoke against God in the Garden of Eden; and in Pirkei Avot we are encouraged to warm ourselves by the fire of the wise, but warned to watch out for their hot coals … for their hiss is the hiss of a serpent (saraf). God was concerned about them speaking against Moshe and Moshe was concerned about them speaking against God.

Destroying the copper snake was one of Chizkiyahu's first acts as king.

Kings II 18:1-4		מלכים ב יח:א-ד
1. And it was in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah, the king of Israel, that Chizkiyah, the son of Ahaz the king of Judah, became king. 2. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem, and his mother's name was Avi, the daughter of Zechariah. 3. And he did what was right in the eyes of Hashem, like all that his father David had done. 4. He abolished the high places, and smashed the monuments, and cut down the asherah, and crushed the copper serpent that Moshe had made – for until those days the children of Israel were burning incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan.		(א) וַיְהִי בִּשְׁנַת שָׁלֹשׁ לְהוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן אֵלָה מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל מָלַךְ חִזְקִיָּה בֶן אָחָז מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה: (ב) בֶּן עֶשְׂרִים וְחָמֵשׁ שָׁנָה הָיָה בְמָלְכוֹ וְעֶשְׂרִים וְתֵשַׁע שָׁנָה מָלַךְ בִּירוּשָׁלִָם וְשֵׁם אִמּוֹ אֲבִי בַּת זְכַרְיָה: (ג) וַיַּעַשׂ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי ה' כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה דָּוִד אָבִיו: (ד) הוּא הֵסִיר אֶת הַבָּמוֹת וְשִׁבַּר אֶת הַמַּצֵּבֹת וְכָרַת אֶת הָאֲשֵׁרָה וכִתַּת נְחַשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה כִּי עַד הַיָּמִים הָהֵמָּה הָיוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מְקַטְּרִים לוֹ וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ נְחֻשְׁתָּן:

Though in some areas Chazal criticized Chizkiyahu, they approved of his destruction of the copper snake.

Mishnah Pesachim 4:9		פסחים ד:ט
There were six things that King Chizkiyah did, concerning three of them they (the Sages) approved and concerning three others they did not approve … He ground up the copper snake and they approved …		שִׁשָּׁה דְבָרִים עָשָׂה חִזְקִיָּה הַמֶּלֶךְ, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה הוֹדוּ לוֹ, וְעַל שְׁלֹשָׁה לֹא הוֹדוּ לוֹ... כִּתֵּת נְחַשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת, וְהוֹדוּ לוֹ...

The verse explains why Chizkiyahu destroyed it; and the Radak explains why people made offerings to it, and why Chizkiyahu's predecessors did not destroy it.

Radak Kings II 18: 4		רד"ק מלכים ב יח:ד
Since they saw written in the Torah: "They saw it (the copper snake) and lived" the people thought it would make a good intermediary (between them and God) and they would serve it. From the days of Moshe it was placed there like the container of Manna. Kings Asa and Yehoshafat did not destroy the snake along with other idolatry because they did not find that in their reign people were serving and offering incense to it. They left it to commemorate the miracle. But Chizkiyahu saw that it needed to be destroyed when he destroyed idolatry, because he saw that in his father's reign people served it like an idol. Even though there were good people who remembered the miracle, he said, "Better to destroy it and forget the miracle, than have Israel stray after it now or in the future" …		כיון שמצאו כתו' ורא' אותו וחי היו חושבי' כי טוב הוא להיו' אמצעי ולעבוד אותו והיה מונח מימות משה זה הנחש לזכרון הנס כמו צנצנת המן ואסא ויהושפט שלא בערוהו כאש' בערו שאר הע"ג מפני שלא מצאו כשמלכו שהיו עובדין ומקטרים לזה הנחש והיו מניחים אותו לזכרון הנס וחזקיהו ראה לבער אותו כשביער הע"ג כי בימי אביו היו עובדים לו כמו לע"ג אע"פ שהטובים היו זוכרים בו הנס אמר טוב לבער אותו וישכח הנס מלהניחו ויטעו בני ישראל היום או מחר …

The Radak goes on to explain why Chizkiyahu called it Nechushtan – to diminish its importance and point out that it is only a piece of copper (nechoshet).

What went wrong? What did the snake with such lofty beginnings become? The key to understanding this is based on a Mishnah:

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8		ראש השנה ג:ח
… "Make for yourself a serpent and place it on a pole, and anyone who is bitten will see it and live" (Bamidbar 21:8). Does a snake kill or revive? Rather, when Israel looked above to Heaven and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven they were healed, and if not, they perished.		… (במדבר כא:ח) עֲשֵׂה לְךָ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל נֵס, וְהָיָה כָּל הַנָּשׁוּךְ וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וָחָי. וְכִי נָחָשׁ מֵמִית, אוֹ נָחָשׁ מְחַיֶּה. אֶלָּא, בִּזְמַן שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל מְסִתַּכְּלִין כְּלַפֵּי מַעְלָה וּמְשַׁעְבְּדִין אֶת לִבָּם לַאֲבִיהֶן שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם, הָיוּ מִתְרַפְּאִים, וְאִם לָאו, הָיוּ נְמּוֹקִים.

The snake was to inspire people to look to Heaven (some explain that God wanted to show that the same thing that brings death can bring life) – not, God forbid, to function as an independent force or as an intermediary. The Talner Rebbe (in the article quoted above) describes the irony of what Chizkiyahu discovered - how the very snake that was to inspire people to subjugate themselves to Heaven had become an intermediary they served like an idol!

Through destroying the snake, he destroyed the intermediary, but through the radical step of destroying such a well-preserved historical artifact, they saw his courageous leadership.

TORAH FROM OUR FACULTY

LAND OF ROYALTY, BY RABBI FYVEL SHUSTER

In his comments on our parshah the Shem Mishmuel asks why the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, was chosen as the representative of חקת התורה, the type of mitzvah we do not have an explanation for. There are many others. He also asks why this mitzvah is given to Israel right before entering the Land of Israel. Didn't Chazal explain to us (Seder Olam Zuta, quoted by Rashi on Shemot 16:25) that the Parah Adumah was one of the mitzvos given to us at Marah, one of the first stops after the Exodus from Egypt? Why does it appear only here, in the fortieth year?

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the concept of קבלת עול מלכות שמים, accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, fealty to a king, means that understanding the reason for the King's command does not play a role in deciding whether to do what the king commands. Accepting Hashem as King means performing the King's commands because the King commands it. This should be a person's approach even in cases where he does understand why the king is commanding. The one who performs the mitzvah only because it makes sense to him minimizes this aspect of קבלת עול מלכות שמים, accepting Hashem upon us as King.

If so, asks the Shem Mishmuel, what happens to the entire world of Jewish learning?! Jewish learning is so full of questioning, trying to understand, and investigating. This must also have its place, as the verse says (Mishlei 25:2), "כבוד מלכים חקור דבר" : it brings honor to the king when we investigate his words and try to understand the wisdom in them, when we try to understand their every detail and how they work.

Says the Shem Mishmuel: this does not influence whatsoever the world of performance of the Divine commands. The purpose of my investigation and questioning is not to judge whether I want to perform this or not, but to enable me to absorb the wisdom of the King's commands. זאת חקת התורה – this is the chok (decree) of the Torah: we investigate and understand in the context of viewing the Torah as a chok – a decree to fulfill because the King commanded it.

Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, is the land which expresses Hashem's מלכות, His royalty. It is the capitol of the King. Before entering Eretz Yisrael, the People of Israel were presented with the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, the ultimate חוק. Not only does it not have an explanation, but it seems to have within it inherent contradictions. It is מטהר את הטמאים, it purifies the impure, and it is מטמא את הטהורים, it makes who are pure impure. Yet we perform it even though its explanation is beyond us. It is even beyond Shlomo Hamelech, King Solomon, who said (Kohelet 7:23), אמרתי אחכמה והיא רחוקה ממני – "I said I would understand but it remained distant from me."

This approach – performing the king's decrees no matter what; yet investigating and questioning to understand their depths – this dual approach is that which will enable Am Yisrael to enter Eretz Yisrael and to make it the land of the King as it is supposed to be.

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The Daf Kesher, a project of Shapell's Darche Noam, is written by Rabbi Eliezer Kwass.

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