

Parsha Ponders

Chukas | July 7, 2022 | 8 Tammuz 5782

Fiery snake bites¹

וידבר העם באלקים ובמשה למה העליטנו ממצרים למות במדבר וגו' וישלח יקוק בעם את הנחשים השרפים וינשכו את-העם וגו' ויבא העם אל-משה ויאמרו חטאנו כי-דברנו ביקוק ובך התפלל אל-יקוק ויסר מעלינו את-הנחש ויתפלל משה בעד העם: ויאמר יקוק אל-משה עשה לך שרף ושים אתו על-נס והיה כל-הנשוך וראה אתו וחי: ויעש משה נחש נחשת וישמהו על-הנס וגו'

The nation spoke against G-d and Moshe: "Why did you take us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?!"...

Hashem sent against the nation the *nechashim haserafim* (stinging snakes), and they bit the people...

The nation came to Moshe and said: "We have sinned! For we have spoken against G-d and you. Pray to

G-d to remove from us the snakes". Moshe prayed on behalf of the nation. Hashem said to Moshe:

"Make for yourself a *saraf* (snake; lit. burning/stinging), and place it on a staff, and it will be that all who were bitten will look at it and live." Moshe made a copper *nachash* (snake), and placed it on the staff...²

As the verses describe, the Jewish nation spoke rudely against Hashem and against His servant Moshe.

The resulting punishment was Hashem unleashed against them a swarm of snakes, described in the verse as the *nechashim haserafim*, the stinging snakes. They bit the people, and many died. The nation repented, and Moshe prayed that the threat be removed. Hashem told Moshe to make some sort of

statue of a snake, and called it a *saraf*. The verse then tells us that Moshe made a copper *nachash*,

which means snake. How did Moshe know to make the statue out of copper? Rashi tells us³ that since

Hashem told Moshe to make a *nachash*, His intent must have been a copper one, since the Hebrew

word for copper is *nechoshes*, etymologically related to *nachash*. The obvious question on this is that

Hashem told Moshe to make a *saraf*, not a *nachash*⁴. If they're the same thing, why is the Torah

inconsistent in its terminology⁵? If they're not the same thing, what is Rashi saying⁶?

We can suggest that Hashem really sent two types of snakes, *nechashim* and *serafim*. Why? The Jews committed two crimes. They spoke against Hashem, and they spoke against Moshe. Hashem sent the *nachash* for speaking against Him, as we see elsewhere⁷ those who speak against Hashem are punished with that type of snake. Hashem sent the *saraf* for speaking against Moshe, for *saraf* means burning or

¹ Based on the commentary of the Bartenura, Amar Naka, to Numbers 21:9 and Ma'asei Hashem Ma'asei Torah Chapter 29 (end), by Rav Eliezer Ashkenazi. What's interesting is the latter is a grandson of the Maharik, and the Bartenura was a primary student of the Maharik. I would have said that's why they essentially say the same thing, but then I realized that many *Rishonim* give their explanation, as will be shown

² Numbers 21:5-9

³ Rashi to v. 9, quoting Bereishis Rabbah 31:8

⁴ Ramban to v. 9. He answers that *saraf* is a specific type of *nachash*, so Moshe used the generic term to interpret the material. Others ask why Moshe deviated from Hashem's command, such as Riva to v. 9, Moshav Zekeinim in the name of the Ri, Rav Chaim Paltiel, and Rosh to v. 8. Rabbeinu Bachaye to v. 8 says that Moshe knew Hashem meant a *nachash* and not a *saraf*, but refrained from mentioning it because the primordial snake brought death into the world

⁵ The Ramban *loc. cit.*'s approach doesn't resolve this

⁶ Ma'asei Hashem; Toldos Yitzchak to v. 8,9, brought by Tzeidah LaDerech to v. 9

⁷ Amos 9:3

something fiery. We are taught⁸ that the bite of our Sages is like the bite of a *saraf*, and the words of our Sages are like burning coals. This made the punishment fit the crime⁹.

The Jewish people, when they intended to repent, didn't ask Moshe for forgiveness. They assumed he had already forgiven them, due to his humility. As such, they asked Moshe to pray to Hashem that He should forgive them as well¹⁰. What did Hashem respond? Make for *yourself* a *saraf*. Meaning, don't be so forgiving. The people sinned against Moshe, so they should ask for forgiveness. Moshe should make a *saraf* to stop the *serafim*, to inspire the people to repent for their sin against Moshe. Hashem Himself already forgave the people, but the sin against Moshe needs to be dealt with¹¹. What did Moshe do? He maintained his forgiveness of the people, and felt that the affront against Hashem needed to be addressed instead. Therefore, he chose to make a *nachash* instead^{12 13 14}.

Lucky is the nation that has such a trustworthy leader and lucky is the nation that has such a compassionate G-d¹⁵.

Good Shabbos

⁸ Avos 2:10

⁹ Ma'asei Hashem, this part brought by Tzeidah LaDerech *loc. cit.* The Bartenura, Riva, Moshav Zekeinim, Rav Chaim Paltiel, and Rosh *loc. cit.* make the same connection of *nachash* for Hashem and *saraf* for Moshe but don't explain why. Tzror HaMor *parshas Chukas*, brought by Tzeidah LaDerech *loc. cit.* and Shenei Luchos HaBris *parshas Chukas Derech Chaim Tochachos Mussar* § 20, says this as well, and says that Moshe is connected to a *saraf* since Moshe was like an Angel, and a *saraf* can also refer to an Angel. Toldos Yitzchak *loc. cit.* makes this Angel point as well

¹⁰ Ma'asei Hashem. It's interesting that he says this, considering that the people explicitly mention that they sinned against Moshe. I suppose it's true that they only requested forgiveness from Hashem. Riva *loc. cit.* simply says they didn't need to pray to stop the *serafim* that were for Moshe's sake, but doesn't say why not

¹¹ Bartenura, Ma'asei Hashem, Rabbeinu Bachaye, brought by Tzeidah LaDerech, Tzror HaMor, Toldos Yitzchak, Moshav Zekeinim, Rav Chaim Paltiel (although he doesn't infer this from the תל), and Rosh *loc. cit.* The Riva *loc. cit.* disagrees and says that besides the *saraf* for Moshe's honor, Hashem said make a *nachash* for His honor. He doesn't discuss why the verse left it out

¹² Bartenura, Ma'asei Hashem, Tzror HaMor, Toldos Yitzchak, Riva, Moshav Zekeinim, Rav Chaim Paltiel, and Rosh *loc. cit.*

¹³ The Bartenura shows that Rashi alluded to this by writing that Hashem "called it" a *nachash*, not that Hashem "told him" to make a *nachash*. Meaning, Hashem never said anything about a *nachash*, and Rashi meant that the *Torah* calls it a *nachash*

¹⁴ This whole back and forth about Hashem worrying about Moshe's honor and Moshe worrying about Hashem's honor appears elsewhere as well. The Tzror HaMor *loc. cit.* says similarly about Hashem's command in Egypt to first put blood on the doorposts, and then the lintel (Exodus 12:7). The doorposts represent Moshe and Aharon, and the lintel represents Hashem (Cf. Alshich to ibid v. 22, who doesn't like this allusion). Nevertheless, Moshe commanded the lintel first (ibid v. 22). The Tzror HaMor says this also in his commentary to *parshas Bo* in the name of an anonymous Ashkenazi, and this is brought by the Tzeidah LaDerech *ad. loc.* The Moshav Zekeinim *ad. loc.* says the same, as well as the Kli Yakar to v. 7, and Chasam Sofer's Toras Moshe to v. 25 (citing an unknown *Midrash*; perhaps he meant the Tzror HaMor). For more examples of this phenomenon, see

<https://parshaponders.com/masei-5780>

¹⁵ Ma'asei Hashem