

Parshat Shemot: Symbolic Staff and Serpent

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz-Stein

With Parshat Shemot we begin the saga of *Bnei Yisroel's* actual enslavement and the seeds being sown for their redemption. Moshe receives God's command to tell *Bnei Yisroel* that Hashem will redeem them. But he worries they won't believe him. Whereupon Hashem asks him, "What is in your hand?" "It is a staff," replies Moshe. Then Hashem has him perform signs with it that they will be convinced that Hashem sent him to redeem them.

Menachem Zion explains, Moshe felt that *Bnei Yisroel* were so connected to *Mitzrayim*, to the outer trappings of galut, that they would not be able to accept the freedom of *Torah*. But Hashem is telling Moshe that *Bnei Yisroel* internally are all believers. Your job, Moshe, is to hold onto the stick, because if you don't believe in *Bnei Yisroel* and throw them away, they will indeed turn into Egyptian snakes. Moshe, pick them up, believe in them, and they will again become the strong staff in your hand.

That staff, continues Rabbi Zaks, may also represent the staff of the wandering Jew in the diaspora. In Egypt, as well as in every country in subsequent diasporas, the Jew tended to rely on the government for protection. But it does not take much for it to transform into a snake set to destroy the Jews in its midst. *Bnei Yisroel*, reasoned Moshe, will not want to believe or leave. In fact, four fifths of *Bnei*

Yisroel actually chose to remain in Egypt.

The Oshorover Rebbe sees the staff as a dry stick representing kings who suddenly turn on the Jews under their rule. As quickly as they rose to power, so will they fall to oppress the Jews and become snakes. On the other hand, referring to the second sign, *Bnei Yisroel* may appear as dead as the leprous hand, but they will be rejuvenated and rebuild in another country.

Hashem was not asking Moshe *mah zeh/what is this in your hand*, but *mizeh/from this which is in your hand*. How will *Bnei Yisroel* believe you, asks Hashem? Through your *mateh*, through your ability *lehatot/to* turn the hearts of *Bnei Yisroel* from the depravity of Egypt to the purity of *Torah*.

Part of the redemption process, writes Rabbi Scher citing the verse in *Hoshea*, is the *teshuvah* that acknowledges that we have no one on whom we may rely except Hashem as it says in *Tehillim*, "Your staff and Your rod, they will be my comfort." When we rely only on Hashem, writes the *Chovot Halevavot*, we free ourselves from reliance on anything in the external world. *Bnei Yisroel* were not only enslaved physically, but also by their mindset. Moshe was afraid that their minds could not conceive of a higher spiritual calling, that they believed they were no different than the Egyptians among whom they lived.

Rabbi Belsky tells the following parable to explain this point. A hunter, passing by a farmhouse, noticed an unusual bird among the chickens. When he asked the farmer about it he said it was just another chicken, although hatched from a larger egg. What a sorry situation, thought the hunter, as no one had told this bird that in reality it was an eagle, meant to soar through the heavens. So too *Bnei Yisroel*, thought Moshe. They cannot imagine that they are meant to soar with angels. Moshe's mission would be to implant this idea in their minds, that their spirits could reignite and soar.

The *Imrei Chemed* explains, the snake symbolizes the evil inclination. When we grab it even minimally, by the tip of its tail, so that we can suppress it and do *teshuvah*, Hashem will help us succeed. All you need is for your heart to take a small turn toward Hashem, and Hashem will clear the path of return.

We are not in control of our circumstances, writes the *Yiram Hayam*, but we are in control of how we respond. How we turn, *mateh*, our perspective will determine whether the circumstance remains negative or becomes a catalyst for growth. We have the ability to make teachable moments for ourselves and others by pausing to observe our negative situation, grabbing it by the tail, and transforming those negatives to build positives. The choice is in our hands.

Traveling the Journey of Life Tehilim 16 Part II

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

Adam was put in *Gan Eden* in an ideal reality. Our journey through history is with the goal to return to that state by doing the will of Hashem even when we are enticed by physicality. The moment a person allows himself to have another deity, he will by default seek more. When he feels like going astray, there are other deities that will be forgiving. To sense Hashem's presence with us all the time, is an intense reality. It's not easy to constantly be on our toes. But if we believe in the oneness of Hashem, it obligates us to do His will. This becomes more difficult

when we encounter contradictions. In this world righteous people may suffer and wicked people may have it good. It's difficult to comprehend how Hashem could be the source of tragedy. We have to admit we don't understand, but still affirm He's a merciful Father. It's hard work to get there and that is why some falter and may come to worship idols.

Let's try to understand the common denominator to all the reasons we mentioned for idol worship: People want control, there are

contradictions, and it's difficult to obey all the time and accept one authority. The Chizkuni on *Chumash* quotes a *Midrash* which is the thread that connects all this. He explains the word *achairim*- what does other in the plural mean? Rabbi Eliezer says, people move from one idol to the next because they aren't satisfied. It's as if a person makes an idol from gold and then needs the money. So, he melts it down, sells it, and fashions a cheaper idol from copper, then when he needs more money he melts it again and fashions something from iron, and then from wood. That is why the

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Torah calls it- *Elohim achairim*. If things get harder, you go for something cheaper. It's all about what the idol can give me and how much control I can have.

The Rashbam says, if you really want to benefit, serve Hashem. He connects the first and second commandment. "I am Hashem who took you out of Egypt," and immediately after it says, "Do not worship other idols." Hashem says-I am the only one who can provide for you.

When warning us not to worship idols, the Torah uses the expression *Kel Kanah- A* jealous Hashem. Although other nations are also required not to worship idols, their

prohibition is only in action, not in thought and speech, as it is for the Jewish people. In addition, the *Torah* tells us, if the 4th generation continues to worship idols, they may come to a point that it will be difficult to come back to Hashem. Why do we find such harsh language and punishment connected with worshipping idols? And why the difference between Jews and non-Jews? The Ohr Hachaim explains, if a person will say to himself- I know that there's no other independent entity other than Hashem but because of His supremacy and omnipotence, I don't feel that I can talk to Him. How can I be so bold as to ask the awesome King for my small mundane needs. This is an opening for idol worship where the person thinks that perhaps it's better to approach the angels, the executors of Hashem's will.

Shir Hashirim describes the relationship of Hashem and the Jewish people as a bride and groom. The desire of Hashem to be connected to us and our desire to be connected to Him is overwhelming. The soul of the Jew is meant to cling to Hashem and become one with Him. If we sense this, we will understand why Hashem warns us so harshly about idol worship. When Hashem says, *Onochi Hashem Elokecha*, He means to say, "I want to dwell in you, I want to become one with you." Other nations don't have that connection. There's an angel in charge of each nation while we have a direct connection with Hashem. Therefore, we can understand the utter betrayal of idol worship and why the punishment is so harsh.

Mishlei: Wisdom and Children

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb

We live in a democratic society where all ideas are good just because they are ideas and all paths are good because they lead somewhere and all narratives are true. Everything is somehow equal. This is especially prevalent now as people discuss critical race theory in which bad and good are equalized depending on which end of the scale you're standing on. Be courageous and learn to reject things that aren't true or good. You don't have to equalize everything. *Eilu v'eilu* refers only to *divrie Elokim*, not anything else. If someone is wrong, you can still respect them as a person, but you don't have to respect their deeds or ideas.

Another modern misconception is that you haven't experienced life fully unless you've tried everything and gone everywhere. You don't have to read every book nor go where you shouldn't. You certainly shouldn't try every lifestyle. When you see people doing something wrong you have to be able to say no.

"Their sleep will be robbed away if they do not cause stumbling." There are evil people who will be aggressive in trying to get you to join them as their self-esteem is very dependent on other people's validation. So, they will push you so that they won't feel judged.

"The narrow path of the *tzadikim* is like the glow of the sun; it shines ever brighter until the day is perfect." *Orach* refers to the individual path while *kvish* refers to a road widely traveled. Then there is *derech* which is a road that goes from point A to B. There are people walking straight along with no idea where they want to go. They can't get to their destination. In general, people want connection and achievement. Ask yourself, "Am I headed on the path that will lead me to this? I want a good relationship with my husband, children, neighbors, friends. What am I doing to make this happen? Am I so busy with work that I'm not investing time to nurture these relationships?"

Before making a decision ask yourself, "What will that make me and where will it take me?" You really have to know your *derech*. However, here *Mishlei* uses the term *orach*- a narrow path. *Derech* is fairly general. People want connection and achievement. *Orach* is what you want as an individual. Every person has different capacities. Figure out what you can do. Your success and happiness in life is very much dependent on finding an address for your unique strengths and talents.

Orchos Tzadikim enumerates various character traits, their good and evil aspects, and how to channel them for good. Look at your traits with a critical eye. Be honest. Don't just look at external accomplishments. What motivated you to make these choices? What were you thinking and feeling? The way of *tzadikim* is that they do this and their lives look different, like the radiant light at the peak of day.