

In the 40th year of their journey from slavery to autonomy, our fractious ancestors are still lurching from misstep to misstep, all the while driving Moses to distraction with their incessant demanding and complaining. The old generation has nearly died out, and now their progeny has taken up their cry, despite having been born in freedom and knowing that their eternal covenant with HaShem affords them protection and success – provided they do their part by observing the mitzvot. Herein lies the problem; this first generation is simply too emotionally immature to take on such enormous responsibility. But realistically, how can it be otherwise? With very few exceptions, their elders have been abysmal role models. Abruptly wrested from their bitter, but predictable slave existence, they had been thrust into an unfamiliar world they could hardly begin to fathom. Each new challenge upsets them and fills them with nostalgia for the life they left behind. And their children, caught between the old mindset of their parents and the everchanging demands of the world they are traversing, are called upon to join in creating a new civilization based on an identity they are just beginning to understand. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam have had to act more as parents than leaders, alternately comforting and cajoling while trying to teach them all the skills they will need to coalesce and survive. Now, these leaders are also dying; first Miriam, and then Aaron are taken from the people, leaving only Moses to try to gently ease them into a future where new leaders must arise, and everyone must participate in the enterprise of creating and maintaining a free society built on the principles laid out in the Torah. In between these two momentous losses they encounter their cousins, the Edomites, who refuse to allow them to pass through their lands, even when they offer to purchase their provisions as a gesture of good will to support the local economy. This means that they are forced to retrace their steps all the way back to their starting point at the Sea of Reeds, in order to avoid entering Edomite territory. No wonder that immediately following the death of Aaron, the people “became disheartened because of the way” (21:4), and “spoke against HaShem and against Moses” “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this desert, for there is no bread and no water, and we are disgusted with this rotten bread.” (21:5) This isn’t the first time they had been sick of manna, but disparaging it in this fashion is a new low point. The word *klokeil* means damaged/spoiled/inferior, an egregious way to speak of the food that has sustained them for 40 years. HaShem reacts in kind, sending “the fiery snakes (*hanechoshim haserafim*), and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died.” (21:6) A fitting punishment indeed, as Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah explains: “Since the snake was the first to speak slander and was cursed for it, and they did not learn from it, the Holy One Blessed Be He said: ‘The snake should come ...’ ... The snake, even if it partakes of all the delectable foods of the world, they turn into dust in its mouth ... but these [the Israelites] eat manna, which turns into many flavors, ... the snake, which eats many things and tastes one taste, should come punish these who eat one thing and taste many tastes.” As usual, the people are immediately contrite and plead with Moses to pray that HaShem remove the snakes. Like a long-suffering parent straddling that thin line between enabling and encouraging, Moses once again demonstrates his undying faith in his querulous charges, and he prays. In response, HaShem gives him a curious command: “Make yourself a fiery serpent and put it on a pole, and let whoever is bitten look at it and live.” (21:8) It is noteworthy that Moses is told to make a *seraf* (a fiery serpent/a particularly venomous snake/a type of angel), but Moses makes a *nachash* (snake), and takes it upon himself to fashion it out of *nechoshet* (copper/bronze). I love wordplay, and Moses’ little act of independence is a particularly delicious example. Do you know Nachshon ben Aminadav? He makes a cameo appearance in Exodus 6:23: “Aaron took to himself for a wife Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav, sister of Nachshon ...” An unappealing name, perhaps because he is a descendant of Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar through a rather dicey relationship (Genesis 38), but a hero in midrashim that portray him as the brave soul who dared to step into the Sea of Reeds while the newly escaped Israelites still stood back. Indeed, the root *נחש* builds a number of words, including snake, hissing, practicing divination, and observing signs. Remember Moses’ first encounter with HaShem at the Burning Bush? He is commanded to throw down his staff, which becomes a *nachash*, a snake, and then turns back into his staff. This happens later too, at Pharaoh’s court. Snakes “see” with their entire bodies; they can even detect infrared radiation. In other words, they are able to read all the signs they need to survive. And they are also extremely flexible – something our ancestors lacked. But isn’t staring at a copper snake on a pole to effect a cure akin to idol worship, which is strictly prohibited? Our Talmud sages dispel that notion: “Now, does a serpent kill, or does a serpent keep alive? No! But when Israel directed their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their Father in heaven, they were healed, but if not, they rotted from their snakebites.” (Rosh Hashanah 29b) With their highly developed “God-sense,” Moses, Aaron, and Nachshon knew how to read the signs and act accordingly. Snakes, real or copper, are simply signs pointing out valuable information we must learn to interpret, i.e., metaphors for the attentiveness and flexibility we would do well to emulate if we want to fully enjoy the autonomy we have been blessed to inherit.

Shabbat shalom!