

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Chukas

9 Tammuz, 5781 – June 19, 2021

Compiled from the works of
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson
The Lubavitcher Rebbe

by
Rabbi Shmuel Mendelsohn
North Miami Beach, FL

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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Chukas**

Likkutei Sichos Volume 13, Pages 71 – 77

Rashi in His Own Words

במדבר כ"א, ט': וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׂמְהוּ עַל הַגָּס וְהָיָה אִם נָשָׁךְ הַנְּחָשׁ אֶת אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל נָחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְחָיָה:
רש"י ד"ה נחש נחשת: לא נאמר לו לעשותו של נחשת, אלא אמר משה הקב"ה קוראו נחש, ואני אעשנו של נחשת, לשון נופל
על לשון:

Bamidbar 21:9: Moshe made a copper snake and put it on a pole. Whenever a snake bit a man, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live.

Rashi Heading: a copper snake: Hashem did not tell him to make it of copper, but Moshe said, "The Holy One blessed be He called it a snake (נְחָשׁ), so I will make it of copper, (נְחֹשֶׁת). One term is similar to the other term.

Synopsis

This week we read the Torah portion of Chukas. It tells of that Hashem punished the Jews by a plague of poisonous snakes. They confessed their sin to Moshe and begged him to pray to Hashem to save them. Hashem told Moshe to make a serpent and put it on a pole; whoever was bitten by the snake would look at the snake and be saved. The Torah tells us that Moshe made the snake of copper, and indeed, whoever gazed at the snake after being bit was saved.

We do not find that Hashem told Moshe to make the snake of copper; why did he do so? Rashi explains as follows. "Hashem did not tell him to make it of copper. However, Moshe said, 'The Holy One blessed be He called it a snake so that I will make it of copper. One term similar to the other term.'" The Hebrew word for snake is "Nochosh," and the Hebrew word for copper is "Nechoshes."

Usually, Rashi does not point out the difficulty in understanding a verse; he only explains which clears up that difficulty. Why does he go on at such length here saying that "He was not told to make it of copper; however, Moshe said ...?" We also do not find that Hashem called it a "snake – נחש - Nochosh." He called it a "serpent – שרף - Sorof."

The explanation is that Hashem's command to Moshe came after the Torah's statement that Hashem sent poisonous snakes against the people. The snake which Moshe was to make would save those who the snakes bit. The word which the Torah uses for poisonous snakes is "Nechoshim – Serofim." These words are the plural of "snake – נחש - Nochosh" and "serpent – שרף - Sorof." In other words, "שרף – Sorof" is being used as an adjective to modify "נחש – Nochosh." The word "Sorof" literally means burning. Hence

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it can be used to indicate poisonous or serpents (which are viperous). When the Torah uses the term "Serofim" in our verse, it does not mean serpents. Instead, it means poisonous. It is being used as an adjective to modify the word "Nechoshim – snakes." The Torah does not write this word. However, it is understood.

According to Peshat, the Torah does not need to specify every word in a command which Hashem gave Moshe. The Torah says that Hashem commanded the Jews to perform a particular Mitzvah is proof enough that Hashem said it to Moshe. Moshe never said or did anything on his own. Here the word "snake – Nochosh" is understood (although the Torah does not write it). Because one term is similar to the other, Moshe made it from copper.

Rashi's Explanation

This week's Torah portion, Chukas, tells how Hashem punished the Jews for speaking against Him and Moshe. Hashem had sent poisonous snakes against the people. The snakes bit people, many of whom died. The people told Moshe that they regretted their actions and asked him to pray to G-d to save them. Hashem told Moshe to¹ "make yourself a serpent and put it on a pole. Let whoever is bitten look at it and live." The Torah then tells us that² "Moshe made a copper snake and put it on a pole. Whenever a snake bit a man, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live."

In the earlier verses, we do not find that Hashem told Moshe of which material to make the snake. Why did he make it of copper? Rashi cites the words "a copper snake" and explains that "Hashem did not tell him to make it of copper. However, Moshe said, 'The Holy One blessed be He called it a snake so that I will make it of copper. One term similar to the other term.'" The Hebrew word for snake is "Nochosh - נחש," and the Hebrew word for copper is "Nechoshes - נחושת." Rashi seems to be explaining that Moshe had the discretion to make the serpent of whatever material he wished. He chose to make it of copper because the Hebrew words for "copper" and "snake" are similar.

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

Generally speaking, when Rashi explains a verse, he does not tell us the question he is answering. Instead, he only gives us the answer. He does not comment in "question and answer format." He provides us with the explanation; we must understand it from Rashi's words. Why here does he begin his comments with a lengthy introduction; "Hashem did not tell him to make it of copper; however, Moshe said ...?"

1. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 21:8.

2. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 21:9.

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Why does Rashi suddenly point out this difficulty in our case? This is particularly difficult to understand in this instance. A quick look through the verses shows us that in G-d's words to Moshe, the term "copper" does not appear. Why does Rashi need to point out that "Hashem told him to make it of copper"

As mentioned above, Rashi writes that "the Holy One blessed be He called it a snake (נחש), so I will make it of copper (נחושת)." The fact is that in the previous verse, we see explicitly that Hashem did *not* call it a "snake – נחש" at all. Rather He said to¹ "make yourself a 'serpent – שרף, "and put it on a pole."

The Explanation

Previously the Torah told us that³ "Hashem sent the venomous snakes against the people. They bit the people, and many of the Jews died." We derive the Hebrew adjective "venomous" from the word "Sorof - שרף," which literally means "burning." This adjective modifies the noun "snakes," which is from the Hebrew word "Nochosh, - נחש⁴." Our verse², "make yourself a serpent and put it on a pole ..." is written as a continuation to the earlier verse³, "Hashem sent venomous snakes against the people ..." Just as there the word "venomous" is used as an adjective to describe "snakes," the same is true in our verse. The Torah uses the word which we translated as serpents, "Serofim." However, this word serves the purpose of describing the word "snakes," which is understood.

Why does the Torah only write the adjective and leave the word snakes for us to understand on our own? If Hashem commanded Moshe to make a snake, why does the Torah not say so explicitly?

It is pretty clear that according to Peshat, the Torah does not need to mention every single detail which Hashem commanded Moshe. Quite to the contrary, there are many instances in the Torah where we are only told the gist of Hashem's command to Moshe. We do not learn the details of the order until one of two things happen. Either the Torah tells us that Moshe gave over the command to the Jews, or the Torah tells us of the Jews fulfilling it. Moreover, there are instances where the Torah does not tell us that Hashem spoke to Moshe. We only learn of the exchange when Moshe delivers His command to the Jews.

This is so because there is no need to inform us that Hashem spoke to Moshe because we know that Moshe does nothing on his own. The only actions he performs are those which Hashem commanded him to do. We see this clearly from Rashi's comments⁵. Moshe interceded to save the Jewish people after Korach's rebellion. He did so by telling Aharon to bring incense. Rashi comments that Aharon "took hold of the Angel of Death and held him against his will. The angel said to him, 'Allow me to accomplish my

3. Our Parshah, Bamidbar 21:6.

4. The only difference being that both "Nochosh" and "Sorof" are in the plural form in this verse; "Nechoshim - נחשִׁים" and "Serofim - שרפִים."

5. Parshas Korach, Bamidbar 17:13.

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mission.' Aharon said to him, 'Moshe commanded me to stop you.' The angel said to him, 'I am the messenger of Hashem, and you are the messenger of Moshe.' Aharon responded to him, 'Moshe does not say anything of his own volition, but only at the bidding of the Almighty. If you do not believe me, the Holy One blessed be He and Moshe are at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; come with me and ask.'"

Accordingly, we can understand Rashi's teaching here. Hashem's command to Moshe was actually to make a "Nochosh Sorof," a venomous snake, to save the Jews. Hashem told him to do this to combat the punishment that³ "Hashem sent the venomous snakes against the people." The Torah only specified that they should be venomous, not that they are snakes. The reason is apparent. The purpose of the snake which Moshe Hashem commanded Moshe to make was to remedy the "venomous snakes" which He sent against the people. The punishment came from the snakes' venom. Hence, that was the main point; therefore, this was what the Torah mentioned.

This being the case, we can ask another question. We are saying that the Torah did not mention that Hashem commanded Moshe to make a "snake – Nochosh." Perhaps Hashem also commanded him to make it of copper. Perhaps "copper – Nechoshes" is another phrase that the Torah did not mention!

Rashi explains this in his Rashi's comments on the previous verse, where Hashem commanded Moshe to make the snake¹. "Regarding the snake bite, it says 'he would gaze.' 'Whenever a snake bit someone, he would gaze.' Merely glancing at the copper snake was not enough; It was not magic! The snake bite would not heal unless one gazed at the copper snake intently. Our Sages said, 'Does a snake cause death or life? However, when Jews look toward heaven and subject their hearts to their Father in heaven, He will heal them. If (G-d forbid) not, they would waste away.'"

We see that the snake is simply a means to cause Jews to look up to heaven and do Teshuvah. It was a snake to remind them of the punishment for which they were repenting. However, it is clear from Rashi's earlier words that which material he made it from was irrelevant.

A Deeper Explanation of Rashi

Those Jews who the snakes bit would have certainly died were it not for the copper snake. The one thing that saved them was (Teshuvah brought about through) the copper snake. From this, we see that copper is related to Kelipah⁶ ⁷. "Nochosh," the original snake at the time of creation, brought evil into the

6. Kelipah refers to the evil which exists within the world, to a greater or lesser extent. Its literal translation is a shell or a husk. The point being that it blocks the G-dly energy which exists within everything to create it.

7. The Biurei Hazohar from the Tzemach Tzedek Parshas Pekudei Page 302 explains what "Nechoshes," copper is in its spiritual source. It is not a realm of holiness which is clothed within Kelipah. Rather it is pure Kelipah itself.

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world. That is the reason that the words "Nochosh" (snake) and "Nechoshes" (copper) are related to each other. As Rashi says, "one term is similar to the other term." Through Hashem's command, we can undo the adverse effects caused by our actions. But the only way for it to work is if it is accompanied by our gazing into heaven and doing complete Teshuvah. Teshuvah has the power to transform even intentional sins into merits!

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Chukas-Balak (12 Tammuz) and Matos-Masei 5729)

I hope that you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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