

# Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Chukat

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

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**GOOD MORNING!** Anyone who has ever been involved in communal affairs knows how difficult it is to find people willing to take on any measure of real responsibility. Whether it be accepting the role of synagogue president or chairing a building campaign for the local JCC, capable and **willing** candidates are few and far between.

**This innate** unwillingness to accept responsibility is also the core of most partisan politics. For example, who is to blame for runaway inflation? Well it depends on who you ask. There are, in fact, many contributing factors to inflation (and no, it's not all President Biden's fault). But assigning blame for every societal ill is the very foundation of partisan politics.

**This exercise** of assigning blame is rarely logical. In theory, if two people have the same intent, they should be equally blameworthy. Yet, consider the following scenario: Two people are standing on a highway overpass and they each throw a brick off the bridge at the passing cars below. One person's brick lands harmlessly on the side of the road, while the other person's brick strikes a car, resulting in a horrible accident with serious bodily injury.

**Theoretically**, the person whose brick didn't harm anyone should be punished as severely as the person whose brick caused the crash – they both had the same malicious intent and the differing result could be attributed to dumb luck. Still, many people look at it as "no harm, no foul."

**Amazingly**, the Torah actually informs us of the source of this "it's not my fault" mentality. The Almighty gave Adam and Eve **ONE** rule in the Garden of Eden: "From the Tree of Knowledge you shall not eat" (*Genesis 2:17*). Of course, Adam and Eve violate this one and only commandment.

**When** confronted by the Almighty, Adam says "it's not my fault," the woman that **you** gave me made me do it. For her part, Eve says "it's not my fault," the snake made me do it. Thus, we can ultimately blame the first set of parents – the progenitors of the entire world – for this attitude.

**This same** attitude is captured in a snarky (and somewhat unfair) interpretation of one's experience in psychotherapy; "I tend to blame other people for my problems rather than taking responsibility. I think it's because of the way I was raised."

**Of course**, this reminds me of a joke. A man complained to his therapist that his wife was awful and that he had a bad marriage. The therapist told him that it's not just his wife's fault; he has to look deeper because it takes two people to create a toxic relationship. The patient cried out, "I knew it! It's the fault of both her and her mother!"

*"and the spirit of the people grew short because of the road. The people spoke against God and Moses [...]"*

*(Numbers 21:4-5).*

**This week's** Torah portion recounts a fascinating incident, one unlike any other in the Torah. In this week's Torah reading we find the Jewish nation nearing the land of Israel during their final year (40 total) of wandering in the desert. The nation then suffered the loss of both of Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron.

**After** the death of Aaron, the nation was suddenly attacked by the local populace and forced to retreat quite a bit. Even though the Jewish people ended up routing them, they found themselves ever further away from Israel and they were quite exasperated. They attacked the Almighty and Moses, and complained bitterly about the heavenly manna and lack of water.

**Now**, to anyone who has been paying attention, this in and of itself doesn't seem particularly unusual. After all, the Jewish people repeatedly tested God's patience time and time again in the desert, and of course their comeuppance is not far behind: "*God sent poisonous snakes against the people and a large number of Israelites died*" (*Numbers 21:6*).

**What** makes this story unique is what happened next.

*"Moses made a snake of copper and placed it on the pole; so it was that if a snake bit a man he would stare at the copper snake and live" (21:9).*

**(Interesting** side note: Perhaps the world's most well-known symbol of medicine is known as the "Rod of Asclepius." This symbol with a snake-entwined staff is usually sourced in Greek mythology and attributed to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing that is also mentioned by Homer in the Iliad. Still, it would seem obvious that the Torah story, from almost a thousand years' prior, is the true source of this symbol and it was merely appropriated by the Greek culture as its own.)

**Getting back** to our story, the people (almost immediately) went to Moses, begged forgiveness from him and the Almighty, and asked him to pray for them. Moses acquiesced right away, at which point God tells him to fashion a snake out of copper, place it on a pole, and have those who were bitten look at the snake to live. Moses created the copper snake and so it happened: Anyone who had been bitten and would stare at the copper snake would live.

**To explain** this phenomena, the great Biblical commentator Rashi quotes a passage from the Talmud (*Rosh Hashana 29a*), "Could a snake (made by Moses) cause death or give life? Rather, as long as the Jewish people cast

their eyes upward and subject their hearts to their Father in heaven, they would be cured and if not they would waste away.”

**We have** a similar story in the *Book of Exodus* (17:8-13); when the Amalekites launched an unprovoked attack on the newly formed Jewish nation. In response, Moses lifted his hands toward heaven: As long as his hands were raised heavenward the Jewish people managed to have the advantage on the battlefield, however, when his hands lowered they faltered.

**If** all that was needed was for Moses to lift his hands toward heaven to focus the minds and hearts of the people to the Almighty, then why didn't he simply do the same here? Why did God tell him to fashion a snake and have people stare at it to be cured?

**On** the face of it, creating an inanimate snake that doles out cures seems wholly contrary to our Torah values as it appears akin to idol worship. In fact, the very same snake that Moses created was later called *Nechushtan* and used in idol worship in the time of King Ahaz (before being eventually destroyed and burned by the righteous King Hezekiah). So it seems like creating this snake was fraught with issues. Why didn't Moses simply lift his arms heavenward again and direct people toward the Almighty?

**In order** to understand what really transpired we need to carefully examine the language the Torah uses during this incident. The Torah uses a curious word to express the concept of “staring” at the snake: “*Vehibit el Hanachash.*” Rashi (in his comments on *Genesis* 15:5) explains that the root word “*yabit* – to peer” refers to looking downward. But this hardly makes sense. Moses fashioned a copper snake and raised it high on a staff so that everyone would be looking up when they saw it. Thus, the word *yabit*, which means to look down, seems inappropriate here.

**The Almighty** is expressing a profound lesson for the Jewish people to internalize. It's true that they had to look up to see the copper snake. But they are being asked to use that as a symbol to focus and examine the “snake” located within themselves – the very same snake (or evil inclination) that tore apart the relationship between the Almighty and Adam and Eve on their first day of creation.

**When** the Jewish people were victims of an unprovoked attack by the Amalekites they simply had to focus their eyes heavenward and put their fate in the hands of the Almighty. That's why Moses raised his arms there. However, here they were victims of their own evil doing; wrongfully attacking God, Moses, and the manna. Thus, God set upon them venomous snakes as a quid pro quo to their rebellious act. The antidote for which was their taking responsibility for their own wrong doing and recognizing that when they remove the “snake” within themselves then God removes the snakes (and the venom) from without.

**TORAH PORTION:** Chukat, Numbers 19:1 - 22:1

**The Jewish people** wander the desert for their final year. The laws of the red heifer (*Parah Adumah*) are stated; it was burnt with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread. The ashes were then used in a purification ceremony for those who had come in contact with the dead. Strangely enough, all who were involved in the making of the ashes became ritually impure, but all who were sprinkled with them became ritually pure. It is a lesson that we must do the commandments even if we can't understand them. God decreed the commandments. They are for our benefit. We may not always know why.

**Miriam**, Moses' sister and a prophetess, dies. The portable well that had accompanied the Israelites on her merit ceased to flow. The people rebel against Moses and Aaron because of the lack of water. The Almighty tells Moses to speak to the rock for water. Moses gets angry and hits the rock instead and water rushes forth. However, the Almighty punishes Moses and Aaron for not sanctifying Him by forbidding their entry into the land of Israel. (It pays to follow instructions and to withhold anger!)

**Aaron** dies. His son, Elazar, is appointed the new High Priest. The Canaanite king of Arad attacks the Israelites and is soundly defeated. There is another rebellion over the food and water, which is answered by a plague of poisonous snakes. Moses prays for the people and is instructed by God to put the image of a snake on a high pole. All who saw it would think of God, repent, and live.

**The Israelites** then annihilate the Amorites and Bashanites who not only refused us peaceful passage through their lands, but also attacked us.

**SHABBAT LIGHTING:** *Jerusalem* 7:12 Miami 7:57 Cape Town 5:33 Guatemala 6:17 Hong Kong 6:54 Honolulu 6:59

**Jo'Burg** 5:11 LA 7:49 London 9:02 Melbourne 4:57 Mexico 8:00 Moscow 8:58 New York 8:11 Singapore 6:57 Toronto 8:42

**“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”:** You can fail many times, but you're not a failure until you begin to blame somebody else. — John Burroughs

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Shabbat Shalom,

*Yitzchak Zweig*

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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