

Weekly shiur – Chukat – part 1

5 Tammuz 5773

(Notes taken during class, not reviewed nor edited by Harav Ginsburgh)

Lechaim lechaim.

We are now in parashat Chukat, beginning with the Red Heifer, continuing with many stories. Today we are in the fifth reading of Chukat. In this portion, there are 3 short stories. The first has 8 verses, the second 3, and the third has 6 verses. The first is the death of Aharon. He entered a cave, there was a bed in it. Moshe Rabbeinu told him to lie on the bed, he closed his eyes, closed his mouth and passed away in the most peaceful death possible. Before he passed away, Aharon merited seeing his son Elazar inherit the high priesthood from him, as Elazar donned the 8 special garments of the High Priest. Aharon's death is called a "death kiss" (מיתת נשיקה). When Moshe Rabbeinu how Aharon had died, he coveted the same type of death.

Before the Red Heifer, we read about Miriam, their elder sister's, death. When she died, her well disappeared, which led to the Mei Merivah incident. When Aharon died, the clouds of glory also left. They protected the Jewish people and were in the merit of Aharon. In the end, both retruned in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu. Still there was some time when they were not present. Because of the lack of the well, Moshe and Aharon hit the rock, and were therefore not allowed to enter the land of Israel. All because of Miriam's merit ending. The same happened with the clouds of glory. When they departed, the Amalekites appeared, because now the Jewish people had lost their covering protection. This is the second time they came to battle the Jewish people. This is the second story in the fifth portion of Chukat. Then another difficult story occurred with the sun beating on the people's heads (because the clouds did not offer protection from it) and so the people became restless from the length of the journey. They got angry at Moshe claiming he should not have taken them out of Egypt to die in the desert. First their were restless (ותקצר נפש העם), and then they grew tired of the manna (נפשנו קצה). And they were close to stoning Moshe Rabbeinu. Again the point was that they showed no thanksgiving or acknowledgment for the goodness of the manna that God had given them. This is called בפיות טובה, just as Adam did not acknowledge the goodness God had done with him, by wedding him to Eve. The punishments were also similar, because here in Chukat, God sent the serpents, the snakes, to harm the people. These snakes are of course the descendatns of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, it comes because of the evil tongue spoken (against Eve, and against the manna).

So these are the 3 stories of the 5th portion. First, Aharon's demise. Elazar אלעזר equals "Aharon's son" בן אהרן. Then comes Amalek, a sign that if Aharon is missing, Amalek appears. The first time Amalek came was when the people had a doubt whether God was within them or not. Indeed עמלק equals "doubt" (ספק). But, here the Amalekites disguised themselves as Canaanites. Amalek, of all the evil in the world, manifests the primordial serpent. So Amalek is already a serpent who comes to strike

the people. And then we have the third story that comes as a result of the evil the people spoke of Moshe, God, and the manna, with more serpents killing the people.

Two weeks ago, we also read about evil tongue, with Miriam and Aharon speaking against Moshe. Even though the purpose there as we explained then was that Moshe receive the traits of King David too, still, it was an improper way to speak, and from their words, specifically after Miriam and Aharon pass away, the evil words propagate. After Miriam passes away the evil words are about Elokim and Moshe (God and Moshe). With Miriam and Aharon it was 2 against 1 (Moshe). But here the people (1) are talking against God and Moshe (2). The propagation is very clear: the death of Aharon, to Amalek, to the serpents.

What do we learn from this in general. First, let's point out that the fifth portion of every parashah (every parashah has 7 portions), so the fifth corresponds to the sefirah of hod, acknowledgment. Aharon is the archetypal soul of hod. Miriam passes away in the second portion (גבורה), might. After there is some blemish in the hod, then hod turns into something negative, הודי נהפך עלי למשחית, and that is why Amalek appears and they are able to capture one maidservant, and because of this small victory, the Jewish people vowed to devote all the spoils of their war against Amalek to God. There is some deterioration, but it's stopped before it gets too bad. But then the downward spiral continues and the people speak negatively about God and Moshe, so they are attacked by the "snakes [and] fiery serpents" (נחשים שרפים).

Why are there two types of snakes here: snakes, which are just called נחשים and fiery serpents, called שרפים (pronounced: seraphim)? The holy Or Hachayim explains (his *yahrzeit* is in two weeks) the difference between the two. He says that based on the sages, when God tells Moshe how to heal the people with the copper serpent, he reveals that the fiery serpent is what burns the soul. The Or Hachayim then extrapolates that it is the snake that kills the body, while the fiery serpent burns the soul. The two types of snake here represent punishment for the people speaking ill against both God (burn the soul) and Moshe (killing the body). This is the Or Hachayim's explanation.

When God commands Moshe to make the healing serpent, he only uses the word fiery (שרף), but not snake. The Almighty said, "Make yourself a seraph and place it on a pole, and then the person who was bitten will see it and live" (עשה לך שרף ושים אותו על נס) (והיה כל הנשוק וראה אותו וחי ויעש משה נחש נחשת) (וישמחו על הנס). The Or Hachayim explains that even though God did not command him to do so, Moshe wanted to capture both the fiery serpent and the snake, so what he did was to make the snake in the shape of a fiery serpent (as God had commanded) but the material he used to do this was copper (נחשת), which in Hebrew stems from the same three letter root as "snake" (נחש). When two words are related in this manner it is called לשון נופל על לשון. So God's command was to heal the souls that were burnt, the spiritual side of the attack that came as the result, as the Or Hachayim says of the words spoken against God, while what Moshe ensured was that the healing of the physical body, also be included, healing the physical side of the attack that came as a result of the words spoken against Moshe.

The four commands “Make yourself”

What we learn from this is that the people felt death of the body more than they did the experience of the burning of the soul. That is why what Moshe made is called a copper snake (נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת) in the end. Rabbi Meir in the Jerusalem Talmud learns from here how to homiletically understand names (לְדַרוּשׁ שְׁמוֹת), because as we said the copper snake is actually the same three-letter verb נחש used in two different ways, one to make snake (נחש) and the other to make “copper” (נחשת). The discussion in the Jerusalem Talmud that we are referring to focuses on the special way in which God commanded Moshe to make the seraph. God said, “Make yourself a seraph.” The Talmud notes that this form of command “make yourself” appears 4 times. In 3 of the 4 cases, when God commanded the person to make something, He also told him what material to make it out of. But, in this case, God left out the material, leaving room for Moshe Rabbeinu to perform an homiletic analysis. The first time this form of command appears in the Tanach is by Noach. God commands him, “Make yourself an ark of Gopher wood.” The second such command, we read about two weeks ago when God commanded Moshe to make two trumpets made of silver, “Make yourself silver trumpets.” The third instance is here, when God commands Moshe to make a seraph. The sages explain that the “yourself” (לְךָ) stipulates that whatever the material, it should be something that belongs to Moshe Rabbeinu himself. What is the point behind this requirement? The sages explain that there was a type of ru’ach hakodesh here (a low grade of prophecy) revealing that in the future this copper snake would be made into an idol. This is amazing in itself: God is telling Moshe that what I am commanding you to make now, in the future will become an object of idol worship. In any case, to prevent the copper snake from becoming an idol, God commanded Moshe to make it out of material that belongs to him, because a person (in this case, the future generations) cannot make something that does not belong to him into something that is forbidden. Still, the form of the copper snake was worshipped nonetheless until the time of King Chizkiyahu, a king who was worthy of becoming Mashiach.

There is another question here: it says that all that Moshe made is eternal, so how could the copper serpent have been destroyed by Chizkiyahu? Moshe Rabbeinu corresponds to the sefirah of netzach, which means eternity too (נְצוּחַי), but the copper snake represents Moshe Rabbeinu’s aspect of hod, as we explained. And in hod, when something begins to fall, it can become negative in the sense of הוֹדִי נִהְפֵךְ עָלַי לְמַשְׁחִית, and continue to deteriorate to the point where the copper snake had to be completely destroyed.

Now, let’s do a gematria. How much does, “Make yourself a seraph” (עָשָׂה לְךָ שֵׂרָפִים) equal? 1005, which is 3 times 335. 335 is the value of “Red Heifer” (פָּרָה אֲדָמָה). There is another simple connection between the saraph and the red heifer. The seraph burns, that is the meaning of its name. The red heifer is burnt. In fact the root “to burn” appears 5 times in the description of the red heifer. Altogether this verb appears 7 times in our parashah, 5 as mentioned and 2 more in the description of the snakes, the first הַנְּחָשִׁים and the second עָשָׂה לְךָ שֵׂרָפִים. This is the well-known partition of 7 in to 5 and 2,

alluding to the word "gold" (זהב). This verb is relatively rare in the Pentateuch, but in parashat Chukat it appears 7 times. Snakes incidentally appears 5 times. This is another example of the partition of 7 into 5 and 2: 5 snakes and 2 seraphim.

The songs of the heifer and the snake

Since we enjoy Perek Shirah, the Song of Creation, let us mention the songs sung by these two animals that star in our parashah, the heifers (cows) and the snakes. The heifer sings, "I sing to God for He has risen higher and higher [the Hebrew words for which are also used to describe the sound made by a calf], a horse and its rider He has cast into the sea" (אשירה לה' כי גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים), a verse that is at the very beginning of the Song of the Sea. The snake's song is, "God supports all that have fallen and straightens all who are crooked" (סומך ה' לכל הנפלים וזקף לכל הכפופים). There must have been in this story of the snakes some rectification for the snakes themselves. Apparently though, for all the rectification they achieved here, in subsequent generations, the snakes were once again damaged spiritually.

Joshua's swords

Returning to the four times God commanded, "Make yourself" (עשה לך), the fourth time was with Joshua, Moshe Rabbeinu's disciple. God commanded him to circumcise the people (the second time after they had left Egypt). He commanded him, make for yourself "flint swords" (חרבות צורים) and use them to circumcise the people.

If we've come this far, let us note that there are a few more times in the Tanach that the phrase, "Make yourself" (עשה לך) appears. Still in the Talmud only four are mentioned.

The partzuf

What is the model behind these four? There are 2 that were commanded of Moshe. The first was the silver trumpets and the second was the copper snake. Silver is related to loving-kindness and love, while the saraph, which is fiery is related to might. About Noach's ark it says that it represents the foundation of the mother principle (יסוד אימא), which extends all the way down to the top third of the tiferet of Zeer Anpin. There, there is wood, every wood corresponds to tiferet, to Zeer Anpin. So the two trumpets correspond to both loving-kindness and to netzach, victory. The saraph in both might and hod. Noach's ark corresponds to tiferet and finally the stone swords used to circumcise correspond of course to foundation.

Aharon's love and the clouds of glory

Let's return to our initial point. What is the simple and straightforward moral about Aharon passing away, the clouds leaving, etc. Aharon is the manifestation of the love of the Jewish people. As we read about him in Pirkei Avot, Hilel (who is Aharon's reincarnation) loves peace and pursues peace. Abraham is also love, but he is worldly love (inner love), אהבת עולם, while Aharon is great love (אהבה רבה), which is a makif,

surrounding light. This of course is an allusion to the clouds of glory that surrounded the people. It also reminds us of the two mitzvot involved in honoring one's parents, מורא וכבוד. One is inner the other surrounding.

Aharon's power is to kindle the spark of love between people. Thus the clouds of glory come as the result of the love that Aharon sparked in us. When the clouds are gone, we become vulnerable. So the moral is that as long as there is love between us, we cannot be hurt, but the moment the love is gone, when Aharon is no longer. The root of love of Israel, אהבת ישראל, is in the keter, the inner aspect of Atik, faith. The moment there is a blemish there, the first thing that happens is that we grow doubtful. We fill with doubt. This is what happened the first time Amalek attacked: the people didn't believe that God was within them. In Chassidut it says that there are two levels of faith. They correspond to the lamed and mem of צלם, tzelem. The lamed of tzelem is the faith that can be (spiritually) seen, while the mem of tzelem is not dependent on seeing anything, not even seeing spiritually. For this reason, when the people lost this level of faith, they were attacked by Amalek.

Another gematria. We said that the Or Hachayim explains that the seraph corresponds to the evil words they spoke against God and the snake corresponding to the evil words spoken against Moshe. When we say, ישמח משה, we have משיח משה, which is also equal to נחש משה. Together they equal 703. Moshe himself is equal to 15 times 23, which equals chayah (חיה) while 703 is the triangle of 37, the value of yechidah (יחידה). Moshe Rabbeinu himself is the chayah in the soul, but he is destined to elevate and become the yechidah in the soul. The highest elevation of Moshe is when he becomes 703, he becomes Mashiach. 37 also alludes to the last 37 days of Moshe's life when he spoke the book of Deuteronomy, the Divine Presence speaking through his throat. In addition, his first 3 incarnations are Abel (who equals 37), Seth, and Moshe. Again, there are many gematriot that connect Moshe with 23 and with 37.

Now what about Elokim (God) and seraph (שרף), together they equal 86 plus 580, which together is 666, which is the triangle of 36, the triangle before 37. 666 is also a multiple of 37, it equals 18 times 37. Now when we add two consecutive triangles, their sum is a square. In our case together they equal the square of 37, which is 1369, which equals the phrase, "And God's spirit hovered over the waters" (רוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים).

We explained that the clouds of glory are the result of the love of Israel that surrounds us. And when they depart the Amalekites disguise themselves, by speaking a foreign tongue. Usually one disguises oneself by changing clothing, but here they changed their language. So the Jewish people did not know who they were. This is interesting in itself that they didn't change their clothing, just their language. Meaning that when Amalek disguises himself, he does so with his speech. This is similar to the Jewish people, whose strength is in their mouths. Because we spoke evil about God and Moshe, the punishment came in the form of snakes that express first a blemish of the covenant and then a blemish of speech. Finally the people come to Moshe and say, We have sinned by speaking against God and you, please pray for us. This is the sign of a rectified person, that even though he was hurt, when asked to forgive he even prays for

those who have hurt him. The simple question here is why did they ask Moshe to pray for them? Also, where did these snakes come from? It says, they were always there, just that the clouds of glory would kill them constantly. But, once the clouds of glory parted, the snakes appeared.

Two words for “why”

Let's look again at the structure of the parashah of the snakes. We said it contains 6 verses. The structure is very beautiful. The first verse describes how they grew restless with the long journey. The second verse describes the sin. “The people spoke ill of God and Moshe, Why...” The first word in the sin is “Why?” למה. If you enjoy looking for equidistant skips in the Torah, you will enjoy looking for how many times the word Why, למה appears in these six verses. Why is an expression of doubt. What is the difference between למה and מדוע. The Torah usually uses למה. In general, מדוע is a question about causality: why did something happen (where did you come from) and למה is what is happening (where are you going). Together they reflect the might and lovekindness of da'at. Where you came from is the lovingkindness, while where you are going is the might. Rabbi Akiva entered the Pardes through the loving-kindness of da'at, through the מדוע. But, Elisah Acher entered through the might of da'at, he asked why as למה. This is his question. This is in general. Now apart from this rule about מדוע being connected with cause, while למה is connected with the outcome, there is another form of למה. One of the evil people that ask למה is Pharaoh, who says, Why Moshe and Aharon are you bothering the people, למה משה ואהרן תפריעו לעם הזה, Meaning what good can come out of your disturbing their work. But, on this phrase the sages say that Pharaoh meant: עתה למה לדבריכם למה, Now why are your words, and why are you. The explanation of this is that “why” (למה) can also mean “nothing.” Meaning, you and your words are nothing. Du bist garnisht and your words are nothing. There is something about the word למה that indicates absolute and total despair, because if you go out to the desert, you will all simply perish.

The commentaries note that the word “and in Moshe” (the people spoke ill about God and in Moshe) ובמשה appears only twice in the entire Tanach. The first time is “the people believed in God and in Moshe his servant” (ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו). They are opposites.

The custom is to start learning Torah from Vayikra. Our current remez is that this is the only chumash that doesn't have the word למה, why? The most appearances of the word are in Genesis, the first time being with Cain and Abel, with God asking Cain, why has your face fallen. So this is another reason that Vayikra is the best chumash to start learning Torah with.

How is למה connected with nothingness, with nullification, because the answer to Why, is ככה, Because! When you add them together למה ככה, their sum is 120, the value of מדוע, why?

Once you can answer “because” (ככה) to why, then you can continue to ask why (מדוע) for 120 years. To add more and more knowledge a person has to ask מדוע, which is cognate with knowledge (מדע).

Telling a story

So the first verse of the story of the snakes teaches us how to tell a story in the first place. First, give the background. Then the second verse describes the sin, the people speaking negatively about God and Moshe. The third verse describes the punishment, the snakes that came and struck the people. The fourth verse describes how the people came to Moshe admitting their sin and pleading that he pray for them.

When teshuvah is not complete

When they spoke negatively, the first word they said was, “why” (למה), “Why have you taken us out of Egypt, to die in the desert...” But, when they come to admit their guilt they begins with the word, “we have sinned” (חטאנו). “We have sinned for we have spoken about God and about you.” “About God” (בי-הוה) equals 28 and “about you” (ובך) equals 28. Now, the first word of the sin, “why” (למה) equals 75, while the first word of their repentance, “we have sinned” (חטאנו) equals 74. What is the meaning of this difference of 1?

Since Moshe prayed that God remove the snakes, why was the copper snake needed in the first place? Why didn't the snakes just disappear. Apparently, even after the prayer, snakes were left. The prayer only helped Moshe learn that he should make a copper serpent to heal the people bit. But, the people asked that the plague of these snakes be entirely removed. Why did this not happen, asks the Or Hachayim. He answers because their teshuvah, their repentance was incomplete. Teshuvah includes 3 elements: admitting that one has sinned (וידוי), regret (חרטה), and a decision to never commit the sin again (קבלה על העתיד). In Igeret Hateshuvah, the Alter Rebbe explains that the most important aspect of doing teshuvah is the final part, deciding to never again commit this sin. In this particular case, the people certainly admitted their transgression, they also regretted having said what they said, yet, they are still unwilling, they don't have the strength to promise that they will never do this again. It is hard for them to declare they will never again speak against Moshe. Jews in general have to complain, so to promise that they will never again complain, that is too much to expect from Jews. But, they do regret what they said this time. It's as if they say, look Moshe Rabbeinu, we can't promise you not to complain, if you will act properly, we too will act properly. How is this connected with our gematria. The difference of 1 between the admitting of their guilt, “we have sinned” and the sin itself “why” indicates that the admittance of their guilt does not completely make up for their sin.

Sickness is one less than the 50th gate

Another example of a similar gematria, where there is a difference of 1 between two related words is between “someone who is ill” (חולה), whose value 49 and the number

50. Why doesn't the ill person equal 50, why is he 1 short of 50? Because he lacks the 50th gate of understanding and because of that he is sick in the first place.

God cares more for Moshe Rabbeinu's honor than for His own

The fifth verse describes God's command to Moshe to create a copper snake and place it on a staff and all that have been bitten will come and see it and they will live. In the sixth verse, Moshe actually makes the copper snake and places it on a pole and then anyone who had been bit came and stared at the copper snake and lived. Both the fifth and sixth verses end with the same word, וחי, which means both "and he will live" and "and he lived." But, there is a difference in the word "stare." In the fifth verse, when God commands Moshe to make the seraph, the Torah uses the word וראה, while in the sixth verse, the verb used is והביט. Why the difference? Rashi notes that it is commonly held that if someone is hurt by an animal, looking at the animal helps him heal. Now, if someone is bit by something other than a snake, it might be enough to just look at that type of animal that bit him in order to be healed. Just to gaze, without to much intent. But, when it comes to a snake, a lot more intent is needed in order to be healed. Thus, Rashi explains that from the first verse we learn the principle, that one should look at the animal that hurt him. He calls this ראייה בעלמא. But, when it comes to a snake, because its venom quickly kills, a more intent look is required, and this is what is called והביט, to stare with intent.

Since the point here was to heal the negative words the people had spoken against Moshe and against God, gazing at the snake healed the negativity of the words. From the two words used to describe the gaze, we can learn which God considered to be worse: the words spoken against Himself or the words said against Moshe. When God commanded Moshe to make the seraph, he only used the simple gaze, וראה, but, when Moshe made the copper snake, the Torah describes the look as an intent stare, meaning that God was more protective of Moshe's honor than of his own.

Story-telling structure

So the structure of the story is: background, sin, punishment, teshuvah (some regret), instruction/advice, and finally performing the instruction. We leave it to everyone here to meditate on what this order reflects. To give a hint, the first verse, the background is malchut. Sin is always related to foundation, פגם הברית. After that continue thinking about how correspond the rest of the stages.

370 letters

It is always important to count how many words and how many letters in a parashah. In the 6 verses included in this small parashah, the story of the snakes and the copper snake, there are exactly 370 letters. 370 is an important number in Kabbalah and is the number of the lights in the face, שע נהורין.

Is there a word in these 6 verses that equals 370? Certainly the central word of the parashah is "snake" (נחש). We could do what the Ba'al Haturim does a lot in his

gematriot. He adds declaratives or pronouns. For instance, since “snake” equals 358, to get to 370 you need to add 12, the value of the word “this is” (זה). So we could say that 370 is “this is the snake” (זה נחש) and since “snake” is equal to Mashiach (משיח), we could just say “this is Mashiach” (זה משיח).

But, in fact there is a single word that equals 370: נשך, which means “bit” or “struck.” This focuses our attention on this word, which because it refers to the entire parashah, tells us that it is for some reason important. This word appears in the sixth and final verse (ויהי אם נשך הנחש את איש והביט על נחש הנחשת וחי).

The root נשך already appeared in the second verse, “they bit the people” (וינשכו את העם). Are there any more examples of biting in the Torah? There are bites and kisses (kuf and chaf interchange, נשק to נשך). All the biting in the Torah is performed by snakes (Rashi speaks of dogs biting, as we mentioned earlier). The only other time is in Yaakov’s blessings, יהי דן נחש עלי דרך שפיפון עלי אורח הנושך עקבים סוס ויפל. The word there is תשופנו עקב, which is close.

But actually, most of the occurrences of the verb נשך is in relation to interest which is called neshech נשך in the bible. The bite is below and the venom raises to the mind. The words used for interest are נשך and תרבית, and this is shortened to רבית. They are exactly the same, and the only reason there are two different names is to blame a person with doing two sins, instead of one. We will speak more about interest later.

A figurate numbers function generating 370

Now since we have 370 letters, we want to figure them in a certain graphic form. 370 is an important number in and of itself, but it is not one of the basic figurate numbers that we are familiar with. How can we partition the 370 letters in this parashah in a way that will help us create a graphic form to suit them.

Let’s analyze the parashah differently. One principle of analysis is to separate the quotes from the narration. In this story there are three quotes. Twice the Jewish people speak, first ill and then words of repentance. The third quote is from God, ויאמר ה' אל משה, עשה לך שרף וכי. So there three quotes from the people and one from God.

If we count the letters making up the three quotes together, we find that they are 145. So the narration must contain 225 letters.

So we have 225 and 145. 225 is the square of 15, while 145 is the inspirational number of 9 (9 squared plus 8 squared). 15 and 9 are both multiples of 3, so we can say that the relationship between 225 and 145 is that 225 is the square of 3 times 5, while 145 is the inspirational number of 3 times 3.

We can now say define a function based on figurate numbers that generates the number 370 (this can also be theoretically depicted as a graphic form):

$$f[n] = \square 3n + (5n)^2$$

When $n = 3$, we get these two numbers, 225 and 145, whose sum equals 370, and which also define the structure of the six verses describing the story of the snakes, again partitioning the 370 letters into those that are part of the narrative and those that are quotes. We leave developing the series to the advanced students.

Let's say one more gematria that is truly astounding. The average value of each of the six verses is 4096, which is 64 squared, or 8 to the 4th power. Or 2 to the 12th power. This is very special numerically. The world was created with a major beit, the Torah's first letter, which among other things alludes to the powers of 2. What is the connection here with creation? Copper snake (נחש נחשת) is equal to "In the beginning..." (בראשית).