

Chukkat – Bemidbar 19:1-22:1 (9 July 2022)

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My original idea for this droshe was to focus mainly on the **haftarah** which is a very special haftarah for Daniel and me, as I read it for the first time 5 years ago at our aufruf.

But Chukkat, the parasha itself, contains several fascinating topics and I realised that it also deserves a few words. *<Noticed some parasitological aspects - I am a biomedical researcher in parasitology>*. So no surprise, they have become more than a few.

We read 3 chapters of Bemidbar: 19, 20, 21 – till 22:1

- In chapter 19: Mosje and Aron receive detailed instructions how to deal with the **red heifer**, how to use the ashes to purify those who have been in contact with dead bodies
- In chapter 20: Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. Thereafter the people start to complain of lack of water. God tells Mosje to speak to a rock and command it to give water. However, Mosje **strikes the rock** to draw water instead of speaking to it as God commanded. He strikes even twice. The punishment seems disproportionate. Mosje is told he is not allowed to enter the land. Aaron dies at Hor Hahar and is succeeded in the high priesthood by his son Elazar.
- Chapter 21: First describes the battle at Hormah, which the Israelites win. There are more complaints from the people, there is no bread, no water and miserable food. The lord sent “**seraph**” **serpents**. The verb “seraf” means burning. *So this is interpreted as venomous snakes, attacking the Israelite camp*. Now it starts to be interesting.
- Around 2010 I was asked to give a talk at Limmud Netherlands about the relation between Jews and parasites. In that context I learned about a different explanation concerning the venomous snakes. In Prof. Francis Cox's well-known paper, “History of human parasitology”, *<that is to say, well known amongst parasitologists>* Cox writes about the history of Guinea worms. He writes that according to most parasitologists the fiery serpents that struck down the Israelites in the region of the Red Sea after the Exodus from Egypt (around 1250 to 1200 BC), were most likely Guinea worms. This needs an explanation.

- Guinea worm or *Dracunculus medinensis* is a nematode worm. It is the cause of the disease named dracunculiasis. People become infected by drinking water contaminated with the intermediate hosts, copepods (small crustaceans). These copepods, contain the invisible small larval stage of this parasite. Inside a human, the larvae penetrate the gastro-intestinal track and migrate through the body. The females grow to adult worms of 70-120 cm, living in subcutaneous connective tissue, so under the skin, from which, after several months, the female worm emerges. Often this is from the lower limbs of the infected person, releasing thousands of larvae into water, for example during bathing and washing. In the water, the larvae again infect the intermediate host (copepods), making the cycle complete.
- Dracunculiasis is a very painful disease. The infection was endemic in the region as demonstrated by the discovery of calcified worms in Egyptian mummies from the same time period.
- Prof. Cox refers for this hypothesis to the German physician Gottlob Friedrich Heinrich Küchenmeister, who gave this explanation in his 1855 textbook translated into English as *Animal and Vegetable Parasites*. According to Cox, Küchenmeister was not only a parasitologist, but also a theologian and a Hebrew scholar. Something I could not find to be confirmed on the internet. Still, for me, Hebrew and parasitology, an interesting career combination.
- What is also interesting, in relation to what follows in chapter 21, is the fact this disease dracunculiasis has no drug treatment. The only way, even at the present time, is to get rid of the worm is by pulling it out of the tissue, bit by bit, cm by cm, each day, and to wind it around a small stick, till the whole worm (>70-120 cm) has been pulled out. This practise is known for many centuries, probably also in biblical times. It seems most likely that the winding of the Guinea worm around a stick is the origin of the rod of Asclepius, [the international symbol of medicine](#).
- Knowing this, it becomes interesting to read line 8 and 9 of chapter 21, where it says:

Then God said to Moses, "Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And anyone who was bitten who then looks at it shall recover." Moses made a copper serpent (nachash ha-ne-choshet) and mounted it on a*

standard; and when bitten by a serpent, anyone who looked at the copper serpent would recover.

- This story of healing has led to many dramatic paintings, I have seen several in famous museums, depicting the scene of Mosje with the nachash ha-nechoshet, as a snake wound with many loops around a large stick. A large scale symbol of healing - and then often with a Christian reference to the crucifixion.
- *"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 otherwise they pined away."* (**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashana 29a**)
- There are many more commentaries to be found on the symbol of the bronze serpent, in particular in relation to the text in Melachiem2; 18-4, about king Hezekiah: *He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan.*
- And I quote Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild who has a teaching sheet on this topic on Sefaria: The bronze serpent that heals those who look upon it seems to be an idolatry. But at the time it seemed to work, and the Talmud assumes that it worked because it diverted the thoughts of the people towards God. But by the time of Hezekiah that function had gone, it had become the object of idolatry and so Hezekiah broke it into pieces....

Enough medical and parasitological interpretations for today.

- Chapter 21 continues with describing the people singing a song in honour of the miraculous well that provided them water in the desert, followed by a description of the route through Transjordan.
- Again the Israelites go into battle, this time with Sihon the king of the Amorites, who refused to let them go through his land. After defeating him and taking his land, they go on to defeat Og the King of Bashan and also take possession of his country before marching on to Moab, right across the border from Jericho.
- And here comes the point I actually want to comment on, the relation between the Torah reading of today and the haftarah.

- The haftarah is the well-known story of Jephthah.(Sjoftiem; 11; 1-33)
- Jephthah was a man of outstanding military ability who rose from despised beginnings (he was the son of a harlot) to become a leader of Israel.
- The haftarah story we read refers to the battles mentioned in the Torah reading, but actually it is mainly about negotiations. Negotiations concerning leadership, negotiations between Jephthah and his half-brothers, negotiations with the Ammonite king.
- In the heat of battle Jephthah promised God that if he was victorious he would offer as sacrifice the first thing that met him when he returned home from the battle. And he does win the battle, and there the haftarah stops. We do not read the last 7 sentences – the most dramatic part of the story
- Jephthah returned home. As he approached his house, his beloved only daughter ran out to meet him. When she was told about her father's hideous promise, she courageously accepted that she must die.
- For two months before her death she went up into the mountains with her companions, where she lamented that she would never know married love, never hold her child in her arms. She returned, and the vow was carried out.
- In a modern context one can wonder why the daughter accepted her verdict. One can wonder why she is not even given a name. But in the context of the times Jephthah had to sacrifice her, and she had to accept her fate.
- On 25th of June Daniel and I went to the theatre play [Girl on an altar](#), based on an ancient Greek tragedy telling the story of Agamemnon, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, hoping to please the gods to win the war in Troye. The play focusses on [Clytemnestra](#), the wife of Agamemnon, the mother of Iphigenia. We witness her grief, her anger, her disappointment and at the end her revenge by killing Agamemnon. A play full of emotion and violence.
- It made me wonder, what about the wife of Jephthah. She is not mentioned in the text. As the daughter of Jephthah, she has no name. What would she feel about the vow of her husband and the fate of her daughter?
- So one last take home message; be careful of making rash promises to anyone, even to God. Be careful to make a promises, because you want to feel accepted and acclaimed by people you feel rejected by.