

Parashat Shemot, Rabbi James Proops

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch z'tl offers an incredibly insightful explanation to the relevance and significance of the specific sign chosen by God, in response to Moshe's concern that Bnei Yisrael will not believe that he has been sent as an emissary of Hashem. Upon hearing the instruction that he must return to Egypt and inform both Paro and Bnei Yisrael that God appeared to him with the message of Redemption, Moshe questions if they will believe him. He asserts that "...they will say: God did not appear to you". Following this doubt Hashem orders Moshe to throw down his staff which subsequently transforms into a snake and then grab it by the tail after which it reverts back to his staff. The significance of this demonstration is to provide Moshe with a sign as a means of "generating the conviction that a man who is equipped with such a power of transformation is indeed the emissary of an utterly unique Power, a Power Who establishes the natural order and course of all things, a Power by Whose Will alone the laws of nature were established and continue to operate".

Rav Hirsch continues to analyze this interaction on a deeper level, asking why Hashem chose as the props for this demonstration, Moshe's staff and a snake? Before being told to throw down the staff Moshe was asked "מַזֶּה בְּיָדְךָ - What is that in your hand?". Beyond the simple understanding of the obvious question, we can see that Moshe is being asked to contemplate and consider 'what *is* a staff?'. Rav Hirsch posits that a staff or stick is the most natural symbol of man's mastery over nature. A staff has two functions and major symbolisms. On the one hand a staff connotes an extension of man's power, a symbol of authority. A staff is carried by the shepherd who presides over his flock, just as a king or ruler holds a sceptre as a symbol of his sovereignty. On the other hand a staff or stick is used to lean on for support should one require assistance standing. Therefore, the symbolism of the staff transforming into a snake is, "If God so desires, the thing on which a person leans for support and with which he wields his authority can turn into the very opposite: a serpent", from which man recoils.

With this analysis the staff-snake demonstration is much more than simply a demonstration of Hashem's power or proof of His conversation with Moshe. It carries with it the fundamental message that Hakadosh Baruch Hu runs the world.

This sign is a ‘real-time’ demonstration, that in a moment one’s reality can change according to the Will of God, “Who, if He so desires, can cause the very thing on which man relies for support and which serves him as an instrument of his authority, to turn against him”. One’s assumptions as to their reality are ultimately meaningless. One can be ‘sitting on top of the world’, the ruler of the mightiest nation of its time, yet in the blink of an eye be brought to his knees. For so many, this notion has been at the forefront of our minds throughout the past nine months. Despite our great strengths of technology and power we have watched helpless as an unknown enemy wreaks havoc on our lives. The places in which we traditionally turned to for support and strength, our family gatherings, our social lives, our schools and shuls, quickly became places of danger and fear. Our staff became a serpent.

However, it must not be forgotten that just as quickly as the staff transformed into a snake, it reverted to its true form with the same degree of swiftness. When Moshe was commanded to grab the tail of the snake he was shown that, “if He so desires, God can take a hostile force that is feared and shunned by man and place it into his hand as an accommodating support and tractable tool”. The message to Bnei Yisrael was again that their assumptions of reality are meaningless. A people who had known nothing but servitude for 209 years could surely not imagine a way out. However Moshe was told to give them a message that the time is nearly up and they will witness the power of Hashem when their reality is turned on its head. Those same Egyptians who torment them and from whom Bnei Yisrael recoil in fear, will embolden them with riches and cheer upon their departure. So too we must internalize the message, that our present crisis will come to an end and we will depart stronger and bolder from this darkness. We pray that the unrolling of the various vaccines is indeed the beginning of this process but while we wait for its conclusion and the serpent is still very much present, we should pay attention to the sign given by Hashem to Moshe, bolstering our *emunah* and encouraging us to direct our *tefillot* to Him, that we see the end of this devastating period soon.

Shabbat Shalom