

B”H

The Staff and the Snake

Don't be Scared of Life's Snakes! They too Originate and Surrender to the Divine Staff.

By Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson

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Dedicated by **David** and **Eda Schottenstein**

In the loving memory of  
Rabbi **Gavriel Noach** and **Rivki Holtzberg**  
And all of the **Mumbai Kedoshim**

And in the loving memory of a young soul  
**Alta Shula Swerdlov**  
Daughter of Rabbi **Yossi** and **Hindel Swerdlov**

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1. **Summary**
2. **Sources**
3. **Questions and Exercises**

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### 1. Class Summary

In any artist's illustration of Moses, he will invariably be depicted holding or lifting a great staff. And for good reason: When G-d charges Moses with his mission to confront Pharaoh and free the Jews from slavery G-d tells him explicitly, "Take your staff in your hand, for with it you shall perform wonders." Indeed, in both Moses' first interaction with both the Jews and with Pharaoh, to prove his authenticity, he transforms his staff into a snake.

As this specific miracle—the transformation of the staff into a snake—is the initiation of Moses role as leader and redeemer, it surely carries within it great significance.

This class will explore the parallel lines between the interpretations of two great Jewish thinkers: Rabbi Moshe Alshich (Safed, 1508 - 1593) and Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (Russia, 1745-1812), the founder of Chabad.

Both of their explanations teach us a powerful and relevant lesson about our own inner 'snakes' and 'staffs.'

**2. Sources****מקורות**

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| <p><b>1. Exodus</b><br/>Chapter 4</p> <p>1. Moses answered and said, "Behold they will not believe me, and they will not heed my voice, but they will say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you.' "</p> <p>2. And the Lord said to him, "What is this in your hand?" And he said, "A staff."</p> <p>3. And He said, "Cast it to the ground," and he cast it to the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses fled from before it.</p> <p>4. And the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch forth your hand and take hold of its tail." So Moses stretched forth his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand.</p> | <p><b>1. שמות</b><br/>פרק ד</p> <p>א. וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהוּן לֹא יֵאֱמִינּוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ ה'.</p> <p>ב. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו ה' מַה זֶה בְּיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מִטָּה.</p> <p>ג. וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְּׁלִיכֵהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁלַכְהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיְהִי לְנָחָשׁ וַיִּנָּס מֹשֶׁה מִפָּנָיו.</p> <p>ד. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה שְׁלַח יָדְךָ וְאַחֲזֵ בְזָנְבוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיַּחֲזֵק בּוֹ וַיְהִי לְמִטָּה בְּכַפּוֹ.</p> |
| <p><b>2. Exodus</b><br/>Chapter 7</p> <p>10. [Thereupon,] Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and they did so, as the Lord had commanded; Aaron cast his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent.</p> <p>11. [Then,] Pharaoh too summoned the wise men and the magicians, and the necromancers of Egypt also did likewise with their magic.</p> <p>12. Each one of them cast down his staff, and they became serpents; but Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs.</p>                                                                                                                     | <p><b>2. שמות</b><br/>פרק ז</p> <p>י. וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כִּן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת-מִטָּהוּ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְלִפְנֵי עַבְדָּיו וַיְהִי לְתַנִּין.</p> <p>יא. וַיִּקְרָא גַם פַּרְעֹה לַחֲכָמִים וְלַמְכַשְׁפִּים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם הֵם חֲרֻטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלַהֲטִיהֶם כֵּן:</p> <p>יב. וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ מִטָּהוּ וַיְהִיו לְתַנִּינִם וַיִּבְלַע מִטָּה-אַהֲרֹן אֶת-מִטְּתָם.</p>                                     |
| <p><b>3. Exodus</b><br/>Chapter 7</p> <p>15. Go to Pharaoh in the morning; behold, he is going forth to the water, and you shall stand opposite him on the bank of the Nile, and the staff that was turned into a serpent you shall take in your hand.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p><b>3. שמות</b><br/>פרק ז</p> <p>טו. לֵךְ אֶל פַּרְעֹה בַּבֹּקֶר הִנֵּה יֹצֵא הַמִּיָּמָה וַנִּצְבֶּתָ לִקְרָאתוֹ עַל שַׁפְתַּי הַיָּאֵר וְהַמִּטָּה אֲשֶׁר נִהְפְּךָ לְנָחָשׁ תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>4. Ezekiel</b><br/>Chapter 29</p> <p>3. Speak and you shall say; So says the Lord G-d: Behold I am upon you, O Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great serpent that lies down in the midst of its rivers, who said, "My river is my own, and I made myself."</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <p><b>4. יחזקאל</b><br/>פרק כט</p> <p>ג. דַּבֵּר וְאָמַרְתָּ כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי ה' הִנְנִי עֹלֶיךָ פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם הַתַּנִּינִים הַגְּדוֹל הַרְבֵּץ בְּתוֹךְ יַאֲרֵיוֹ אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לִי יַאֲרֵי נְאֻמִּי עָשִׂיתִנִּי.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

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| <p><b>5. Alshich</b><br/>Parshat Vaeira</p> <p>This [staff/serpent episode] is the parable describing the relationship between Moses and Pharaoh: Pharaoh is ‘the great serpent who crouches in his own river,’ and when he is in the hand of Moses—who grew up in Pharaohs own chamber—he is reduced to a staff...</p> <p>But afterwards, when cast down, meaning Moses separated from Pharaoh—and this was when ‘Moses grew up and went out [of the palace] to his brethren’—Moses’ influence in Egypt was weakened and silenced and Pharaoh became a snake who attempted to kill Moses for killing the Egyptian, and Moses had to flee Pharaoh, [all the way] until Midian.</p> <p>Nevertheless, when Moses sent forth his hand and grabbed the snake, meaning he stood up and faced Pharaoh fearlessly, Pharaoh reverted to become a lifeless staff, harmless and powerless.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p><b>5. אלשיך</b><br/>פרשת וארא</p> <p>כמשל הזה, הוא ענין משה עם פרעה... כי כשהיה פרעה, שהוא נחש בריח, והוא התנין הגדול הרובץ בתוך יאוריו, בהיותו ביד משה שהיה גדל עמו בהיכלו היה מטה...</p> <p>אך אחרי כן, כאשר השלכתו ארצה, שנפרדת ממנו, שהוא כאשר ויגדל משה ויצא אל אחיו, שיצא מבית המלך, שרפתה ידך ממנו בארצו, ואין אומר לו דבר, אז היה לנחש, שבקש להרוג את משה על שהרג את המצרי, וינס משה מפניו, עד מדין.</p> <p>עם כל זה, בשלחך יד לאחוז בו ותחזק בו לשים פניך נגדו בכח בלי פחד, יהי למטה בכפך כעץ דומם, שלא ירע ולא ישחית לך.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>6. Torah Or</b><br/>Parshat Vaeira 57b</p> <p>The purpose of miracles is to show the forces of pure kelipa and sitra achra that indeed they, at every moment, receive constant and interminable vitality from holiness, and are not at all the independent and separate existence that they imagine themselves to be. Rather, they too are nullified absolutely to G-d. It's only that their vitality flows through so many curtains and levels of intense and mighty contractions and concealments that they gain the illusion of atheistic independence, to the point that they claim: ‘The river is mine [and I have made myself].’</p> <p>Therefore with an immense revelation of G-dliness as it is beyond and before any contraction, they become completely nulled and voided. This is the idea of a miracle. And this was demonstrated in the first miracle as the staff was transformed into a snake.</p> <p>Moses and Aharon showed Pharaoh how the staff became the snake, meaning how from the light and divine flow of energy, vitality and existence is given even to the ‘serpent’ meaning the source of all kelipa. This is only through the system of chains and gradations of many contractions, to the point where the ‘staff’ is morphed into the ‘snake.’ For through these, the G-dly flow from ‘staff’ is concealed so much that it can even</p> | <p><b>6. תורה אור</b><br/>וארא נו, ב</p> <p>וענין המופתים הוא להראות להם איך שעם היותם בחיי קליפות וסט"א ממש אעפ"כ הם מקבלים חיות תמיד מקדושה בכל רגע ושבאמת אינם יש ודבר נפרד בפ"ע כדמיונם הכוזב אלא שהם בטלים בתכלית לגבי אלקותו ית' רק שהחיות נמשך להם ע"י מסכים והשתלשלות מדרגות רבים ועצומים וגברו כ"כ הצמצומים וההסתרים עד שיוכלו לומר לי יאורי כו'.</p> <p>ולכן בהגלות הארה רבה שלמעלה מן הצמצומים הם בטלים ומבוטלים וזה היה ענין המופתים כו'. וע"ז היה מורה המופת הראשון בענין המטה שנהפך לנחש ...</p> <p>והראו לו משה ואהרן איך שהמטה נהפך לנחש דהיינו שמבחי אור והמשכה דקדושה הנק' מטה נמשך החיות והקיום להתנין מקור הקליפות. וכמ"ש רגליה יורדות כו'. ומלכותו בכל משלה אלא שזהו ע"י השתלשלות וצמצומים רבים כנ"ל עד שיוכל להיות נהפך ממטה לנחש ... שע"י צמצומים רבים אלו</p> |

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| <p>create the level of the 'great serpent that crouches in its river and claims 'the river is mine' etc. as explained above.</p> <p>After [showing how the 'staff' became the 'snake'] they showed Pharaoh how the snake is re-transformed to become the staff, and how Aharon's staff swallows the Egyptian's staffs. This means that it reverts back to its original and natural submissiveness and dependence on G-dly holiness.</p> <p>This is how Moses and Aharon proved to Pharaoh and Egypt that they do not truly exist outside of G-d, rather at every instant they draw their lives from G-dliness, and its only that He is a 'G-d who hides Himself.'</p> <p>The same holds true of all the miracles in Egypt: They are only so that 'Egypt will know that I am G-d!'</p> | <p>מסתתר השפע מבחי המטה כ"כ עד שיוכל להיות התהוות בחינת התנים הגדול הרובץ בתוך יאוריו ואומר לי יאורי כו' כנ"ל.</p> <p>ואח"כ הראו לו איך שהנחש נהפך למטה וגם ויבלע מטה אהרן את מטתם. היינו שחזר בחי התנין להתבטל לגבי הקדושה האלקית כבראשונה ...</p> <p>בזה הראו לפרעה ולמצרים אשר אינם יש ודבר בפ"ע. כ"א בכל רגע נמשך להם החיות מאלקות אלא שהוא ית' אל מסתתר (וברצותו נהפך הנחש למטה והיו כלא היו הקליפות)</p> <p>ועד"ז היו כל המופתים להיות וידעו מצרים כי אני ה' כנ"ל:</p> |
| <p><b>7. Numbers</b><br/>Chapter 21</p> <p>8. The Lord said to Moses, "Make yourself a serpent and put it on a pole, and let whoever is bitten look at it and live."</p> <p>9. Moses made a copper snake and put it on a pole, and whenever a snake bit a man, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p><b>7. חוקת</b><br/>פרק כא</p> <p>ח. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לְךָ שֶׁרֶף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל-גֹּסֶן וְהָיָה כָּל הַנִּשּׁוּךְ וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָיָה.</p> <p>ט. וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׂמְהוּ עַל הַגֹּסֶן וְהָיָה אִם נִשְׁךְ הַנָּחָשׁ אֶת אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל נָחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְחָיָה.</p>                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p><b>8. Mishnah Tractate Rosh Hashana</b><br/>3:8</p> <p>Similarly it says, "Make yourself a serpent and put it on a pole, and let whoever is bitten look at it and live."<br/>(Numbers 21:8) Can a snake kill? Can a snake give life?</p> <p>Rather, when Jews gaze above and subjugate their hearts to their father in Heaven, they would be healed; and if not, they would be afflicted.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p><b>8. משנה ראש השנה</b><br/>ג, ח</p> <p>כיוצא בדבר אתה אומר עשה לך שרף ושים אתו על גס, והיה כל הנשוך וראה אתו וחי. וכי נחש ממית, או נחש מחיה?</p> <p>אלא, בזמן שישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את ליבם לאביהן שבשמים, היו מתרפאים; ואם לאו, היו נימוקים.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

**מקורות:**

תורת משה להאלישיך, פרשת וארא

תורה אור, פרשת וארא מאמר ד"ה

לקוטי תורה פרשת חוקת מאמר ד"ה

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### 3. Questions and Exercises

1. Why does the Exodus story revolve around sticks being transformed into snakes?
2. What are your three greatest fears in life?
3. What is your single greatest fear? How do you deal with it?
4. Do you think you should deal with these fears differently?
5. What is the significance of the fact that when Moses drops the stick it becomes a snake, and when he fetches it, it reverts to a stick?
6. What does the snake represent? What does the staff represent? Why are they, at their core, really one?
7. How should we deal with the various “Pharaohs” and “snakes” in our life?