

June 30, 2012

## HUKKAT (This Is the Statute)

In reading the Bible through Western eyes, we expect it to reflect a pure and sublime monotheism untainted by magic, idolatry, or superstition. How shocking it is to come across this story of fire-breathing, winged snakes. **But wait!** I didn't read anything about fire-breathing, winged snakes in my translation. However, the Hebrew word used in Numbers 21:6 is *seraphim*. *Seraf* means "to burn," so maybe they were fire-breathing; but what about the flying part? Isaiah 6:2 declares that the *seraphim* each had 6 wings. In Israelite and other Near Eastern writings, we find that *Seraf* refers to a winged snake. Archeologists have even found a copper statue of just such a snake dating to the time and region mentioned in this *parasha*. Archeologists have also found a bronze bowl in Nineveh depicting a snake perched on a pole as described in the Torah. Very interesting, but I'm having some problems here.

To begin with, in the Ten Commandments, HaShem told the Israelites to **not** make graven images: see Exodus, chapter 20, verse 4. And yet HaShem told Moshe to make the image of the serpent and stick it on a pole. OK, so HaShem is HaShem and He can order whatever He wants. Then the people who were bitten by the *seraphim* could live if they would only look at the bronze snake, or they could choose to not look, and die. Sounds a little bit like hocus-pocus to me. Many years later, the Israelites took the snake on a pole, gave it a name, set it up in the Temple courtyard, and burned incense to it. Now that's a real problem: see Exodus, chapter 20, verse 5. But King Hezekiah took care of that problem in when he took the bronze serpent that Moses had made and smashed it to pieces: as reported in 2 Kings, chapter 18, verse 4.

HaShem had given the Israelites everything they needed, but did they say, "Thank you very much?" No. They said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?" My, my, my - how disobedient. So **now**, in order to be saved, they had to demonstrate their willingness to do as HaShem said, even if it meant looking at the statue of the snake. But whoever turned toward the snake was not saved by the sight that he beheld, but through HaShem, the Savior of all. We have seen that whenever the Israelites directed their thoughts on high and kept their hearts in subjugation to their Father in heaven, it was all good. We also need to fix our hearts on the Eternal One to find the resolve, virtue, and piety needed to be in HaShem's will.

Theme: For Goodness Snakes

Hebrew verses: Numbers 21:5-6

English reader: Numbers 21:5-9

Haftarah: Judges 11:23-24 & 32-33

B'rit Chadasha: John 3:13-18