

Parashat Chukkat 2 sermon, 6/23/2018

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Last year we city Jews made a driving trip to Madras, Oregon for the solar eclipse. I thought how different Madras was, out on the high desert of central Oregon, from its tropical namesake in southern India—and I thought that only in America, where pioneers felt they were starting history afresh, would you find a place named like that. But then I recalled that Oregon's pioneers gave their capital a Hebrew name—Salem.

It was a long drive, so there was time to think about all the Hebrew place names in the United States. Only in America are there so many. Bethpage, Bethesda, Bethlehem, Moriah, Tabor, Pisgah; Galilee, Carmel, Moab; Ephraim, Utah; Rehoboth, Massachusetts; Shiloh, Siloam, Gilboa, Bethel Park—there's an American town sporting the name of almost any place in the Bible. Even names that just don't work in English, like Shittim Gulch, Washington; I couldn't find Gehenna anywhere in the Dakotas or Texas, but maybe I didn't look hard enough. As we drove by Mount Hebron, California, I thought that only in America are they preserving a map of iron-Age Israel, our ancient heritage, in the names of contemporary small towns. One wonders what else they might be preserving.

Another feature of small-town America is the rural-urban political divide, which up in NorCal and Oregon means State-of-Jefferson separatism. Throughout the region we saw the gold-on-green flag of Jefferson with its double cross, often paired with the Gadsden flag, the yellow one with the snake. While you won't see Jefferson banners down here in San Diego, you don't have to look to far to find Gadsden flags. That slogan "Don't Tread on Me" is part of our shared national culture, and the coiled yellow rattlesnake has been an American mascot for 243 years.

It was a long drive, so there was lots of time to think about snakes on flags. A survey of the world's national flags yields only Mexico, but the snake on that flag is being killed by an eagle: noble eagle fights demonic serpent, that's conventional: Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, Captain America vs. Serpent Society—that's not the positive snake mascot we're looking for, so let's put that aside. In the Midrash, the tribe of Dan has a snake banner (Num R 2:7), based on the words of Jacob's blessing—"Dan shall be a serpent in the road" (Ex 49:17)—that seems positive, but unrelated. Almost all the snake flags in modern times* are concentrated in just one country, the United States, so it does seem like we're dealing with a quirk of culture found only in America.

Anyone who has taken high school American History has seen the cartoon by Benjamin Franklin, showing a snake cut into segments, with the admonition "Join, or Die." Although created for the cause of unity in a previous war, this cartoon came into its own in the Revolution. In popular myth, a snake cut in pieces could live again if it were

reassembled, but this was a Biblically literate Ben Franklin cartooning for a Biblically literate audience, and there is only one snake cut into pieces in the Bible. That is in the Book of Kings (II Kings 18:4), where Hezekiah braves in pieces “the brasen serpent that Moses had made.”

Clearly something powerful would re-emerge if you put that serpent back together, so-- what was that brazen serpent? In Parashat Chukkat, today’s Torah reading, on page 889, (Num 21:6-9), we see the children of Israel on the verge of entering the Land. Previously they were protected by clouds of glory, provided for the merit of Aaron, which kept poisonous snakes away. But Aaron has just died, and the serpents which have been patiently sharpening their fangs outside the Israelite camp now show up all at once, and there is a plague of snakebite.

Moses asks his Advisor what to do, and Hashem says “*’asah l’cha saraf v’sim oto al-nes*”—“make for yourself a poisonous snake and put it on a *nes*.” What does G-d mean by *nes*? It means miracle, as in the *nun* on the dreidel: *nes gadol*. But *nes* also means sign, signpost, emblem, banner, flag, or flagpole: anything one looks up at and draws inspiration from. At the end of today’s service we’ll sing, in “Adon Olam,” *v’hu nisi*, meaning “G-d is my banner or flag.” So the thing that Moses makes is a *nes nachash*, a snake flag, or snake standard.

Moses makes the snake out of copper. Possibly because he sees the root similarity of the word *nachash* (snake) with the word *nechoshet* (copper or bronze). Or, according to Abarbanel, it was the right color: copper made for a realistic image of the Holy-Land equivalent of the copperhead, which lives only in America—but desert-camouflaged snakes are the same color the world over.

The result of Moses’s efforts can thus be called *nes nachash han’choshet*, or ‘copper snake standard,’ but it usually goes by the name that Hezekiah called it when people were starting to worship it as an idol. He called it *nechushtan*, a diminutive form meaning “little copper thingy.” The anti-idolatry crusader first dissed it verbally, then chopped it in pieces physically--presumably with a kosher shovel.

The Rabbis applaud Hezekiah for destroying the *nechushtan*, but they also endorse Moses’s action in creating it—after all, he made that ‘graven image’ on G-d’s direct order, so it can’t be idolatry. Moses’s non-idol eventually became an idol-by-usage, so then it had to go. But the original creation of the *nechushtan* does make some commentators uneasy; the Mishnah has to defend Moses against the implication of idolatry by asking, rhetorically, “Did the copper serpent kill or bring life? [No,] rather, when the Jews looked upwards, and subjected their hearts to Hashem, [then] they were healed” (BT RH 29a).

In any case, the Jewish life of the *nechushtan* is just those two episodes and some unmentioned centuries in between: Moses makes it, snakes go away, *nechushtan* goes into storage, but then it becomes an idolatry magnet, and Hezekiah breaks it up. End of

story from a Jewish standpoint...but then our Christian cousins come on the scene, and we are going to have to delve a bit further into Christianity than we usually do in synagogue, to understand the persistence of the Jewish *nechushtan* in America. In the Gospel According to John (3:14), Jesus makes the *nechushtan* the precursor of the cross: "Like the brazen serpent raised by Moses, the Son of Man will be raised up..." And the voluntary nature of Moses's snakebite therapy—people could choose to be cured or not, by gazing at the *nechushtan* or looking away--fit perfectly into the Christian message of personal faith in the crucifixion for remission of sin. Even the analogy between snakebite and sin was covered: since the Devil was "that old serpent" (Rev 12:9), a sinner 'bitten by the serpent' could raise his eyes to the cross, a *nes* in every sense of the word, and be cured.

This augmented retelling of Parashat Chukkat reassembled the *nechushtan*, so to speak, for a new millennium or two. And now it was in the hands of folks who were not so squeamish as us Jews about making images. You can find the *nechushtan* painted by countless nameless illuminators, and by Tintoretto, Van Dyck, Rubens, Michelangelo (on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, no less), and the American Benjamin West. Make a pilgrimage, as American church groups sometimes do, to Mount Nebo—not the one in Utah, and not Mount Nebo, Arkansas—I mean the one in the Kingdom of Jordan, the place from which Moses could view the Promised Land, and you'll find a monumental 20-foot bronze *nechushtan* by the Christian sculptor Fantoni. And, pulled along by Christian artistic traditions, 20th-century Jewish artists like Leon Kossoff and Marc Chagall also drew or painted the *nechushtan*.

This interplay of ideas between Jews and Christians is interesting to consider, and it works in both directions. Let's think, in American terms, what it meant to the sedentary, relatively urbanized Jews during that period of at least 5 centuries that the *nechushtan* held an honored place in the Temple, perhaps being trotted out on special occasions. Like a ship's bell from the *Mayflower* or a wagon wheel from the Oregon Trail, the *nechushtan* was a precious relic of the critical, formative period, that pioneering journey that defined us as a people—our 40 years in rattlesnake country, so to speak.

And then back to modern history: let's think of the Americans as Jews. 18th- and 19th-century Protestants saw the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua as the script for the American drama. Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson argued which scene belonged on the Great Seal of the United States: Franklin wanted the crossing of the Red Sea, while Jefferson opted for the Israelites in the desert. Later, Manifest Destiny was understood by contemporary writers as a continent-wide application of the book of Joshua. And whenever a new group of Americans showed up, they revived and rehearsed the same Bible stories: think of the African-American cultural emphasis on the Exodus, or the Mormons' crossing the American Desert toward their 'Zion,' led by their latter-day Moses. Now we can look at the American landscape, dotted with Hebrew place names, and we can see that the pioneers were *not* starting history afresh; rather, they saw themselves recapitulating the Israelites' journey to and conquest of the Land. Americans have always thought of themselves as an exceptional, even a chosen

nation, and we have often described this as a promised continent: we have often said that what we're building here can be done only in America.

And in the light of that American exceptionalism, we can now finish making sense of the only-in-America tradition of snake flags. In the Revolutionary period, anything unique to North America could become an emblem of the emerging nation. Thus, among eagles, the smaller, scavenging Bald Eagle, found only in America, took precedence over the more majestic Golden Eagle, which also lived in Europe. Thus, the poisonous snakes which rattled to warn potential aggressors, found only in America, seemed an apt expression of the fearlessness and fair play that ought to characterize the unjaded New World. Ben Franklin touted the rattlesnake as a national symbol for the US, describing it as “an emblem of magnanimity and true courage....she never wounds till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy.”

Now Franklin was a career satirist, and even in his most earnest statements he may still be poking fun at you, or at himself. But the United Colonies were at war, and one might expect that more literal minds would take Franklin's patriotic meme and run it right up the flagpole. And as they did, they further reconstructed that Biblically potent symbol—a *nes nachash*, a snake standard—for the Biblically literate American public to look up to and draw inspiration from.

From the Revolution onwards, the US Army has had just one creature on its seal, emblem, and flag: no eagle but a rattlesnake, holding a scroll reading “This We'll Defend.” The US Navy has its own rattlesnake flag, the ‘First Navy Jack,’ purportedly dating to the Revolution. And the complete package, the one taught in the schools and perennially popular with protesters of all political stripes, is the Gadsden flag of 1775, a coiled yellow rattlesnake on a yellow field, and the inscription “Don't Tread on Me.”

What makes this the exemplary snake flag? The pithy slogan, the drama of the serpent ready to strike, and the very odd color. About that color: viewing the Gadsden flag in the context of other American emblems, its yellowness stands out as an anomaly in a sea of red and blue. Even broadening the context to all the flags in today's world, yellow is a distinctly unpopular color, with only one out of 195 national flags being majority yellow.** Back in the 18th century, the symbolism of yellow was migrating from 16th-century jealousy to 19th-century cowardice, neither one particularly auspicious. The explanation is of course to be found in the Biblical literacy of the flag's designer and target audience: to make it a “brazen” serpent standard, a *nes nachash han'choshet*, it had to be the color of brass. Yellow was Col. Gadsden's logical choice.

You might ask how *nechoshet*, which means copper or bronze, came to be mistranslated as brazen, or made of brass. That's explained by changes in the English language. In the English of the King James Bible, from 1611, the words ‘brass’ and ‘brazen’ meant any copper alloy, including what we today call bronze, so it was a legitimate translation for *nechoshet*. But by 1775, when Gadsden put up a *nechushtan* for the modern age, the word ‘bronze’ had recently entered English language to

describe the brown alloys, and the old word 'brass' had come to mean just the yellow ones. Hence the yellow snake flag we've inherited.

In case you think this whole thesis about the persistence of the *nechushtan* only in America is just a product of highway hypnosis from a too-long driving trip, let me summarize it and offer one more nugget of evidence. I think we can say that in the 18th and 19th centuries, *all* the American snake standards--and there were many, including Franklin's "Join, or Die" and the Army and Navy flags--were designed as, and understood by viewers to be, echoes of Moses's divinely commanded snake-on-a-stick from Parashat Chukkat. Further, that the most famous and long-lived of the snake standards, the yellow Gadsden flag, derived its cultural mojo from hewing even more closely, in color as well as design, to its Book-of-Numbers model, the *nes nachash han'choshet*. And that, for the Protestant Christians of the era, these *nechushtan* analogs drew further power from prefiguring the most potent Christian symbol of all, the cross.

Now if all that were true, one would expect that some variant of the American snake standard would more clearly speak its connection to the crucifix, with some kind of overt analogy between serpent and Savior. The proof-text for this is an obscure member of the snake-flag family, the 1861 state flag of secessionist Alabama: it shows the now-familiar brazen-colored serpent and the Latin motto *Noli Me Tangere*, or "Don't touch me." At first this seems like a Latinization of "Don't tread on me," but *Noli Me Tangere* is also exactly what the resurrected Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, in the Vulgate Gospel of John (20:17). This snake flag is thus a defiant political standard, an overt affirmation of Christianity, and a faithful *nechushtan* all in one, showing the affinities of the snake flag family most clearly.

It's a long drive from the Mizpah of Minnesota to Ascalon, Georgia, and another long drive from Beersheba Springs, Tennessee to Jerusalem, New York. For the urbanized American Jew, it's instructive to travel the backroads of this land of power and glory, this land unique in its resonance with the Jewish people, unique its hospitality to the Jewish people. You may not find Jews in all those small towns, but you'll find plenty of Zionists. And in all those places, when Americans want to protest something they view as tyranny, they hoist on high their best 18th-century approximation of the Bronze-Age *nechushtan*--our ancient heritage. Only in America!

Footnotes for purists, not part of the sermon:

* Except the Martinique/St. Lucie gendarmerie flag of 1766.

** Brunei Darussalam. And one state, New Mexico. But compare blue, red, green, black, and white, locally and worldwide.

Handout

Numbers 21:9

וְהָיָה הַנֶּחֱשֶׁת נְחֹשֶׁת אִישׁ-אֶת הַנֶּחֱשֶׁת בְּשֹׁד-אָם, וְהָיָה; הַנֶּחֱשֶׁת-עַל מַהוֹנֶיֶשׁ, בְּחֹשֶׁת נְחֹשׁ מִשֶּׁה וַיִּצֵּשׁ ט

JPS, 1985: Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard, and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover.

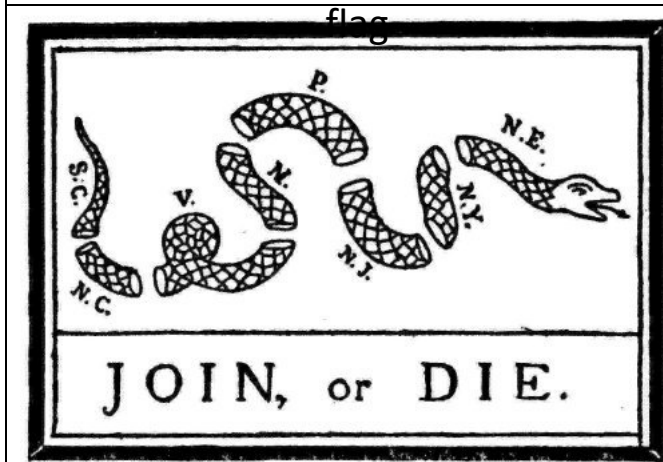
KJ, 1611: And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.



1. Mexican national flag



4. 'First Navy Jack'



2. Franklin cartoon, 1754



5. Gadsden flag, 1775



3. US Army flag



6. Alabama state flag,
1861