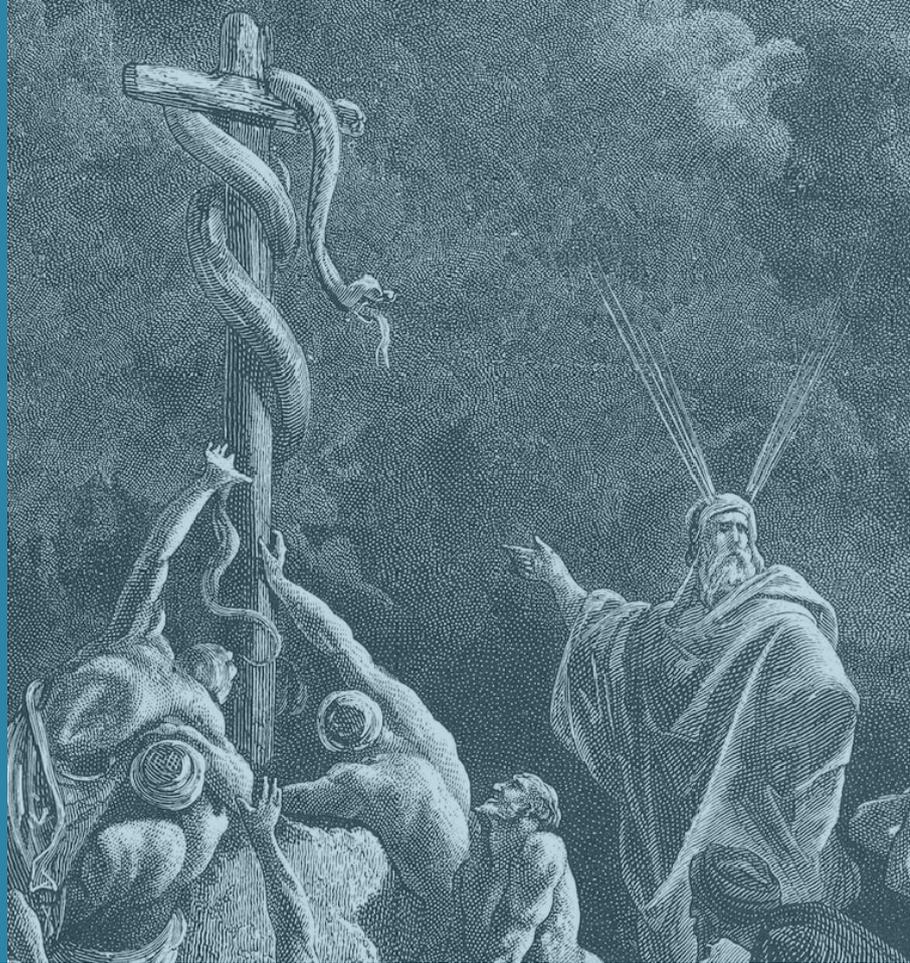


Yeshua Comes Before Tradition

Parashat Chukat



Parashat Chukat

This Shabbat we read and study Parashat Chukat. This portion focuses on the red heifer and its ashes, which are mainly intended for the purification of those who have been made unclean by the dead, the most severe of impurities.

The Israelites' Many Complaints and the Healing Serpent

After 40 years in the desert, we see the Israelites starting to draw near into entering the Land of Israel, and at the same time departing from the desert and from a life of wandering. They were even separated from some of their dear leaders, Miriam the prophetess and Aaron the priest.

In this parasha, there is a severe shortage of water, the people complained, and God told Moses and Aaron to speak to a rock as a solution. In actuality, Moses was very angry with the people, so instead, he hit the rock. As a result of this dismal affair, Moses was punished and was not allowed entrance into the Promised Land.

The people of Israel were already very close to the borders of Canaan and the Promised Land, and because of that the battles, wars, and conquests were starting to begin.

The people complained once again to God, and due to their bitter complaints, He sent snakes to bite the people. After their repentance and the prayer of Moses, God presented an interesting form of healing, a statue - a serpent made of bronze, that whoever looked at it would be healed.

The New Testament used the concept of the serpent to explain Yeshua the Messiah, his salvation and redemption:

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” - John 3:14-16 [NIV]

The Serpent Exemplifies Salvation

These verses are the essence of the New Testament as well as the essence of Yeshua the Messiah. The entire idea of redemption is presented with wonderful simplicity.

The Messiah, like the serpent in the desert, must be lifted high, for everyone to see. For everyone who sees it will be saved. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, to give us eternal life.

It is important for me to emphasize Yeshua and his importance. Here at Netivyah, we receive many letters from believers, mainly of which are from outside of Israel. Often times, these individuals have read the Bible anew and want to draw near and try to keep the Sabbath.

They see the importance of the commandments of the Torah, and these believers complain about their churches, that they do not desire to draw near to the word of God during the feasts or during the Sabbath. So these believers usually leave the group and stop going to church. However, I think this is sad and unhealthy.

Even in Israel, the situation is not that much better. Many young Israelis are coming less and less frequently to their local congregations. Our answer must be, first and foremost, Yeshua. It is imperative to preserve our fellowship, for in doing so we keep one another accountable.

The Story of the Pastor and the Coal

I would like to tell a brief story. It is about a family that participated in the congregation regularly, until eventually they gradually stopped coming. One day the pastor went to visit them on a particularly cold day. The father of the family let the pastor in, prepared a drink for him, and they sat down to speak in front of the burning fireplace.

In the middle of the conversation, the pastor rose to the fireplace, picked out the hottest coal, took it out, and put it aside, and went back to listen to the father of the family.

The father complained that the congregation didn't do enough, the lessons are this way and that, there are problems with other families in the community, they do not like their bad influence, and so on and so forth. The family decided to have a time of fellowship at their home, where they study and pray alone according to their own standards.

At the end of the conversation, the pastor got up to go home, the once hot coal was already cool enough for him to hold it in his hand, he threw it into the fire - and immediately it lit up again. At that moment the father of the family suddenly learned the lesson from the pastor.

The lesson is this: we are the coals and we heat up one another. If one of the coals is taken out of the fire, however, it grows cold. The congregation is designed to support, build, and help each other grow and be strengthened in Yeshua the Messiah.

Yeshua is in the first place, far beyond other things, even if they are important.

So I see fellowship among believers as the highest priority.

The Israelites' Glorification of the Bronze Statue

Let's go back to the bronze snake. In so many things we do, there is a fine line between good and evil, between a mitzvah and a sin.

Of course God knew that sick people would come, look at the serpent, and be healed. They may even want to thank the serpent by burning incense or giving it some gift, but nonetheless God asked Moses to create the serpent and also to encourage the people to look upon it.

Moses' bronze serpent survived the entrance into Israel. Think about how great would it be if we still had this statue in our possession. On the other hand, it would probably turn into a real idol.

King Hezekiah understood that nothing remained in the bronze serpent remained the work of God, but rather it had become idolatry. Therefore, King Hezekiah decided to destroyed it.

"...He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)" - 2 Kings 18:4b [NIV]

We forgot that the statue was just a piece of plain bronze, and for some reason it was given power, influence and authority.

In the end we had to destroy that statue, which in its time God used to cure death and give life. Where am I going with this?

Yeshua Must Remain our First Priority

Our vision is to change the present situation and prove that we can believe in Yeshua as the Messiah and at the same time remain loyal to the Jewish people and be a part of Israel.

However, we must not fall into the trap of the bronze serpent, and give power to the tradition, to the prayer book, and even to the commandments and the Torah itself. We must make sure that nothing comes at the expense of Yeshua the Messiah.

We must remind ourselves again and again, as a community and as individuals: God and Yeshua the Messiah, they are the center of the community. They, and no other means or idea.

Some go so far as to say that Yeshua is the main thing and in fact the only thing. There is nothing else except for Yeshua.

On the one hand they are 100% right. True, there is no other way by which we can be saved. Indeed, Yeshua is the only way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Likewise, it is not by our power, or by our actions, but only from above.

Living Out Faith is More than Just an Obligation

As believers we are required to be righteous. To show that faith works in our lives.

Now how do I connect the two parts, Yeshua and the Torah?

I will give an example from the Bible:

According to the Torah, a husband is obligated to give his wife three things, "...food, clothing and marital rights." (Exodus 21:10) Food, clothing (including a roof over her head), and marital rights (intimate relations).

Those are the three obligations. My question is: If a husband does only these three things, is he a good husband or even a good person? The correct answer is: No, far from it! A husband or wife, father or mother, is much more than that.

Emotion, support, love, listening, kind words, caring, appreciation. And that's not all, there is also a touch - a loving caress, a hug. Quality time together, and a nice gift from time to time.

Food on the table and a roof over your head is perhaps the minimum, but certainly it doesn't come close to what is desired. The same goes for us as believers. Yes, that's my point. Now we must strive to live out our faith in Yeshua.

The Delicate Balance Between Yeshua and the Torah

We must be careful that He does not come at the expense of the Torah, but it is important to be even more careful that the Torah or more accurately, Judaism, will not come at the expense of Yeshua.

I would like to conclude with a prayer that the apostle Paul wrote at the end of Romans 8:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 8:38,39 [NIV]

The Teachings of Messiah Yeshua *in a Jewish Context*

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