

# Snake Mind, Conscious Mind: Revisiting Torah's Serpents

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THE SNAKE'S FIRST APPEARANCE IN TORAH IS powerful — powerfully negative, that is. For no reason at all, the *nachash*/snake slithers into the Garden of Eden to make trouble for human beings. Suggesting that God is not trustworthy, the snake encourages the humans to “become like gods,” by developing their knowledge of good and evil. The episode seems to end badly for all. Forever, says the story, snakes and humans will be at odds. For humans, the snake is a devious and slippery character — even satanic, according to *Midrash Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer*.

As Torah continues, however, it offers a more nuanced portrait of the snake. Snakes appear in the stories of the Exodus and the Israelites’ subsequent wilderness wandering. In these stories, too, the snake brings humans new awareness. Here the awareness is welcomed as a shift to a higher level of consciousness. Had a snake had not helped awaken Moshe’s consciousness, Torah implies, the Exodus would not have taken place.

Towards the beginning of the book of *Shmot*/Exodus, Moshe, rescued from the bulrushes, grows up in Pharaoh’s palace. Sympathetic to his people of origin, he kills a taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. He flees to Midian, where he works as a shepherd. One day he turns to look at something extraordinary: a bush that is on fire, but is not consumed.

From the bush, God speaks to Moshe. “Go to Pharaoh, and lead the Israelites out of slavery. I will be with you.” Moshe, worried that the Israelites will not accept his leadership, asks God for a sign. God says that the sign will come after the Israelites leave Egypt. Moshe, unconvinced, asks for a Divine name he can share with the Israelites to show that God truly sent him. God says, “Tell them ‘I will be’ sent you.”

These abstract hints to the future fail to satisfy Moshe. “What if they don’t believe me?” he asks. “What if they don’t listen to me? What if they say ‘God did not really appear to you?’” God changes tactics, suddenly becoming more concrete. God asks, “What’s that in your hand?” It’s a staff. Moshe throws down the staff that is in his hand and it becomes a snake, a *nachash*. Moshe recoils, but God asks him to pick up the snake by the tail. Moshe does this, and the snake becomes a staff again.

*Midrash Shmot Rabbah* (3:13) presents the snake as a symbol: an image that Moshe interprets, and from which he draws meaning. The midrash reconstructs Moshe’s thought process:

*And the Lord said unto him: What is (mah zeh) that in your hand?  
And he said: A rod [EX. 4:2], that is to say, You are worthy of being smitten — with that (mi-zeh) which is in your hand, because you spoke slanderously about my children who are believers and the sons of believers... Moshe had followed the example of the serpent who had spoken slanderously of his Creator, as it is said: For God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened... [GEN. 3:5]. So, just as the serpent was punished, so will he [Moshe] be punished. See what is written: And He said: Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground and it became a serpent [EX. 4:3]. Because he had copied the example of the serpent, God showed him the serpent, as if to say: You did what this serpent did.*

Moshe reflects on the staff, and then on the snake. Suddenly Moshe sees the staff as an instrument of punishment. Perhaps he remembers Egyptian taskmasters beating slaves with sticks. Perhaps he thinks, “God offered me an opportunity to help save people from this, but I thought they lacked faith, so I didn’t even try.” Perhaps he projects onto them his own lack of faith, subtly implying that God does not deserve confidence. By misrepresenting the people’s faith, he speaks disparagingly of God. The snake in the Garden of Eden was punished for its slanderous speech; Moshe, too, deserves to be punished. Disliking this negative self-understanding, Moshe changes perspective, and sets out for Egypt to confront Pharaoh.

On the one hand, Moshe knows the snake as a villain. On the other hand, his reflection on the snake changes his consciousness, and he chooses heroic ethical action. Once again, the snake brings higher awareness, this time unequivocally for good.

What makes the snake an excellent symbol for a new level of consciousness? Some years ago, when I lived near a small nature museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, I began to reflect on this question. There I saw the skeleton of a snake displayed next to the skeleton of a frog. When I looked at the frog, I felt pity. Its fancy joint structure limited it to only one type of movement. When I looked at the snake, however, I felt awe. The snake skeleton is one long spine with short fine ribs all along it, offering maximum flexibility in multiple directions. In that moment, physical movement seemed a metaphor for thought. Some people, I thought, have frog minds; calcified opinions constrain their thoughts within narrow pathways. Others have snake minds; carrying very little baggage, they turn every which way to explore new ideas.

In actual biological fact, snakes do collect enormous amounts of information. In *Wild Comfort*, nature writer Kathleen Dean Moore writes:

Scientists surmise that a snake has more than 500 genes in its vomeronasal system, the system [including tongue, mouth organs, and nerves] that somehow reads the air. The human mind has that many vomeronasal genes, too, five hundred. But all but six of them are broken and degenerate. Four hundred and ninety-four ways to drink in the world are lost to us, crumpled in our exalted minds. If I were to sit in damp grass in the dark, I could only listen, mourn this terrible loss, and breathe deeply of what is left to me and of the world. (p. 7)

This snake, that reads the air with 500 genes, is the *nachash* that the Torah knows.

The Garden of Eden story describes the snake as the most *arum* of all the creatures. In Hebrew, *arum* means both “naked” and “clever.” The snake is most naked and most clever — as if the snake’s bare skin effortlessly collects information about things we find unknowable. The snake tells the woman that if she eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she, too, will know these unknowable things. So she eats, she is initially pleased, and she shares the fruit with her man.

At first the woman and the man do feel their naked skin as a wondrous organ, but when they feel the evening wind and hear God walking, it is too much for them and they hide. Snake awareness isn’t right for their bodies. The end result of their attempt at something like genetic re-engineering is a terribly heightened sensitivity to pain. Thus, the Torah says, “by the sweat of

your brow shall you earn your bread...in sorrow shall you bear children.” And thus, the story continues, God compassionately heals the humans’ wounds with a coating of skin.

We human beings cannot literally have snake awareness, but we can learn something from snakes about expanding human awareness. So the Torah teaches with a mythological story in the book of *B’Midbar/Numbers* (chapter 21). Israelite leaders Aharon and Miriam have died, water is nowhere to be found, no cities will grant the Israelites safe passage, and for the first time, the Israelites experience all-out war. After the battle the people crave nourishing meat, but there is none. They begin to riot against their leader Moshe.

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A swarm of poisonous snakes enters the camp. When the Israelites get bitten, they apologize for their hostile, violent behavior. Moshe sets up a pole with a snake sculpted in copper. The Hebrew word for copper is *nechoshet*, so this piece of art, the copper snake, is called the *nachash nechoshet*. Everyone who has been bitten by a snake is healed. The healing is a national turning point. For the first time since the Exodus, the people offer their leaders a song of praise, instead of a litany of complaints.

We might interpret this story psychologically: when the people find themselves lost in the narrowness of fear and despair, they cannot see a future or grasp a plan. Snakes swarm in and bite them into awareness. The *nachash nechoshet* helps them heal. In the Torah’s Hebrew, words are occasionally doubled for emphasis. The *nachash nechoshet*, the copper snake, is also the Archetypal Snake, an image that reminds them to move out of the narrow place of fear and faithlessness into expanded awareness.

The Israelite tribal leader Nachshon ben Aminadav is a living icon bearing the same archetypal message. In Torah, Nachshon is charged with leading the army into battle. Midrash says that he also leads the Israelites across the Sea of Reeds. As the Israelites stand paralyzed on the shore, trapped between the advancing Egyptian army and a deep sea, Nachshon jumps into

the water. When he is in up to his neck, almost over his head, the waters part. The name Nachshon means “snake.” Nachshon is a consciousness-raiser. He raises others out of fear and into action.

Perhaps the Archetypal Snake is also present at the burning bush. In the space of a moment, Moshe’s staff becomes a snake, and then becomes a staff again. But for Moshe, it will never again be just a staff. His awareness has changed. Perhaps, upon reflection, Moshe remembers that years ago he had challenged a slave driver. In his desire for a pastoral life and a family life he tried to forget his activism. But he could not forget; even the desert bushes reminded him. He could not ever be an ordinary shepherd with an ordinary staff. Instead, he would be a consciousness-raiser: a political, spiritual, and ethical *nachshon*. Perhaps this realization comforted him, and he reasoned, “Once I raise the elders’ consciousness, they will have to join the rebellion!”

We have all had moments of heightened consciousness: moments of political passion, spiritual grace, or ethical understanding. And we have all let those moments fade. Not out of weakness, but out of responsibility. We honor the pressing immediate needs of everyday life, our commitments to our closest circle, the healthy practice of stability, and the wisdom of avoiding physical and emotional exhaustion. Sometimes life is so well-lived that these commitments are all fulfilled; at other times life is so torn that it is impossible to fulfill them. These are windows of opportunity. When a window opens, can we recapture our highest awareness?

Picture, again, the dialogue between Moshe and God at the burning bush: Moshe asks, “What if they don’t believe me?” And God answers, “What if they don’t? Could you still find the flexible spine that lets you move in unexpected directions? Could your own heightened awareness subtly inspire others? Could you trust that any wounds you might suffer in the process will heal?”

Apparently Moshe could. And so, sometimes, can we.

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