



“Language Falling on Language”

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There is probably no more playful instance of wordplay in all the Torah than the *neh_hash ha-neh_hoshet*, the copper¹ snake described in Parashat Hukkat. With its string of repeated consonants, it sounds like it could be another of Dr Seuss’ whimsical creations, living in the same strange zoo with “the Cat in the Hat,” “Yertle the Turtle,” and “the Fox in Socks.”

Yet the *neh_hash ha-neh_hoshet* appears in the midst of a story that is anything but whimsical. In chapter 21 of the Book of Numbers, the Children of Israel have once again questioned the decision to leave Egypt. God, once again outraged by their ingratitude, sends a den of deadly snakes to attack. The people ask Moshe to pray on their behalf, he does, and God responds with a strange solution:

¹ The word נחשת is alternately translated as “copper” and “bronze.” R. Aryeh Kaplan, who translates it as “copper” in his *The Living Torah*, includes this helpful footnote: “Or, ‘bronze.’ The Septuagint thus translates the word as *xalkos* which can denote copper or bronze, and the MeAm Lo’ez, also, translates it as *alambre* which is Spanish for copper or bronze. There is some indication that the Hebrew word *nechosheth* used here indicates pure unalloyed copper (Deuteronomy 8:9; Radak on 1 Kings 7:45). Others, however, state that the Temple vessels were made of brass, which has the same color as gold (Ezra 8:27, Ibn Ezra ad loc.; Radak, s.v. Tzahav; Rambam on Middoth 2:3), and the Talmud clearly states that the vessels made by Moses consisted of this material (Arkhin 10b). Josephus writes that the brass altar looked like gold (Antiquities 3:6:8, see Exodus 27:2). Perhaps it was an alloy of copper and silver or gold.” I went with “copper” for this piece simply because it sounds more fitting as a description of the color of a snake.



במדבר כא:ח

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לְךָ שֶׁרֶף וְשִׂים אוֹתוֹ עַל גֹּס וְהָיָה כָּל הַנִּשְׁוָךְ וְרָאָה אוֹתוֹ וְחָיָה.

Numbers 21:8

Then the Eternal said to Moshe, "Make for yourself a snake and mount it on a pole. And then anyone who is bitten who looks at it shall recover."

This is a startling command (not least of which because it smacks of idolatry²), but it is good news: God has provided a cure. Like the proverbial hair of the dog, the snake will heal the snakebite. But it isn't until Moshe begins to fulfill the order that we get to the actual copper snake:

במדבר כא:ט

וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ עַל הַגָּס וְהָיָה אִם נִשְׁךְ הַנָּחָשׁ אֶת אִישׁ וְהִבִּיט אֶל נָחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְחָיָה.

Numbers 21:9

Moshe made a copper snake and mounted it on a pole; and anyone who was bitten by a snake would look at the copper snake and recover.

This phrase, *neh_hash neh_hoshet*, is virtually begging for us to notice its linguistic playfulness. There are, of course, the series of shared sounds: the *nun* (נ), the *het* (ח), and the *shin* (ש). What's more, nearly the same sounds, slightly jumbled, appear nearby in the word for bite: *nashakh*. So:

If a snake bites *im nashakh ha-nah_hash*,
you should look at a copper snake *neh_hash ha-neh_hoshet*.

² In fact, it literally becomes an object of idol-worship during the First Temple period, and when King Hizkiyah comes to power, he has it destroyed. See 2 Kings 2:4: "He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post. He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moshe had made, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan." See also Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8 which denies that the copper snake itself had any power at all.



But if the wordplay itself is glaring, the identity of the wordsmith may require a more careful look. If you read the two verses above once again, you will notice the “copper” ingredient in this ritual recipe seems to have been added by Moshe. In the original command, God never specified the material to be used. The instruction was simply to “make a snake.” Rashi points this out, in his commentary on the verse:

רש"י במדבר כא:ט

לא נאמר לו לעשותו של נחשת, אלא אמר משה הקב"ה קוראו נחש, ואני אעשנו של נחושת, לשון נופל על לשון.

Rashi on Numbers 21:9

He was never told to make it out of copper, but Moses said, The Holy Blessed One called it a “snake” (*nahash*), so I will make it out of copper (*nehoshet*): language falling on language.

In fact, we can take Rashi’s point even further in attributing creative license to Moshe. Because in the original command, God actually used a different word for “snake”: “עשה לך” - make for yourself [not a *nahash*, but] a *saraf*!³ So, it seems, Moshe chose a different word than the one he heard from God, and then deliberately picked a material that matched its sound.

The question is: why? What would compel Moshe to take the initiative, as he constructed the snake statue, to play a little linguistic game on the side?

The source Rashi is drawing from, in Bereishit Rabbah, provides an explanation. R. Isi says that there are four places where God asks people to craft an object with the phrasing, “עשה לך”

³ The late midrashic work, Avot de-R. Natan (version A, 39), points out that 6 different words for “snake” are used in Tanach: *nahash* (נחש), *saraf* (שרף), *tanin* (תנין), *tzif’oni* (צפעוני), *ef’eh* (אפעה), and *akhshuv* (עכשוב).



- make for yourself.” In three of the four, the material is specifically named: “an ark of gopher wood” (Genesis 6:14), “flint knives” (Joshua 5:2), and “silver trumpets.” (Numbers 10:8). Only in this case is Moshe told to “עשה לך שרף” - make for yourself a snake,” but given no instructions on what material to use. So he reasons that there must be something in the command itself that is hinting at the material:

בראשית רבה לא:ח

אם אני עושה אותו של זהב, אין הלשון הזה נופל על לשון זה, של כסף, אין הלשון הזה נופל על לשון זה, אלא הרי אני עושה אותו של נחשת לשון נופל על הלשון.

Bereishit Rabbah 31:8

If I make it of gold, that language does not fall onto that language. If I make it of silver, that language does not fall onto that language. Instead, behold, I will make it of copper, for that is language falling on language.

The *midrash* thus concludes that the Torah must have been given in Hebrew. For only in Hebrew, which uses the same root for “copper” and “snake,” would Moshe’s linguistic logic hold.

If that is true, R. Simon adds, then the world must also have been created in Hebrew, because there is one other place where we see language falling on language—very early on, back in the Garden of Eden.

The first human has just awoken from a God-induced slumber to find he has a new companion. He is elated, having so far “not found his counterpart,” his *eizer ke-negdo*. Here is the being that will alleviate his sense of “aloneness” in the world, and he seems right away to know it, declaring:



Genesis 2:23

This one, at last,
is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh.
She will be called "woman" (*ishah*),
for from "man" (*ish*) was she taken.

בראשית ב:כג

זאת הפֶּעַם
עֵצָם מֵעֵצָי
וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי
לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה
כִּי מֵאִישׁ לֻקְחָה זֹאת.

The name of this new human, "woman," is no mere derivative, for we have not seen the word for "man" before either (not *ish*, but rather: *adam*). These two terms, *ish* and *ishah*, appear together at once, as if mirroring one another.

Rashi's commentary on this verse borrows once again the phrase from the *midrash* above:

רש"י בראשית ב:כג

לשון נופל על לשון מכאן שנברא העולם בלשון הקדש.

Rashi on Genesis 2:23

Language falling on language. From here we know that the world was created with the holy language.

Once again, "language falling on language" is meant to describe the selection of two words that sound nearly alike. And once again, the syncing of the two words is being done intentionally—not by God, nor by the nameless narrative voice of the Torah, but by a character in the story of the Torah.

So what is Adam's purpose in letting language fall on language? The rhythm of the verse suggests that he is composing a poem, to celebrate the arrival of this new being. And the



poem, with its "flesh of my flesh," has a distinctly tender, romantic feeling. It is, we might say, the first love song. Indeed, we find, in the very next verse, the man "clinging" to his woman (Genesis 2:24). As they become "one flesh," the two words seem to have "fallen into" one another.

Back in our scene in the Book of Numbers, Moshe is the one playing the poet. He, too, is using linguistic echoes to create a connection. Here, however, the connection is not between two human beings, but between the divine command and its human implementation. God says to make a snake. Moshe could have just done what he was told, with no embellishment. But instead, he takes the opportunity to construct a copper snake, a *neh^hash neh^hoshet*, as a kind of *hiddur mitzvah* (beautification), a way of celebrating the words he has received from God with words of his own that mirror back a response, like a shimmering reflection. He has transformed a duty into a dialogue.

There is something romantic about this exchange as well. Sometimes, when we love something, we feel compelled to write poetry, to devote words to the object of our affection. And if those words are especially playful, that, too, is no surprise, for there is a playful spirit in romance and intimacy. With the one we love, we use pet names, we whisper sweet nothings. As we fall in love, we let language fall on language.

Moshe's language is an expression of love for God's language. So, too, we who love the Torah's language have for centuries responded with language of our own—in the form of *midrash*, *parshanut*, and *piyyut*.⁴ Indeed, our whole tradition of commentary can be seen as a linguistic response to the divine call, a way of clinging to our Beloved with words. With these acts of lexical love, we create the world anew with the holy language.

⁴ *Piyyut* is liturgical poetry that often deftly incorporates biblical allusions.

