

Good Shabbos... This week's parasha is Chukkat. It's a short, odd parasha that covers a lot of ground. In its spare 87 psukim, it has as bookends two very puzzling choks. At its beginning, the parasha describes the chok of -- the red heifer, and near its end, the parasha describes the equally puzzling chok of -- the copper snake. The copper snake, in particular, raises troubling questions. In parashat Breisheet, the snake is portrayed as sinister, the agent of much human suffering. So, how is it that the sinister snake of parashat Breisheet is now transformed in parashat Chukkat into an object almost revered for its healing powers? A possible explanation may lie in two events in the parasha that are sandwiched between the descriptions of the red heifer and the copper snake. These two events are the death of Miriam and Moses hitting, rather than speaking to, the rock to bring forth water. Both of these events foretell that the path of the Jewish people to the Promised Land will be much harder than they might earlier have come to believe. Earlier, the Jewish people were flush with their new freedom and exultant in their resounding triumph over the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Miriam, with her joyous song at the sea, and Moses, with his seemingly effortless and limitless access to God's mercy, now seem almost more like passing footnotes in the protracted journey of the Jewish people to the Promised Land. Instead, both the red heifer and the copper snake – even in all their unsettling mystery – have now emerged as somehow more comforting and healing to the Jewish people. But, the ashes of the red heifer can purify only those who have directly, palpably, experienced death. Similarly, the copper snake can heal only those who first were debased by their complaints against God. The simple wonder and giddy joy that the Jewish people must have felt immediately after passing through the Red Sea are now long gone. Instead, the copper snake, like the ashes of the red heifer, announces a new, sobering truth: Miriam is now dead; Moses is now forever barred from the Promised Land. Even with its healing powers, the copper snake now stands for the decisive death of the pleasant myth previously held by the Jewish people that good triumphs easily over evil... On April 2, 1917, Woodrow Wilson stood before a joint session of Congress, calling for the declaration of war against Germany that would allow American entry into World War I. Wilson was a deeply religious, deeply principled man, the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers. In his address to Congress that day, Wilson spoke in terms that seem to show an understanding of what the copper snake in this week's parasha might signify. Great good may, and perhaps ultimately will, triumph -- but not without a very steep price to pay. Wilson spoke somberly that day to the American people, just as a now-chastened Moses might have spoken to the Jewish people in seeing the pain and strife that certainly lay ahead for them. "The right *is* more precious than peace," Wilson declared. But, as he knew and said that day, "It is a distressing and oppressive duty which I perform in... addressing you... There are... many months of fiery trial and

sacrifice ahead of us. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war.” Good Shabbos