

Snake Symbol

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There is a crisis, in this week's Torah reading, as happens often with the children of Israel. Once again, they are complaining about Moses and his leadership. We think we are divided and self-destructive. Believe me it was worse then. In response, there is a plague of poisonous snakes. Moses made a bronze snake, put it up on a pole and whenever people looked at it, they were cured. We think the symbol of medicine, the snake entwining a pole, comes from Greece, but clearly it has earlier origins.

The rabbis were disturbed at the implication of this. "Can images of snakes really cure people?" they asked in the Mishna. But "when they looked up at the image their thoughts were conducted upwards to God and that was what cured them." The symbol itself was not important. It was the function of getting people to think of God and by doing that they themselves became better people, they felt more uplifted and spiritual and this helped them recover. A sort of faith healing process.

Sadly, as often happens, people come to think that the symbol itself is what cures. And that was why King Hezekiah destroyed the snake because people were worshiping it (2nd Kings 18 & Talmud Brachot 10a).

Today most people I meet seem to think the Mezuzah is a kind of magic talisman that protects one's home. It is not! The point of the Mezuzah is that it reminds us of the Torah, parts of which are on the scroll inside. If our homes are run along Jewish lines, it is this that gives us blessings and helps us cope with the tragedies of life and uplifts us. But the Mezuzah itself is not what protects us magically.