

WHY BOTHER?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

When Paroh speaks to you, saying "Provide a wonder,"...take your staff and cast it down before Paroh. It will become a snake...Paroh, too, summoned his wise men and sorcerers, and they, too...did so with their incantations.

Be'er Yosef: A midrash has it that Paroh not only was unimpressed by this great "wonder" that Moshe performed, but that he used it to mock and deride Moshe. Not content to replicate the "miracle" through his wise practitioners of the occult, he turned to laypeople to do the same. Before the encounter with Moshe ended, Paroh had four and five year-old children turning staffs into snakes. Paroh's wife did the same! This was supposed to impress him?

So what, then, was actually the point? What was gained by a demonstration that fizzled rather than sparkled?

A midrash teaches that this "wonder" was not intended to prove Moshe's great magical powers, but to convey to Paroh a message without having to use words that perhaps could not be uttered. Through this episode, Moshe relayed that Paroh had become the snake! He and his people were thorough evidloers; they could be represented by the ancient symbol of evil, the primordial serpent.

Specifically, the snake message alluded to what certainly would be a cynical objection by Paroh and his court to any suggestion that the Egyptians were mistreating the Bnei Yisrael. Why should they be faulted, if the Jews themselves had a tradition that G-d foretold of a 400-year exile and oppression? Surely they were only following Divine instruction in carrying out the plan He had announced to Avrohom at the bris bein habesarim!

The question, raised by Rambam², is addressed by many commentators. The Raavad (joined by Ramban) writes that Hashem decreed only that the Bnei Yisrael be "afflicted" in exile. The Egyptians greatly exceeded this decree, subjecting them to harsh labor conditions that broke them and killed them. This was not called for in what Hashem conveyed to Avraham. In going beyond His mandate, they assumed responsibility for their choice.

Here we arrive at Moshe's message in the failed "wonder." Paroh was slated to be nothing more than a mateh, a staff which is sometimes wielded for mild, humane punishment. Instead, they themselves turned the mateh into a serpent, heaping evil upon evil. They had earned and justified whatever punishment G-d would now visit upon them.

Another important message was communicated in this episode. A midrash reports that Aharon's mateh did not change in appearance, despite its swallowing up heaps of staffs cast down before it by all of Paroh's sorcerers. Its girth did not expand; one could not tell that it had swallowed anything at all.

This may sound familiar. It paralleled Paroh's dream of the lean cows swallowing the fat ones.³ There, too, the gaunt cows showed no signs of changed appearance after their hearty meal. Yosef's interpretation was that the famine would be so severe, that it would entirely erase the memory and positive effects of the years of plenty.⁴

Moshe and Aharon delivered the equivalent message to Paroh. The blows from Hashem delivered through Aharon's mateh would be so severe, that all of the blows that the Egyptians had rained down upon the Bnei Yisrael would be insignificant relative to the makos. No one would pay any further attention to that period of time. The painful effects of the ten makos - symbolized by Aharon's mateh - would be so severe, that they would remain a topic of attention and conversation. No one would bother speaking about any other pain.
