

THE THREE GREAT LESSONS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

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For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart, and upon your servants and your people, so that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the world.[1]

Rashi: "All my plagues" refers to the killing of the firstborn, which had the equivalent effect of all the other makos combined.

Maharal: Why would the Torah make reference to makas bechoros in a verse that introduces the plague of hail? Because of this question, some wish to explain that bechoros does not mean the firstborn sons, but the first fruits. In other words, Moshe warns that all produce that appeared and ripened early (bechoros of the field, so to speak) would be stricken by the plague of hail, in contradistinction to late-ripening produce that would survive. But this explanation suffers from a different weakness. Why the ominous warning about the severity of this makah? Why would the plague of hail in and of itself visit as much destruction upon the Egyptians as all the plagues combined? And if it somehow was to be experienced that way, why was it not successful in convincing the Egyptians to let go of their stubbornness? Why would the lesser plagues that followed succeed while the super-plague of hail failed?

One possibility is that "this time" does not refer to the plague at hand, but to the issue at hand, namely Paroh's refusal to let the Jews leave. It is as if Hashem said, "Listen here. You have refused to be moved one time too many. You might be taking comfort in that the plague of dever targeted animals, and not people. You may believe that I will not apply more pressure and target people as well. That would be a mistake on your part. Your present refusal is now poised to bring down upon your head the greatest of My plagues - the death of the firstborn. This will not happen immediately. It will be preceded by a number of other plagues, whose purpose is to demonstrate that I can do what no one has ever seen; beginning with a plague of hail whose destruction surpasses anything in memory. These dramatic demonstrations will all culminate, however, in the one that will finally cause you to relent - makas bechoros."

Alternatively, "this time" refers to the next plague to be visited upon them, together with those that follow. They form a logical entity, just as the six plagues that occurred previously formed two other such groups. "This time" refers to the third of three groups of plagues. Each group carried a different message to the Egyptians. The final group demonstrated the extent of His power.

The sequence of groups follows:

During the first plagues, Paroh rejected the notion of Hashem's very existence. He obstinately believed that they could be explained without invoking G-d as their cause. Thus, he called in his magicians to replicate their effect. When they were unable to produce lice, they conceded that a greater Power stood behind the plague: "It is the finger of G-d!"^[2]

The general sweep on the first plagues, however, showed no sharp distinction between people in the stricken areas. The Egyptians could not see, as it were, the Hand of G-d punishing the guilty and sparing the innocent. These makos, then, left much room for error, for imagining that Hashem's Providence did not reach to the individual level. Perhaps His actions differentiated only between large groups, but not between individuals. The second group of plagues however, sharply differentiated between Jew and Egyptian, culminating in Paroh's realization that "I, Hashem, am in the midst of the land."^[3] Paroh could now discern that His Providence extended to treating every individual differently.

While the second group demonstrated His presence in the affairs of our world, it did not make the case for His uniqueness, His unity, His oneness. The fullness of his power and ability - an outgrowth of His oneness that encompasses all things and all phenomena within Him - became apparent only in the third set of makos. Those makos did the unimaginable, such as allowing fire and water to coexist with a hailstone. Only a G-d Who created all forces could bring peace between polar opposites. Thus, the summary statement of this set is "so that you will know that there is none like Me in all the land."

These three sets of makos are familiar to us through their famous acronym in the Pesach Haggadah: **ב**ַּדְּצִ"ךְ **ע**ד"ש **ב**אַח"ב. R. Yehuda divided up the makos this way to emphasize the three basic lessons about Hashem (existence, providence, ability) that He taught Klal Yisrael just as the Jewish people were ready to step out into the world as a national entity forged in emunah..

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Shemos 9:14*
2. *Shemos 8:15*
3. *Shemos 8:18*