

MAKING SENSE OF THE PLAGUES: THE EDUCATION OF PHARAOH

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I INCONSISTENCIES WITHIN THE PLAGUES

Then YHVH said to Mosheh, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, 'YHVH, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness." But until now you have not listened.' Thus says YHVH, "By this you shall know that I am YHVH." See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. (Sh'mot [Exodus] 7:14-17)

In this account of the warning of the first plague (blood), there are several details which show up again in some - but not all - of the other plagues:

1. Mosheh warns Pharaoh about the upcoming plague - but not every time (only before the plagues of frogs, wild beasts, pestilence, hail, locusts and the first-born).
2. Some of these warnings take place in the early morning by the banks of the Nile (wild beasts and hail) while others take place in Pharaoh's palace.
3. A theological message (e.g. "By this you shall know that I am YHVH") is appended to the warning - whereas other warnings are bereft of such a message.
4. Mosheh's staff is used in some of the plagues - but not all (it is only used in the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, hail and locusts).

Our first simple and straightforward question is:

Is there any rhyme or reason to the plagues and their attendant warnings which would explain these apparent inconsistencies?

II

"I WILL HARDEN PHARAOH'S HEART"

The second question begins in the text, challenges our basic theological and philosophical assumptions - and is answered right back in the text. This question has troubled religious thinkers throughout the ages:

And YHVH said to Mosheh, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go." (Sh'mot 4:21 - see also 7:3)

Not only does God promise that He will make Pharaoh stubborn - the Torah also recounts this divine intervention several times throughout the "plague-driven negotiations" (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27)

Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart?

There are two parts to this question:

- Ⓔ. *How could Pharaoh be held responsible for his wickedness if God was "pulling the strings"?*
- Ⓕ. *If God made Pharaoh stubborn until something changed which would allow B'nei Yisra'el to go free - what "changed" after the smiting of the first-born that allowed our freedom - which couldn't happen before?*

Rambam (MT Hilkhos Teshuva, Chapter 6) addresses this question, as do R. Sa'adia, Albo, Ramban, Ibn Ezra and many other Rishonim. Their answers vary, including the response that the punishment for Pharaoh's harsh enslavement of the B'nei Yisra'el was to "close off the doors of repentance" by hardening his heart.

III

THE S'FORNO'S APPROACH

Rabbenu Ovadiah S'forno suggests an independent and original approach:

And I will harden his heart: *Since he will be unable to tolerate the plagues, he would certainly emancipate the people - not because he accepts the sovereignty of God and to do His will - therefore He hardened his heart to be able to withstand the plagues and not to free them. (Commentary to Shemot 4:21 - see also his commentary to 7:3).*

In other words, God wanted Pharaoh to let B'nei Yisra'el go - but only for the right reason. To let them go as a political move or as a visceral reaction to the onslaught of plagues was not sufficient. Pharaoh had to learn a lesson of sorts which would affect his overall attitude towards God and the B'nei Yisra'el before the process could be completed and the B'nei Yisra'el could be allowed to leave. In order to "keep Pharaoh in the game" until he could learn this lesson, God had to strengthen his will (=heart) to withstand the plagues.

Although S'forno doesn't point this out explicitly, the implication of this is that something took place in Pharaoh's consciousness - even if only for a fleeting moment - in reaction to the plague of the first-born which signified the proper attitude and the desired change. The text indeed bears this out.

In response to those plagues which caused Pharaoh to temporarily "give in" (although he always changed his mind once the plague had passed), the text tells us that the king allowed us to **Go, sacrifice to your God** (8:24). Pharaoh's responses in the other cases, although varying in scope (sacrifice in the land, only the men could go etc.), remained constant in style: It is your God whom you seek to worship - not mine!

In response to the final plague (12:32), Pharaoh added two key words: **uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti** (And bring a blessing on me too!). The Rishonim generally understand these words to mean that Pharaoh was asking the B'nei Yisra'el to either pray or to present an offering on his behalf (when they reach their worship site in the desert).

In other words, the understanding that Pharaoh achieved via the final plague was that this God - YHVH - who the B'nei Yisra'el worship, was a God Whose blessing even the Pharaoh needed. He also recognized one other facet - this Supreme Ruler had a special relationship with the B'nei Yisra'el, such that their intercession on his behalf would be more effective than his own prayer.

As I explained in last week's shiur, this turnabout was necessary not only for Pharaoh's spiritual welfare and theological enlightenment - but, most significantly, for the benefit of B'nei Yisra'el. For these people, steeped in Egyptian culture and self-subjugated to Egyptian icons, to have their own king make this sort of declaration and express this awareness would do more to bring the B'nei Yisra'el back into their own proper place in their relationship with God (and awareness of their own greatness) than any miracle.

IV

THE PROCESS OF AN ATTITUDE-SHIFT

I would like to propose that the process which culminated in Pharaoh's cry of **uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti** can be discerned in the structure of the plagues and of Mosheh's warnings in advance of them. For purposed of this shiur, we will focus on the first nine - and then view the tenth (the first-born)

independently.

First - the facts as they are presented in the text:

#1: **Dam** (blood)

Warning: **YES**

Where: **NILE**

When: **MORNING**

Message: **YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH**

Vehicle: **STAFF**

#2: **Tz'farde'a'** (frogs)

Warning: **YES**

Where: **PALACE**

When: ???

Message: (none)

Vehicle: **STAFF**

#3: **Kinim** (lice)

Warning: **NO**

Where: n/a

When: n/a

Message: n/a

Vehicle: **STAFF**

#4: **'Arov** (wild beasts)

Warning: **YES**

Where: **NILE**

When: **MORNING**

Message: **YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND**

Vehicle: (none)

#5: **Dever**(pestilence)

Warning: **YES**

Where: **PALACE**

When: ???

Message: (none)

Vehicle: (none)

#6: **Sh'khin** (boils)

Warning: **NO**

Where: n/a

When: n/a

Message: n/a

Vehicle: (none)

#7: **Barad** (hail)

Warning: **YES**

Where: **NILE**

When: **MORNING**

Message: **YOU WILL KNOW THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE LAND**

Vehicle: **MOSHEH'S HANDS/STAFF**

#8: **Arbeh** (locusts)

Warning: **YES**

Where: **PALACE**

When: ???

Message: (none)

Vehicle: **MOSHEH'S HANDS/STAFF**

#9: **Hoshekh** (darkness)

Warning: **NO**

Where: n/a

When: n/a

Message: n/a

Vehicle: **MOSHEH'S HANDS**

Note the following:

Wherever Mosheh encounters Pharaoh at the river in the morning, there is also a theological message attached to the warning. This is followed by a plague with a prefatory warning given inside the palace - without a theological message - which is followed by a plague given with no warning. If we can decipher this structure, we will only need to explain the role of the staff and Mosheh's hands to complete the picture.

V

A FOUR-STEP EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

As we all know, attitudes which are dramatically shifted in one shot are often just as easily shifted back. In order to permanently and effectively educate someone, we need to use slow and even steps, giving the student time to digest, reflect and integrate the new information in such a way that a new attitude may be adopted.

God (through Mosheh) had to lead Pharaoh from **I don't know YHVH** (Sh'mot 5:2) to **uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti** (12:32). In order to clarify the steps needed for this process, we'll use an analogy from our own world of Torah education.

If a teacher would like to encourage a potential student - who is not even aware of Talmud Torah as an academic discipline at all - to take a year off to go study in Yeshivah in Israel, there are several shifts which the teacher must effect in the student:

7. *Make the student aware of Torah as an academic discipline;*
8. *Demonstrate the special qualities of Talmud Torah;*
9. *Demonstrate the superiority of Talmud Torah over all other disciplines;*
10. *Demonstrate the special and unique relationship which this future student has with Talmud Torah.*

In much the same way, Pharaoh had to:

11. *Be made aware of YHVH's existence;*
12. *Be shown the uniqueness of YHVH;*
13. *Be shown the ultimate superiority of YHVH;*
14. *Admit to the special relationship that the B'nei Yisra'el - and he - have with YHVH.*

If we look through the three theological messages (in context) given in the warnings (before plagues #1, 4 and 7), we can note that this progression covers the first three steps:

(1): "YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH" (God's existence) (4): "YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND" (The uniqueness of God's powers) (7): "YOU WILL KNOW THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE LAND" (The superiority of God)

The progression of Pharaoh's education is capped with his request following the plague of the first-born: **uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti** - indicating that a recognition of the special relationship which he has

with God (he is dependent on God's blessing) and which the B'nei Yisra'el have with God (he is dependent on their intercession on his behalf).

VI

EACH STEP: THREE "SIGNS"

Earlier in the narrative, we are introduced to the notion that three demonstrations of a truth will suffice to persuade the targeted audience. When Mosheh asks God for a sign through which he can prove the veracity of his divine agency (4:1), God gives him three signs (staff, scale-disease, blood; these signs are themselves a mystery which we hope to unravel in a future shiur). As God Himself says, the goal of these signs is:

"This," said YHVH, "is so that they may believe that YHVH, the God of their fathers -the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Ya'akov -has appeared to you." (4:5)

Note that this "message" and goal of the three signs is given subsequent to the first sign - as if to say: Mosheh, the purpose of this entire series which has just begun is to establish your credentials as My messenger.

In the same way, each step in Pharaoh's education took three signs/plagues to be accomplished, allowing him to move on to the next step. This explains the following pattern:

14. *The first plague in each set (blood, wild beasts and hail) follows a pattern: Early morning warning at the river, theological message - and then the plague.*
Why was the warning at the river in the morning? Ibn Ezra and Rashbam point out that the river was a spot where the king would take walks - and where the people would be present, watching him as he sojourned. I would like to suggest that since the Nile was considered a divinity in Egypt, the Pharaoh was likely involved in some form of worship at the banks of the river early in the morning. Mosheh's confrontation of Pharaoh in the middle of a worship service, in front of his priests and the people, became a public statement and challenge to the entire Egyptian culture and belief system.
This warning was the preface to all three plagues in the set - including a public declaration and the theological lesson of these three plagues.
16. *The second one in each set (frogs, pestilence and locusts) also has a consistent pattern: Warning in the palace with no theological message - and then the plague.*
In these cases, Mosheh challenges and warns Pharaoh in his palace - there is no need for either public declaration or a theological message, as these have already been given at the

beginning of the set. The warning, however, was still given to show Pharaoh that the upcoming plague was part of that same system.

- 1; . *The final one in each set (lice, boils and darkness) also has a pattern: No warning at all - just a plague.*
At this point, the message and warning are moot - Pharaoh needs to internalize the lesson of the series.

This entire structure and explanation is buttressed by R. Yehudah's acrostic of the plagues - **D'Tza"kh 'Ada"sh B'acha"v**:

VII

R. YEHUDAH'S *SIMANIM*

In the Sifri (Devarim #301) we first encounter R. Yehudah's famous acrostic for the ten plagues: **D'Tza"kh 'Ada"sh B'acha"v** (which stands for *Dam* - *Tz'farde'a'* - *Kinim*, *'Arov* - *Dever* - *Sh'khin*, *Barad* - *Arbeh* - *Hoshekh* - *makkat B'khorot*) - which is incorporated into the Haggadah shel Pessach.

There are many explanations of the meaning behind this acrostic (the simplest is that it is a mnemonic device) - but it may hold the key to understanding the structure of the plagues and the educational process driving them.

Leaving the final plague aside for a moment, let's reexamine our list, keeping R. Yehudah's acrostic in mind. Following his set-up, there are three sets of plagues. Each set carries an increasingly radical and impactful message to Pharaoh - until he is ready to be affected by the plague of the first-born and to declare **uVeirakhtem Gam-Oti**.

Before examining the consistent pattern within the sets, let's see if we can discover the lesson of each set. We will also be able to explain the role of the staff in the plagues.

SET #1: THE EXISTENCE OF YHVH

When first approached by Mosheh, appearing in the Name of YHVH, Pharaoh's response was: "I do not know YHVH" (5:2). The first goal, therefore, was to "introduce" Pharaoh to God.

We see this in the theological message attached to the first plague - **That you will know that I am YHVH**. At this point, Mosheh was to make Pharaoh aware of **the God of the Hebrews** - if you will, as an "equally valid" God to the rest of the Egyptian pantheon. This is accomplished through blood, frogs and lice. Note that all three of them involved using the staff as the direct catalyst for starting the plague (Blood: "he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river"; Frogs: "So Aharon

stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt"; Lice: "Aharon stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth") - just like the Egyptian wizards would do their magic. Note that through these three plagues the Egyptian magicians stayed in the plague-competition, finally bowing out during the third one.

In other words, this first set of plagues was designed to introduce God into the Egyptian power picture: **YOU WILL KNOW THAT I AM YHVH.**

SET #2: THE SPECIAL POWERS OF YHVH

Now that Pharaoh realizes that YHVH exists and that He has powers (at this point) akin to those of the Egyptian gods (and even surpassing them, as his wizards had already bowed out of the competition), the time had come to impress upon Pharaoh God's unique power. Unlike the gods of the Egyptians, who are distant but need a human intermediary (wizard) to trigger the plague with a vehicle (staff) - God is **...in the midst of the land**. This is demonstrated by plagues which, unlike the first three, do not come out of the ground (river, earth), but from the environment. In addition, Mosheh no longer uses the staff - the message here is that God Himself is present and it isn't Mosheh's staff that triggers the plague as much as Mosheh's command/request.

Through the second set, including wild beasts, pestilence and boils, Pharaoh is finally taught that: **I AM YHVH IN THE MIDST OF THE LAND**. As before, the first plague is preceded by a public warning with this message, the second is preceded by a private warning and the third has no warning attached.

SET #3: THE SUPERIORITY OF YHVH

Pharaoh is ready to embrace the superiority of God over all members of the Egyptian pantheon. Significantly, God tells Mosheh to lift his hands heavenward to trigger all three of these plagues (hail - 9:22; locusts - 10:12; darkness - 10:21); however, in the case of the first two, Mosheh lifts his hands and holds the staff up - whereas in the third, he only lifts his hands to the heavens.

The staff, which did not play a role in the second set, serves a different function from the first set. In the first set the staff was the catalyst of the plague, mimicking the Egyptian wizards. In the third set, Mosheh lifted the staff as an extension of his hands, showing everyone that the same God Who brought the first three plagues was also behind these. The staff is not a catalyst, it is a sign. This explains why Mosheh did not use the staff for the third plague in this set - darkness. Once he lifted his arms, absolute darkness fell and no one (of the Egyptians) would see either his hand or the staff!

Through these final plagues, Pharaoh has been taught the penultimate lesson: **THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE LAND.**

Pharaoh was now prepared for the ultimate lesson, brought through the plague of the first-born - but that will have to wait for another shiur.

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