

# PHARAOH'S WIZARDS

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לעילוי נשמת אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורקבה ז"ל הכ"מ

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Although we read the Biblical text in the sequence that it is presented - and this is truest when reading narrative (we assume that event A precedes event B in the text because it preceded it in real time), there are numerous examples where the Biblical text adds in interjections which reflect a later reality to help the reader understand the text - or to maintain the narrative flow. For example, at the beginning of Numbers, we are told that the count of the people and their assignments to different camps was first commanded on the "first day of the second month"; this series of assignments includes the division of Levitical labors in transporting the Tabernacle. Yet, a month earlier, the chieftains offered (over 12 consecutive days in the first month) a total of 12 wagons which, as we are told in the pre-summary of the narrative of their donation (Numbers 7:3, 7-9) that Moses distributed the wagons and teams of oxen to the Levites based on the specific transporting needs of each family - in other words, it seems as if Moses already knew - and communicated to the Levites - which family would be in charge of which component of cargo; yet that command is only given in the next month!

The answer to this puzzle lies in our understanding of the Torah as an "edited" text; in other words, the events were not recorded as they happened, rather at some point later, God commanded Moses to commit them to writing - and in an order that would maintain narrative flow as it clarifies the reasons and etiology of certain practices. This is, parenthetically, a point of consensus among nearly all medieval commentators (Rishonim) and is fully anchored in traditional Rabbinic exegesis. In the example invoked above, although the text marks the dates when the chieftains brought their gifts and when the people were to be counted (and the Levites were given their assignments), the final editing took place at a time when the results of those were all known - hence, the distribution of the wagons and oxen is integrated into the text of Numbers 7 to complete the narrative of the gifts and identify where each ended up.

This an example of a chronologically "flexible" narrative; yet there are more obvious examples of "interjected texts", such as I Samuel 9:9 and Ruth 4:7 where early nomenclature or practices are clarified for the later (current) audience who would no longer recognize the words or practice invoked.

This short introduction will help us demystify several enigmatic passages involving the wizards of Pharaoh's court and their role in the "Plagues narrative".

I

## HARTUMEI MITZRAYIM

The wizards/magicians of Pharaoh's court appear in the Biblical narrative several times - and in all cases, they come off as quite incompetent and hapless.

The first time they appear is in their lack of success in interpreting Pharaoh's double-dream (Gen. 41:8) which leads to Joseph's release from prison and, very quickly, to his meteoric rise to royalty. This particular mention sets the Hartumim up as foils for Joseph and anticipates their serving a similar role for Moses and Aaron in our passages.

Before assaying the interactions with the wizards in the Exodus narrative, it is prudent to point out that the word Hartum (BDB reckons it as derived from חרט - to chisel or engrave. Occult practitioners were familiar with forms of writing their incantations) does not appear in the Biblical text after our passages - until the middle of the Hellenistic era (Daniel 1:20, 2:2) and, again, they are unsuccessful in interpreting the king's dreams when Daniel (surely a latter-day Joseph) is able to do so.

The wizards appear in five passages in our narrative, which we will refer to as the "serpent" (I leave this in quote marks, as it is entirely unclear that the תנין here is a serpent - many regard it as some amphibious creature, following Gen. 1: 21, Ezekiel 29:3 and others), blood, frogs, lice and boils.

### A: The "serpent" (7:8-13)

Before the plagues begin, God charges Moses to go to Pharaoh and present his "bona fides" (per the note above, I have not left "Tanim" untranslated)

8 And Hashem spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying: 9 'When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying: Show a wonder for you; then you shall say to Aaron: Take your rod, and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it become a Tanim.' 10 And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so, as Hashem had commanded; and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a Tanim. 11 **Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did in like manner with their secret arts. 12 For they cast down every man his rod, and they became Tananim; but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.** 13 And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as Hashem had spoken.

Moses and Aaron enter Pharaoh's palace, representing a deity foreign to Pharaoh. In order to demonstrate the power of their God, they must show their abilities in the occult "language" of Egypt

-- magic. Pharaoh's response is understandable - his magicians can match their tricks and they've brought nothing new to the table; when Moses and Aaron's "magic" proves to be stronger, Pharaoh, who should lend an attentive ear to these interlopers and their demands, hardens his heart instead and refuses to listen.

#### B: Blood (7:19-22)

It is in the next passage - the first of the plagues - where the role of the wizards and their behavior becomes unclear and hard to decipher.

19 And Hashem said to Moses: 'Say unto Aaron: Take your rod, and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their streams, and over their pools, and over all their ponds of water, that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.' 20 And Moses and Aaron did so, as Hashem commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. 21 And the fish that were in the river died; and the river became foul, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the river; and the blood was throughout all the land of Egypt. 22 **And the magicians of Egypt did in like manner with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not to them; as Hashem had spoken.**

Aaron had turned all of the waters of Egypt to blood (note - real blood, not blood-colored water, as attested by the death of the fish) and there was no way to find any water as the blood was throughout the land.

That being the case, what did the wizards do? What liquids remained for them to turn into blood? Even if we posit that there were some remaining untouched waters, what would be the point of their adding to the devastation wreaked on the Egyptian populace and economy through the Aaronide plague?

There is a further anomaly in the text. After the Torah relates the wizards' success in aping Aaron's plague (?), the passage concludes with Pharaoh's hardening his heart so as not to listen to Moses and Aaron - but the wizards' actions (seemingly) have nothing to do with Pharaoh's stubbornness. The apparently disjointed read of the text tempts us to consider that it was the wizards to whom Pharaoh didn't hearken - note "he hearkened not to them" - them being the aforementioned wizards - but that would be very odd indeed, for what did the wizards say that Pharaoh chose to ignore?

#### C: Frogs (8:1-7)

The next plague keeps us in the company of the wizards functioning in an apparently parallel manner to their role in the "blood-plague".

1 And Hashem said to Moses: 'Say unto Aaron: Stretch forth your hand with your rod over the rivers, over the canals, and over the pools, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt.' 2 And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt. 3 **And the magicians did in like manner with their secret arts, and brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt.** 4 Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said: 'Entreat Hashem, that He take away the frogs from me, and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice unto Hashem.' 5 And Moses said unto Pharaoh: 'Have you this glory over me; against what time shall I entreat for you, and for your servants, and for your people, that the frogs be destroyed from you and your houses, and remain in the river only?' 6 And he said: 'Against to-morrow.' And he said: 'Be it according to your word; that you may know that there is none like unto Hashem our God. 7 And the frogs shall depart from you, and from your houses, and from your servants, and from your people; they shall remain in the river only.'

Again, the wizards' actions and Pharaoh's reaction to them seem odd; even if there were room to bring more frogs into Egypt (note that the text testifies that after Aaron effected the plague, the land of Egypt was "covered"), what would be the point of this plague. Surely no one would notice more frogs and identify that they were summoned forth by the royal magicians - and, even if that were the case, the same question asked above confronts us - what is the purpose of more agents of destruction and stench? If the wizards were going to help Pharaoh, they should have removed the frogs and reversed the Hebrews' leaders' plague.

Again, as we saw in the blood-narrative, Pharaoh ignores the wizards and their actions play no role in his further discussions with Moses and Aaron. The mystery continues...

D: Lice (8:12-15)

In the final plague of the first plague-cycle, where Aaron is commanded to strike his staff on the ground and bring forth lice, the wizards finally try to act in Egypt's interest - to reverse the plague. They are, however, utterly unsuccessful:

12 And Hashem said unto Moses: 'Say unto Aaron: Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats throughout all the land of Egypt.' 13 And they did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod, and smote the dust of the earth, and there were gnats upon man, and upon beast; all the dust of the earth became gnats throughout all the land of Egypt. 14 **And the magicians did so with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; and there were gnats upon man, and upon beast.** 15 **Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh: 'This is the finger of God'; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as Hashem had spoken.**

The key issue here is the meaning of להוציא - "to bring forth" (The English here is incomprehensible; how does it follow from their inability to bring forth gnats (replicating the plague) that gnats (lice) were everywhere? For better or worse, there is no clear way to translate the phrase) - what were the magicians attempting to do? If they were trying to replicate Aaron's plague - he also "brought forth" lice - then the same question asked above in the blood and frogs narrative rises here: Why were they replicating the destructive plague. If, on the other hand, they were (finally) trying to reverse the plague, then the word כן - and they did "thus" (similarly) is a bit hard to fathom.

In any case, this is the one point at which the magicians speak up - in resignation, admitting that the plague is "the finger of God".

E: Boils (9:8-12)

The final mention of the magicians paints them in their most pathetic hues - as bystanders who cannot even stay in the company of their master when Moses and Aaron generate the boils - and they must flee:

8 And Hashem said unto Moses and unto Aaron: 'Take to you handfuls of soot of the furnace, and let Moses throw it heavenward in the sight of Pharaoh. 9 And it shall become small dust over all the land of Egypt, and shall be a boil breaking forth with blains upon man and upon beast, throughout all the land of Egypt.' 10 And they took soot of the furnace, and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses threw it up heavenward; and it became a boil breaking forth with blains upon man and upon beast. 11 **And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boils were upon the magicians, and upon all the Egyptians.** 12 And Hashem hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them; as Hashem had spoken unto Moses.

Not only were the magicians unable to combat the plague and thereby protect their land and people - they couldn't even protect themselves and ignobly fled.

This - along with the "serpent" - appear to be the only passages which are comprehensible as is - but the key three passages of blood, frogs and lice will require more rigorous - and innovative - reading.

II

## MOSES AND AARON AGAINST THE HISTORY OF EGYPTIAN WIZARDRY

In the introductory paragraph to this chapter, we assayed several examples of interjected texts, woven into narratives in order to clarify the import of a particular phrase or action. I'd like to suggest that employing that interpretive strategy here will be most useful in "unpacking" the role of the wizards in the three core passages.

One salient note about identifying interjections in a narrative; since we are accustomed to reading narratives as sequentially "pure" sans parenthetic statements, it is often a challenge to recognize them. This is ever more the case when the first introduction of a particular narrative component - such as a person or group - stays true to narrative sequencing. It becomes much harder for us to identify an interjection in an adjacent passage involving the same group, as we are accustomed to seeing them as "active players" in our story line.

Indeed, the first mention of the wizards cannot be understood as anything but part and parcel of the narrative sequence - Moses and Aaron enter, do their magic and Pharaoh summons his court magicians to match the interlopers.

However, once we encounter the blood-narrative, we have an entirely different role for the magicians. Moses and Aaron were playing on the Egyptian "field" of magic and black arts (See BT Menahot 85a, where the Midrash compares Moses bringing magic into Egypt to bringing "grain to Ofra'im" - a la "coals to Newcastle"); as such, I'd like to suggest that they began by replicating a plague already induced (in the past) by the royal magicians. In other words, the report of the magicians' turning the water into blood is not in narrative sequence but is a parenthetic mention that this plague had already been performed in Egypt - by their own wizards! (Perhaps this was done at Pharaoh's behest to punish the people, to maintain fear and loyalty etc.) This explains the significance of the mention - Moses and Aaron continue to demonstrate their credentials by replicating a plague with which the Egyptians were familiar. The text may be read as follows:

...And Moses and Aaron did so, as Hashem commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. And the fish that were in the river died; and the river became foul, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the river; and the blood was throughout all the land of Egypt. (*And the magicians of Egypt had, in the past, done in like manner with their secret arts;*) and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not to them; as Hashem had spoken.

Pharaoh did not respond to the magicians because they did nothing here - and his stubbornness was a direct response to Moses and Aaron.

Indeed, using this approach, we can not only solve the mystery of the magicians and their (non-)role in the frogs passage, we can also discern an evolution of power on the part of God's emissaries vis-à-vis Pharaoh's agents.

... And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt. (*And the magicians did in like manner with their secret arts, and brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt.*) Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron...

In the first plague, Moses and Aaron accomplished what the wizards had done in the past; in this case, they outpaced them. Whereas the magicians had brought frogs upon the land, Aaron's hand introduced frogs that "covered the land", besting the wizards at their own dark art.

When we come to the third plague, we have to read carefully - the wizards are both present and in the narrative shadows. Whereas in the past they had introduced lice into Egypt (as evidenced by the use of כֶּךָ), this time, they get into the act (an unavoidable read, as they report to Pharaoh about their inability to solve the plague) and try to "take out" (not "bring forth", but "take out" of Egypt, reversing the plague) and were unable to do so. This was the final blow to their prestige - whereas Moses and Aaron had matched them, then outdone them, now they were utterly flummoxed - the same plague they themselves had induced in Egypt in the past was now before them and they couldn't reduce it, could not help their own country or save their countrymen.

At this point, as they are part of the "real-time" narrative, they speak up and tell Pharaoh that this is "the finger of God" and beyond their ability to control.

The final blow, as noted above, occurs several plague-passages later, when the wizards (who are effectively "out of the action" by now) are standing in Pharaoh's court and must flee - their purported powers shown to be illusory.

We might even post that the first cycle of plagues pits Aaron and his staff (note, Aaron's staff is only used in this cycle) against the magicians and their "magicks"; once they are gone, the theological lessons which are so central to the Exodus narrative move to the next level.

(note: a fuller version of this essay, complete with an appendix which presents the text in the original following this reading, is available in *Between The Lines of the Bible*, volume 2. Inquire at your local Jewish bookstore - or purchase it online)

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