

## Who is Targeted by the Theological Display of the Plagues in Egypt? By Dr. Brachi Elitzur

The theological situation of *Am Yisrael* during their years of slavery in Egypt is hinted at, indirectly, in the reservations that Moshe expresses when God appoints him to his mission:

And Moshe said to God, "Behold, I shall come to *Bnei Yisrael* and I shall tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they shall say to me, 'What is His Name?' What shall I say to them?" (*Shemot* 3:13)

God's response does not negate Moshe's concern; on the contrary, God equips Moshe with a speech about His eternity and His future action on behalf of the nation.

*Parashat Va'era* opens with a description of the speech that Moshe will deliver before *Bnei Yisrael*, setting forth his theological mission:

God spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am the Lord. And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov as God Almighty (*El Sha-dai*), but I did not make My Name, Y-H-V-H, known to them. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, in which they sojourned. And I have also heard the cry of *Bnei Yisrael*, for the Egyptians are enslaving them, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore, say to *Bnei Yisrael*: I am the Lord, and I shall bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I shall deliver you from their bondage, and I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I shall take you unto Me as a nation, and I shall be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God Who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt. And I shall bring you to the land which I have raised My hand to give it to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, and I shall give it to you as a heritage, I am the Lord." (6:2-8)

God is depicted in this speech as having revealed Himself to the ancestors of the listeners and as destined to fulfill His part of the covenant by redeeming the progeny of those ancestors and bringing them to the land promised to them.

The theological vacuum in the people's faith is not surprising in light of the pagan environment in which they had lived throughout the years of sojourning and then servitude in Egypt, and the absence of religious leaders to guide them in monotheistic faith. It seems, then, that while Moshe's mission is indeed to bring *Am Yisrael* out of Egypt, he must first inculcate faith in God as the force acting to free and redeem them.

Moshe delivers God's speech before the nation, and his anxiety with regard to their response turns out to have been well founded:

Moshe spoke thus to *Bnei Yisrael*, but they did not listen to Moshe for anguish of spirit and for hard labor. (6:9)

From this point onwards, up until the splitting of the Red Sea, it seems that the role of target or beneficiary of the theological mission is played by Pharaoh. The *parasha* describes God's miracles in the process of the redemption has being aimed at inculcating in Pharaoh's mind the awareness of One God:

"So says the Lord: by this shall you know that I am the Lord." (7:17)

"In order that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God." (8:6)

"In order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the land." (8:18)

"In order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the land." (9:14)

The same message is echoed and reinforced from the point of view of Pharaoh in the transitions between one plague and the next, as the miracles begin to make their impression:

Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them, as God had spoken. (7:13)

Pharaoh turned and went to his house, and did not set his heart even to this. (7:23)

"This time I have sinned; God is righteous, and I and my people are wicked." (9:27)

The seeming absurdity of the Divine command to ask Pharaoh to liberate the people in the name of a Divine entity is alluded to by Moshe in one of the arguments he uses in his ongoing attempt to evade his mission:

Moshe spoke before God, saying, "Behold, *Bnei Yisrael* have not listened to me; how, then, shall Pharaoh listen to me, as I am of uncircumcised lips?" (*Shemot* 6:12)

The "*kal va-chomer*" argument (from a minor to a major circumstance) invoked by Moshe is expanded on by the Alshikh:

*Bnei Yisrael*, who are believers descended from believers – behold, *Bnei Yisrael* themselves do not listen to me... How then will Pharaoh, who, aside from his considerable opposition to the mission itself, also denies the existence of God? How will this non-believer listen, especially since he has no reason to take notice of this message, seeing that he himself is not suffering from anguish of spirit and hard labor?

What, then, is the purpose of the mission? Is it really Pharaoh and his beliefs that are at center-stage? Is monotheistic faith meant to be accepted by all nations even at this early stage? If so, in what way are *Am Yisrael* different and distinguished, such that they merit the status of a "special nation," *am segula*?

*Am Yisrael*, following the years of harsh slavery in Egypt, is not ready to absorb theological messages, even those relating to the process of their extraction from slavery and

suffering. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch describes this situation in his commentary on *Shemot* 6:9:

The inhumanity of their present state lay so heavily upon them, and to satisfy its demands and get even a momentary respite for themselves so completely took up all their energy, that they had no mind left even to give a thought to the future of which Moshe would speak to them. They were so pressed by the demands made upon them, the work burdened them down so completely, that they had no patience to listen to him quietly.

Moshe must therefore lead the nation in a process of building faith in God. Knowing that talk about God's strength and power will not bring about any real change in their attitude, he must resort to other means in order to achieve the desired result. The means that he chooses to attain the goal is Pharaoh. From the moment of Pharaoh's first encounter with Moshe and Aharon and until his death, he is at the center of the textual description of the events – but it is to the observers that the events and their message are aimed.

Pharaoh's belief in God starts at point zero, where he speaks words of blasphemy openly and shamelessly:

Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him, to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go." (5:2)

Pharaoh's starting point, his stubbornness, and his refusal to view the wonders that are occurring before his very eyes as proof of the existence of a God Who rules over creation, are what make him a perfect model for the building of the nation's faith, layer by layer. God exposes Pharaoh to a lengthy process of gradual acknowledgment of His powers – but it is not Pharaoh's own progress that interests God, but rather the effect of the wonders on the building of faith amongst the nation. Seeing how this stiff-necked ruler who regards himself as a god slowly arrives at the recognition that beyond everything that he believes in there is a real God Who rules over the entire universe and Who can deal with him as He pleases, will strengthen and intensify their belief in the God of Israel as the sole Power upon Whom their redemption depends. An acknowledgment of God by Pharaoh too early would, as it were, hinder the exposure of God's other powers before the people. Therefore, it is specifically when Pharaoh finally begins to display some early sparks of recognition of God that we find unprecedented Divine intervention in the form of the hardening of his heart, serving to block the pace of his process and facilitate the continuation of the process.

God's wonders and miracles in Egypt play out like a theological film, gradually revealing to the audience God's absolute and exclusive control over Creation. The main character who serves to move the plot along is the recalcitrant Pharaoh; his stubbornness and hardness of heart facilitate the continuation of the revelation of God's powers in nature.

The first stage of revelation of God's power comes in the form of the description of Aharon's staff, which becomes a snake that swallows up the staffs of the magicians:

Moshe and Aharon came to Pharaoh, and they did so, as God had commanded, and Aharon cast forth his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a snake. And Pharaoh called to his wise men and magicians, too, and they too – the magicians of Egypt – did so with their secret magic. Each cast forth his staff, and they became snakes, and Aharon's staff swallowed up their staffs. (7:10-12)

Already at the very first stage of revelation, God's superiority over those who are believed to possess supernatural powers is clear. Pharaoh's indifference to this sign – "Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them, as God had spoken" (verse 13) – invites the next step.

The plague of blood represents a new stage in the revelation of God's power. The miracle here does not involve objects belonging to those who bring about the wonder, but rather the most central and most important natural resource of Egypt, regarded as a divine power in its own right – the Nile:<sup>[1]</sup>

So Moshe and Aharon did so, as God had commanded them. He lifted the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood. And the fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile, and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. And the magicians of Egypt did so too, with their secret magic. (7:20-22)

The dead fish were evidence that this was not a magic trick, but rather a real change in the order of nature.<sup>[2]</sup>

The plague of frogs reveals God's power in ruling over space and time. The text describes the frogs reaching even the hidden places in Pharaoh's palace and in the homes of his servants – but amazingly enough, they do not find their way into the land of Goshen:

"If you refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite **all your borders** with frogs. And the Nile will swarm with frogs, and they will rise up and come **into your home, and into your bedroom, and upon your bed, and into the homes of your servants, and among your people, and into your ovens and your kneading troughs.** And the frogs shall come **upon you and upon your people and upon all your servants.**" (7:27-29)

Pharaoh cannot remain indifferent at this sight of this disaster aimed at him, and he asks that the frogs be removed. Moshe taunts him:

"Challenge me as to when I should pray for you and for your servants and for your people, to destroy the frogs from you and from your home, so that they will remain only in the Nile." (8:5)

And Pharaoh, despite his suffering, falls right into Moshe's trap: instead of offering the obvious response – "Take them away immediately, this minute!" – he tests God's control, which has just been manifest, in the realm of time as well. Ibn Ezra comments:

"And he said, 'Tomorrow'" – R. Shmuel ben Chofni said: Would a person usually not ask that the plague simply be removed from him immediately? But Pharaoh thought that it was some heavenly constellation that had brought the frogs upon Egypt, and that Moshe knew it, and Pharaoh thought that now was the time that the frogs were going to disappear naturally anyway; therefore, he tested him, to see if he could make them remain for longer, and he said, "Tomorrow."

Pharaoh's stubbornness allows Moshe to reveal further aspects of God's control of the world to the nation.

In the plague of lice, Pharaoh takes a step backward in his path towards faith, despite the fact that, for the first time, the Egyptian magicians are unable to produce an imitation of the plague, and they arrive at the conclusion that "it is the finger of

God." Ibn Ezra explains that the regression is caused by the lack of warning:

For he thought, "It is not God's hand that has struck us; it is simply a natural disaster brought about by the heavens," and therefore Pharaoh's heart was hardened... For Moshe had warned Pharaoh of the plague upon the Nile before it happened, and likewise concerning the plague of frogs, but he gave no prior warning for the plague of lice.

Pharaoh's regression advances the plot, allowing Moshe to reinforce the principle of God's control over space and time in such a manner that the events can no longer be attributed to coincidence:

"On that day I shall separate the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, **such that no mixed wild things shall be there**, in order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the land. And I shall place a division between My people and your people; **tomorrow** shall this sign come about." (8:18-19)

The plague has its effect, and Pharaoh is ready to accede to the demand that the people go and offer their sacrifice. Unquestionably, this is progress, but Moshe seems to do everything in his power to resist the window of opportunity offered by Pharaoh's newfound flexibility. At first, he argues with him over where the sacrifice will take place, and after Pharaoh agrees to his demands, instead of starting to prepare for the journey, he postpones the removal of the mixed wild things for the next day, offering Pharaoh the opportunity to change his mind – which indeed he does.

The plagues of pestilence and boils intensify all the parameters touched upon until now: control over place, control over time, and a phenomenon that cannot be reproduced even by those who possess supernatural powers:

"And **God shall separate between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt**, and nothing of all that belongs to *Bnei Yisrael* will die. And **God has appointed a set time, saying: Tomorrow, God shall do this thing in the land.**" And God did this thing the next day, and all the cattle of Egypt died, while of the cattle of *Bnei Yisrael*, none died...

And the magicians were unable to stand before Moshe because of the boils, since the boils affected the magicians and all of Egypt. (9:4-6:11)

The text testifies that Pharaoh has now begun to internalize the idea of God's control over place, but he nevertheless hardens his heart:

Pharaoh sent, and behold, of the cattle of Israel, not one had died; but the heart of Pharaoh was hard, and he did not let the people go. (9:7)<sup>[3]</sup>

The ripening of Pharaoh's consciousness of God's power is attested to by the fact that after the plague of boils, we find for the first time that there is active Divine intervention, preventing Pharaoh from acceding to the demand that the nation be released:

And **God hardened Pharaoh's heart**, and he did not listen to them, as God had spoken to Moshe. (12)

The effect of the plagues on Pharaoh's theological world-view leads to an exposition of the complexity of the aims behind the signs:

"For this time I shall send all My plagues upon your heart, and upon your servants and upon your people, in order that you will know that there is none like Me in all the land. For now if I were to stretch out My hand and strike you and your people with pestilence, you would die off from the land. But it is for this purpose that I have placed you where you are – in order that I might show My strength, and in order that My Name be proclaimed throughout the land." (9:14-16)

These verses suggest that the plague of pestilence could have brought the process of preparation for the redemption to an end – had the goal been to annihilate the Egyptians, to bring *Am Yisrael* out from among them, and to demonstrate God's hand to Pharaoh. However, the plagues have another, more important purpose: "In order that My Name be proclaimed throughout the land." Pharaoh, who experiences the plagues first-hand, has already achieved partial recognition, but the audience watching the events needs this process to continue a little longer in order that their faith in the God of Israel will be firmly and unshakably established.

The next plague, hail, serves to introduce another theological lesson – the principle of reward and punishment, which guides Divine Providence. Pharaoh is given the opportunity to save the people and the livestock that are brought indoors, thereby sparing them the devastation of the plague:

"Send now and gather your cattle and all that you have in the field; all men and beasts that are found in the field and are not gathered indoors shall have hail come down on them, and they will die." And those that feared the word of God among the servants of Pharaoh drove their servants and their cattle indoors. And those who did not regard the word of God left their servants and their cattle in the field. (9:19-21)

This has the effect of catalyzing an unprecedented confession on the part of Pharaoh, who finally acknowledges God's rule:

"I have sinned this time; God is righteous while I and my people are wicked." (27)

The Ba'alei ha-Tosafot explain:

"God is righteous" – For this reason, Pharaoh says this specifically after the plague of hail, rather than after the other plagues, because God had said to him, "Send now and gather," and those that were not gathered indoors died. Therefore, Pharaoh said, "God is righteous," for He warned me well, "while I and my people are wicked," because it was out of wickedness that they left their beasts in the field and did not believe in God.

Even this declaration by Pharaoh does not end the process of consciousness-building. Two elements of the process of removing the hail arouse some doubt in Pharaoh's mind as to God's power and lead to a renewed hardening of his heart. The first doubt concerns the discrepancy between the gravity of the threat that preceded the plague and its actual implementation. The warning had spoken of annihilation of all people, animals, and remaining vegetation in the fields, while in fact, there was produce that remained undamaged:

"But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the Lord God. For the flax and the barley

were struck – for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the spelt were not struck, for they were late ripening." (9:30-32)

Chizkuni explains:

"I know that you do not yet fear" – You do not fear Him because the wheat and the spelt were not struck, and you still have food to eat.

The second doubt arises from the discrepancy between Pharaoh's request and Moshe's prayer, on the one hand, and the response to them, on the other:

"Pray to God, that **there will be no more mighty thundering and hail**, and I shall send you out, and you will stay no longer." And Moshe said to him, "As soon as I leave the city, I shall spread my hands to the Lord, and **the thunder will cease and there will be no more hail**, in order that you might know that the earth belongs to God..." And Moshe went out of the city from before Pharaoh, and he spread his hands to God, and the thunder and hail stopped, and **rain no longer poured upon the earth**. And when Pharaoh saw that **the rain** and hail and thunder **had stopped**, he sinned again, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. (9:28-34)

The discrepancies between the threat and its realization and the prayer and its answer give rise to new doubts concerning God's control over the details. These doubts pave the way for the locusts and their theological message. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart once again facilitates the revelation of yet another aspect of Divine power in the form of the plague of locusts, which will dispel his doubts.

The main characteristic of the plague of locusts is its demonstration of God's control over the details, as well as over space and time. The text emphasizes repeatedly in its description of the plague the damage that is done in precisely those areas left untouched by the hail:

"They shall eat the residue that was left to you from the hail." (10:5)

"That they may come up over the land of Egypt, and eat all the plants of the land, all that was left from the hail." (10:12)

"And they ate all the plants of the land and all the fruit of the land which had been left from the hail, and there remained nothing green among the trees or among the plants of the field, throughout the land of Egypt. (10:15)

Similarly, the removal of the plague also emphasizes control over the details:

God turned a very strong west wind, and it took up the locusts, and cast them into the Red Sea; and **not a single locust was left** throughout the borders of Egypt. (10:19)

The messages of the two final plagues are made possible by the Divine intervention that hardens Pharaoh's heart. The plague of darkness amplifies the power of God's control over the laws of nature and the ability to change them in accordance with His will.

The final plague, the death of the firstborn, has a dual purpose. The overt goal is, of course, the punishment due to the Egyptian taskmasters for embittering the lives of *Am Yisrael* for

so many years. The covert goal is a test of the level of the people's faith and the degree to which the theological lessons that accompanied each sign and wonder in Egypt have been absorbed. The details of the command set forth the test of faith:

"The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses where you are, and I shall see the blood and pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you, to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt." (12:13)

The painting of the blood upon the doorposts expresses faith in God's control over time: "No man shall exit the doorway of his house until morning" (22); His control over place: "And when He sees the blood upon the lintel and upon the two doorposts, God will pass over the doorway" (23); and His repayment of every individual in accordance with his acts: "And He shall not allow the destroyer to come into your houses, to smite you" (23).

The results of this test are unequivocal. The nation acts in accordance with God's instructions, but as of yet, there are no voluntary expressions of religious consciousness:

And *Bnei Yisrael* went and did as God had commanded Moshe and Aharon; so they did. (28)

The accumulated effect of all that they have witnessed reaches its powerful climax seven days later, as *Bnei Yisrael* watch the Egyptians drowning in the sea:

On that day God delivered Israel from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt dead upon the sea shore. And Israel saw the great hand with which God had acted upon Egypt, and the nation feared God, and they believed in God, and in Moshe, His servant. (14:30-31)

In summary, the gradual process of Pharaoh's acknowledgement of the God of Israel, which seems to be the main goal of God's signs and wonders in Egypt, is nothing more than tangible symbolic representation of a parallel process – the process undergone by the spectators who observe the slowly softened stubbornness among Pharaoh's magicians and servants, which is eventually broken even in Pharaoh himself. The sight of the disasters striking the land that is home to the most highly developed civilization in the world and the gradual collapse of its all-powerful ruler, in the face of signs and wonders performed by someone who presents himself as God's emissary to free the slaves, is intended to awaken sparks of recognition of the veracity of Moshe's mission, bringing news of imminent redemption. The numerous stages of warning of impending plagues, their execution, and the negotiations over their removal are necessary for the gradual building and consolidation of the nation's faith in such a way as to dispel all doubts as to Divine Providence and its power. The greatness of God's control is eventually established, firmly and unshakably, in the hearts of the people.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>[1]</sup> The prevailing belief in the divinity of the Nile may be deduced from Pharaoh's words as quoted in *Yechezkel* 29:3: "Speak and say: So says the Lord God: Behold, I am upon you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great serpent who crouches within his Nile, who has said, 'My

Nile is mine; I made it." See also the Midrash Tanchuma, *Va'era* 13: "Go to Pharaoh in the morning, behold he goes out to the water... So says God: 'By this you will know that I am the Lord – behold, I strike with the staff that is in my hand upon the water that is in the Nile, and it will turn to blood.' Why was the water struck first, turning into blood? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile. God therefore said, 'First strike his god before him, and then he himself.'"

<sup>[2]</sup> This explains the emphasis at the end of the verse on the fact that the magicians acted "with their secret magic" – an action fundamentally different from that of Aharon, whose genuine nature was proven by the death of the fish.

<sup>[3]</sup> Chizkuni explains this hardening of the heart after he has already achieved realization: "His heart was hard" – Here there was no room to request healing, for whatever had died was dead, and whatever was still alive was alive." In other words, the plague had its desired effect in terms of Pharaoh's consciousness, but since its effects were irreversible in any case, he had no incentive to promise that he would release the nation to go and offer their sacrifice.

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