YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**PARASHAT VAERA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

*Detzakh, Adash, Be’achav*

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“With a strong hand” — [this indicates] two [plagues]; “and with an outstretched arm” — two; “and with great terror” — two; “and with signs” — two; “and with wonders” — two. These are the ten plagues that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt.

Rabbi Yehuda created a mnemonic for them: “*Detzakh, Adash, Be’achav*.” (Midrash Tanna’im, *Devarim* 26:8)

What is the meaning of Rabbi Yehuda’s mnemonic, beyond the fact that it is an acronym, comprising the first letter of each of the plagues?[[1]](#footnote-1) A number of commentators indicate that we should set aside the final letter, representing the Plague of the Firstborn, and focus on the three sets of three this leaves us: *Detzakh, Adash, Be’ach.*

The Marahal, in his *Gevurot Hashem*, divides the plagues into three groups: the first three are manifest at ground level; the next three are at the height of a person’s arm, and the last three (prior to the Plague of the Firstborn) are in the sky. He notes further that the first three are performed by Aharon with his staff; the last three by Moshe, and the middle three are unspecified in this regard.

Abravanel offers a different categorization. He points out that there are characteristics that are common to the first plague of each group of three, the second of each three, and the third. For the first plague of each group (blood, *arov*, hail) a warning is issued to Pharaoh in the morning, on the banks of the Nile. The warning for the middle plague of each group of three (frogs, pestilence, locusts) is given, but the text makes no mention of its timing or location. The last plague of each group of three comes with no prior warning. Thus, each group consists of one plague that is preceded by a warning in the morning on the banks of the Nile, a second plague that comes with some general warning, and a third that has no warning.

We shall pursue this categorization further, and show that there is religious significance to the time and place of the warning. The morning, in Egypt, represents the manifestation of the sun-god, Amun-Ra, the chief deity in the Egyptian pantheon. The Nile is the manifestation of the crocodile, the Egyptian god of evil. Pharaoh himself was a god, and the encounter of all three — the sun, the crocodile and Pharaoh — takes place in the morning on the banks of the Nile. We may therefore assume that a warning issued in these circumstances would carry a religious message. We may further assume that this “religious” warning, uttered prior to the first plague of each group, is relevant to the series of all three plagues that follows — either *Detzakh* or *Adash* or *Be’ach*. Let us examine this assumption in more detail.

1. *Detzakh*

Prior to the plague of blood, we read:

“Go to Pharaoh in the morning: behold, he goes out to the water, and you shall stand by the river’s bank to meet him, and the staff which was turned into a snake shall you take in your hand. And you shall say to him, ‘The Lord God of the Hebrews has sent me to you, saying, “Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness; and behold, until now you would not hear.” Thus says the Lord: “By this shall you know that I am the Lord: behold, I will smite with the staff that is in my hand upon the water in the river, and it shall be turned to blood.”’” (*Shemot* 7:15-17)

The purpose of the warning in the morning on the bank of the river is in fact to teach Pharaoh faith — “By this shall you know that I am the Lord” — in keeping with our hypothesis above that the warning has “religious” content. The plague and its warning come as a response to Pharaoh’s words, “I do not know the Lord” (*Shemot* 5:2). But how does a plague of blood, rather than any other plague, testify to God’s existence?

As mentioned, we shall test the assumption that this warning is meant as a prelude to all of the first three plagues (*Detzakh*) and that its religious character indicates that the purpose of these plagues is to inculcate faith in God. What is common to all of the first three plagues is that in these instances (and not in any other plagues) the magicians try to imitate the plagues brought by God:

Blood: “And the Egyptian magicians did so with their secret arts, and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.” (*Shemot* 7:22)

Frogs: “And the magicians did so with their secret arts, and they brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt.” (*Shemot* 8:3)

Lice: “And the magicians did so with their secret arts, to bring forth lice, but they could not…” (*Shemot* 8:14)

The magicians are inactive during the rest of the plagues. They appear just once more, in the plague of boils, where the text records that they were unable to stand before Pharaoh, but even here the text makes no mention of any positive action on their part or any effort to imitate God’s plague.

Pharaoh’s estimation of Moshe and Aharon in the wake of the plague of blood seems to be low, even scornful. The magicians have done just as Aharon did. Since Pharaoh is not impressed by the plague of blood, he makes no request for it to be removed, and the magicians are left sharing the same status as Moshe and Aharon. The plague of frogs brings some progress: while the magicians, too, manage to bring frogs, they — unlike Moshe — are unable to remove them. Therefore Pharaoh calls upon Moshe to help, and Moshe is justifiably triumphant:

Then Pharaoh called to Moshe and to Aharon and said, “Entreat the Lord, that He may take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go, that they may make sacrifice to the Lord.”

And Moshe said to Pharaoh, “Challenge me (*hitpa’er alai*) to fix a time when I should entreat for you… that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God.” (*Shemot* 8:4-6)

The plague of lice brings Pharaoh’s awareness of the difference between God’s power and that of the magicians to a new level. The magicians are unable to create lice *ex nihilo* — or, in the language of the Torah, “to bring forth lice” (*Shemot* 8:14). They themselves acknowledge that “this is the finger of God.”

These three stages in the magicians’ grappling with the plagues and the ability to remove them, teach Pharaoh the meaning of “for I am the Lord.”

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The text makes no mention of the time or place of the warning concerning the second plague, frogs:

And the Lord said to Moshe: “Come to Pharaoh, and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: “Let My people go, that they may serve Me. And if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all your borders with frogs.”’” (*Shemot* 7:26-27)

This warning is not meant as a profound lesson in faith, but rather as a practical warning presented in the form of an either/ or “deal.” The difference between the warning prior to the blood and the warning prior to the frogs might be compared to the relationship between the first section of *Shema* (*Devarim* 6:4-9) and the second section (*Devarim* 11:13-21). The first section of *Shema* deals with knowledge of God and His Presence, and the acceptance of the yoke of His sovereignty. There is no “condition” or “deal” here, nor any mention of reward for fulfillment of the commandments. On the contrary, we learn, “‘You shall love the Lord your God… with all your soul’ — even if He takes your soul… ‘and with all your might’ — meaning, with whatever He metes out to you, you should offer effusive thanks.” (*Berakhot* 9:5). The second section of *Shema*, by contrast, offers a sort of “transaction” between us and God: if we obey Him, He will bring rain in its time and bless our produce and fruit. If, heaven forfend, we do not obey Him, He will stop the heavens from giving rain and the earth from giving its produce, and we will be lost from the land. Likewise, in the plague of frogs, if Pharaoh obeys God’s command to free the Israelites, he will not be harmed. If he refuses to let them go, he will be struck with a plague of frogs. Just as the two sections of the *Shema* complement one another, so the two warnings work in tandem.

1. *Adash*

Prior to the plague of *arov* (understood by the commentators as either a mixture of wild beasts or swarms of gnats), we read:

And the Lord said to Moshe: “Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh — behold, he comes forth to the water, and say to him: ‘Thus says the Lord, “Let My people go, that they may serve me. Else, if you will not let my people go, behold I will send *arov* upon you and upon your servants, and upon your people, and into your houses, and the houses of Egypt shall be full of *arov*, and also the ground upon which they are. And I will separate on that day the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, that no *arov* shall be there, in order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth. And I will put a division between My people and your people; tomorrow this sign shall come to pass.”’” (*Shemot* 8:16-19)

The warning comes in the morning, at the river, and it carries a lesson in faith: “In order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth” (*Shemot* 8:18). This is a different lesson from the previous one, introducing the concept of God’s Presence “in the midst of the earth.” This Presence finds expression in the division that will be manifest between the Jewish people and the Egyptians, with the former being spared the plague. This lesson in faith continues with the plague of pestilence, which follows after the *arov*. Here, too, emphasis is placed on the distinction between Egypt and the Jewish people, which the Torah notes no less than three times:

“And the Lord shall separate the cattle of Israel from the cattle of Egypt, and nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites…”

And the Lord did this thing on the morrow, and all the cattle of Egypt died, but of the cattle of the Israelites not one died. And Pharaoh sent, and behold, there was not one of the cattle of Israel dead. (*Shemot* 9:4-7)

The content of the warning concerning the third plague in the series is not stated in the text, and therefore we can only surmise — based on the general structure of the plagues — that it also concerns the separation and distinction between Egypt and Israel. This is more than simply a geographical separation between Goshen and the Egyptian cities; it is a distinction that applies down to the level of each and every individual, regardless of his location.

Once again, the warning before the plague of pestilence is presented as a sort of transaction.

1. *Be’ach*

The plague of hail is preceded by the following warning:

And the Lord said to Moshe: “Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh, and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord God of the Hebrews: “Let My people go, that they may serve Me. For I will at this time send all My plagues upon your heart, and upon your servants, and upon your people, that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth…

“Behold, tomorrow, about this time, I will cause it to rain a very grievous hail, such as has not been in Egypt since its foundation until now…”’”

So there was hail, and fire flaring up amidst the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. (*Shemot* 9:13-24)

In the warning prior to this plague, there is mention of the morning, but no mention of the river; still, we may propose that the context suggests it. The third lesson in faith concerns a new subject: “In order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth.” This lesson deals with God’s power, which is quite unlike that of any of the gods of Egypt. Hence the repeated emphasis on the hail being unlike anything that Egypt had ever experienced. Similarly, in anticipation of the plague of locusts, we read:

“For if you refuse to let My people, go, behold, tomorrow I will bring the locusts into your border, and they shall cover the face of the earth, so that it will not be possible to see the earth, and they shall eat the residue of that which is escaped, which remains to you from the hail, and shall eat every tree which grows for you out of the field, and they shall fill your houses, and the houses of all your servants, and the houses of all Egypt, which neither your fathers, nor your father’s fathers have seen, since the day that they were upon the earth to this day.” And he turned and went out from Pharaoh…

And the locusts went upon over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the borders of Egypt; very grievous they were; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall there be such.” (*Shemot* 10:4-6, 14)

Here again we see an emphasis on an intensity unlike anything ever experienced. We may assume that when it comes to the plague of darkness, too, although it is not stated explicitly, the plague is meant to illustrate God’s power. Once again, the second plague of this series, locusts, comes with a warning that carries a conditional either/ or.

1. Death of the firstborn

Logic dictates that we view the death of the firstborn not only as a decisive blow to the Egyptians, but also as a climax and conclusion of all the preceding plagues:

And Moshe said, “So says the Lord: ‘About midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt, and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sits on his throne, to the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. But against the Israelites not a dog shall move its tongue, neither against man or beast, that you may know that the Lord differentiates between Egypt and between Israel.” (*Shemot* 11:4-7)

The very fact of God’s Presence in the plague — “I will go out into the midst of Egypt” — may complement the lesson in faith conveyed by the plagues of *Detzakh*, whose message is, “I am the Lord.” The statement, “in order that you may know that the Lord differentiates between Egypt and between Israel” complements the lesson in faith that is conveyed by the second group, *Adash,* which illustrates God’s differentiation of the Israelites from the Egyptians. The description of the uniqueness of this plague — “such as there was none like, it, nor shall be like it any more” — complements the lesson in faith conveyed by the third group, *Be’ach*: the power of the Holy One, blessed be He, is unlike anything known to us in the natural world.

1. From *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (Version II, 36) it would indeed seem that it is meant simply as a memory aid. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)