YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Shemot**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Different Ways to Divide the Plagues**

Translated by David Strauss

### Five and Five

The ten plagues can be divided into two sets of five plagues each, in the same way that the *midrash* divided the Ten Commandments on the two *luchot* into two equal groups. Accordingly, the division is as follows:

1) Blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, and **pestilence;**

2) Boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the plague of the **firstborn.**

Indeed, we find a similar division in the Pesach Haggada, which compares the plague of the firstborn to pestilence:

"With a mighty hand" (*Devarim* 21:8) – This is pestilence, as it is stated: "Behold, the hand of the Lord is upon your cattle which are in the field" (*Shemot* 9:3)…

"And with an outstretched arm" (*Devarim* 26:8) – This is the sword [the plague of the firstborns], as it is stated: "With a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem" (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 21:16)

Beyond the numerical equality of five and five, what is the nature of this division, which places pestilence, the last of the first five plagues, in the center of the plagues, paralleling the plague of the firstborn?

We find an allusion to this division in the verses themselves:

Surely now I had put forth My hand and smitten you and your people **with pestilence,** and you had been cut off from the earth. But in very deed for this cause have I made you to stand, to show you My power and that My name may be declared throughout all the earth. (*Shemot* 9:15-16)

The implication is that the plague of pestilence could already have brought Egypt to its knees. Instead, God decreed five additional plagues, the purpose of which was not to persuade Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go, but rather to make known the name and the power of God.

This division accords well with the following *midrash*:

"For I have hardened his heart" (*Shemot* 10:1). R. Yochanan said: Does this not provide heretics with ground for arguing that he had no means of repenting, since it says: "For I have hardened his heart"? R. Shimon ben Lakish replied: Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up… When God warns a man once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then does God close his heart against repentance, so that He should exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since God sent five times to him and he took no notice, God then said: You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart; I will thus add to your uncleanness. (*Midrash Rabba, Bo* 13)

Indeed, the verses distinguish between the first five plagues and the last five plagues regarding the matter of who hardened the heart of Pharaoh. Regarding the first five plagues, we read:

*Blood*: 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 the Lord had spoken. And Pharaoh turned and went into his house; neither did he lay even this to heart. (*Shemot* 7:22-23)

*Frogs*: But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, **he hardened his heart** and hearkened not to them, as the Lord had spoken. (*Shemot* 8:11)

*Lice*: Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God”; **and Pharaoh's heart was hardened**, and he hearkened not to them, as the Lord had spoken. (*Shemot* 8:15)

*Wild animals*: **And Pharaoh hardened his heart** this time also, and he did not let the people go. (*Shemot* 8:28)

*Pestilence*: And Pharaoh sent, and, behold, there was not so much as one of the cattle of the Israelites dead. **But the heart of Pharaoh was stubborn,** and he did not let the people go. (*Shemot* 9:7)

In contrast, regarding the last plagues (except for the plague of the firstborn, of course), we read:

*Boils*: **And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh,** and he hearkened not to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moshe. (*Shemot* 9:12)

*Hail*: And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he did not let the children of Israel go, as the Lord had spoken by Moshe. And the Lord said to Moshe, “Go in to Pharaoh; **for I have hardened his heart** and the heart of his servants, that I might show these My signs in the midst of them.” (*Shemot* 9:35-10:1)

*Locusts*: **But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart,** and he did not let the children of Israel go. (*Shemot* 10:20)

*Darkness*: **But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart,** and he would not let them go. (*Shemot* 10:27)

From here it follows, in accordance with the view of Resh Lakish, that God hardened Pharaoh's heart primarily in the last plagues.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is possible that the division of the plagues into two sets of five is alluded to in Moshe's first words to Pharaoh. God tells Moshe how to warn Pharaoh before the plagues begin:

And you shall say to Pharaoh: “Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn. And I have said to you: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn.” (*Shemot* 4:22-23)

But Moshe and Aharon expand upon this. They say to Pharaoh:

“Let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our God; lest He fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.” (*Shemot* 4:3)

According to Rashi, the words "lest He fall upon **us**" really mean "lest He fall upon **you**." Based on this, the plague of the firstborn, which God alludes to even before the plagues begin, divides into two plagues: pestilence and the sword. As indicated by the *midrash* cited earlier regarding the expressions "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm," there were two decisive plagues, and not one – pestilenceand the sword, which is the plague of the firstborns. As noted above, it stands to reason that the decisive plagues closed a series of plagues. Thus, the ten plagues should be divided into two series of five plagues each.

These two plagues appear together in the context of the disastrous count taken by King David. God offers King David a choice of punishment, and King David chooses pestilence:

Or else three days the sword of the Lord, even pestilence in the land, and the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the borders of Israel… So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel, and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men… And David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between the earth and the heaven, with a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 21:12-16)

In this case, pestilence itself is symbolized by God's sword, whereas in the plagues of Egypt, they are two corresponding plagues – the fifth and the tenth. It follows from this that there was a clear revelation of God not only in the plague of the firstborn, but also in the plague of pestilence. It stands to reason that in the plagues of Egypt as well, the plague of pestilence was executed not by way of an agent, but by God Himself, as was the case with the plague of the firstborn. Indeed, with regard to this plague, special emphasis is placed on God's involvement:

**And the Lord appointed** a set time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord shall do this thing in the land.” **And the Lord did** that thing on the morrow. (*Shemot* 9:5-6)

The plague of pestilence was unique in its force – in the mass and immediate death that it caused. But among the plagues of Egypt, it was unique also in its mercy and compassion, as reflected in the fact that humans were not afflicted by it in the wake of the death of the animals:

Surely now I had put forth My hand **and smitten you and your people with pestilence,** and you have been cut off from the earth. But in very deed for this cause have I made you to stand, to show you My power, and that My name may be declared throughout all the earth. (*Shemot* 9:15-16)

### Seven and Three

It also possible that the verses dictate a division of the plagues into a set of the first seven plagues – the last in the set being hail – and the last three plagues: locusts, darkness, and the plague of the firstborn.

In the plague of hail, we find force the likes of which we would expect to find in the final plague:

**For I will this time send all My plagues upon your person,** and upon your servants, and upon your people, that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth. (*Shemot* 9:14)

Rashi: "All My plagues – We learn from here that **the plague of the firstborn** was equal in weight to all the other plagues.

Rashi's remark is puzzling, as this verse refers to the plague of hail, and not the plague of the firstborns. It is possible that he is referring to the plague that afflicted the first ripe fruits, which was the plague of hail, about which it is stated:

And the flax and the barley were smitten, for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bloom. But the wheat and the spelt **were not smitten, for they ripen late.** (*Shemot* 9:31-32)

The Torah emphasizes that only the ripened produce (the flax and the barley) was smitten, whereas the young produce (the wheat and the spelt) survived the plague of the hail. In this sense, the plague of hail was similar to the plague of the firstborn. Indeed, when Pharaoh capitulates in response to this plague, his reaction was different than his response to all the other plagues:

And Pharaoh sent and called for Moshe and Aharon, and he said to them, “**I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.**” (*Shemot* 9:27)

It is reasonable to assume that Pharaoh's response, which attests to a "religious" awakening on his part, is connected to what happened in the plague itself. During the plague of hail, "mighty thunderings" (*Shemot* 9:28) were heard, similar to what happened at the revelation at Mount Sinai. In the context of both, "thunder" is mentioned five times. Thus, we find regarding the hail:

And the Lord sent **thunder** and hail. (*Shemot* 9:23)

“Entreat the Lord, and let there be enough of these mighty **thunderings** and hail.” (*Shemot* 9:28)

“I will spread forth my hands to the Lord; the **thunders** shall cease, neither shall there be any more hail.” (*Shemot* 9:29)

And Moshe went out of the city from Pharaoh and spread forth his hands to the Lord; and the **thunders** and hail ceased. (*Shemot* 9:33)

And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the **thunders** were ceased… (*Shemot* 9:34)

It seems that it would have been possible to end the plagues in Egypt with the plague of hail and with Pharaoh's statement that "the Lord is righteous." Indeed, Pharaoh's advisors broke after the plague of hail, begging Pharaoh to free the people of Israel even before the arrival of the plague of locusts:

And Pharaoh's servants said to him, “How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God; know you not yet that Egypt is destroyed?” (*Shemot* 10:7)

In the last three plagues, Pharaoh stands alone from among all of his people and advisors to contend with God face to face.

The uniqueness of the last three plagues is reflected in the introduction to them, which appears at the beginning of *Parashat Bo.* In this introduction, we hear about the story to be told to future generations:

And that you may tell in the ears of your son and of your son's son what I have wrought upon Egypt and My signs which I have done among them; **that you may know that I am the Lord**. (*Shemot* 10:2)

For this reason, they may also serve as an introduction to the great deliverance that took place at the Yam Suf, which all the peoples saw and which led for the first time to the proclamation: "**The Lord shall reign forever and ever**" (*Shemot* 15:28)

This correspondence is evident in the plagues in this series. It seems that the plague of locusts serves as an introduction to the splitting of the sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's army:

And Moshe stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an **east wind** upon the land all that day and all the night; and when it was morning, the **east wind** brought the locusts. (*Shemot* 10:13)

This is clearly parallel to the splitting of the Yam Suf:

And Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by **a strong east wind** all the night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. (*Shemot* 14:21)

The parallelism is evident also from the end of the plague of locusts and the end of the splitting of the sea. The plague of locusts ends with the wind changing direction and drowning the locusts in the Yam Suf, as was the fate of the Egyptian army. Regarding the removal of the plague of locusts, we read:

And the Lord turned an exceeding strong west wind, which took up the locusts and drove them into the Sea of Suf. (*Shemot* 10:19)

And regarding the return of the Yam Suf, we read:

And Moshe stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled against it; and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. (*Shemot* 14:27)

The similarity to the splitting of the Sea of Suf is evident also in the plague of darkness:

And Moshe stretched forth his hand toward heaven; **and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt** three days… **But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.** (*Shemot* 10:22-23)

Regarding the splitting of the Yam Suf, we read:

And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; **and there was the cloud and the darkness here, yet gave it light by night there; and the one came not near the other all the night.** (*Shemot* 14:20)

As the Ramban explains, the cloud was on the Egyptian side, and it darkened the way for them, whereas the pillar of fire was on the side of Israel, illuminating the way for them.

The drowning of the Egyptian army in the Yam Suf also seems to parallel the plague of the firstborn. We may suggest that the ten-fold appearance of the word “*rekhev* ("chariot," including *markevotav*) in chapter 14 (which describes the splitting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptians) and its similarity to the word *bekhor* ("firstborn") alludes to the parallel to the plague of the firstborn.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The last three plagues – locusts, darkness, and the plague of the firstborn – return in the appearance of the “great day of God” in the book of *Yoel*:

Tell you your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation. That which the palmer-worm has left has the **locust** eaten; and that which the locust has left hath the canker-worm eaten; and that which the canker-worm has left has the caterpillar eaten. (*Yoel* 1:3-4)

Immediately afterwards, there arrives in his days a plague of darkness:

**A day of darkness and gloominess,** a day of clouds and thick darkness, as blackness spread upon the mountains… (*Yoel* 2:2)

**The sun and the moon are become black,** and the stars withdraw their shining. (*Yoel* 2:10)

These two plagues strike Israel for their sins. But in this chapter, the prophet Yoel leads the people of Israel to a great act of repentance, in the wake of which the hand of God retracts; the plagues of darkness and smiting of the firstborn afflict the enemies of Israel, while God judges the enemies of Israel in the valley of Yehoshafat (*Yoel*,chapter 4). An entire series of plagues was supposed to afflict Israel, but in the course of the plague of darkness Israel repented, and the plague of darkness and the continuation of the series of plagues struck Israel's enemies instead.

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What is special about these plagues?

The plague of the firstborn struck the elite of Egypt, the pedigreed layer, which was apparently the ideological and practical foundation of the regime of slavery in Egypt.

Together with it came the plague of darkness, which was a sort of plague of the firstborn directed at the host of heaven – at the Egyptian sun god, Amon-Ra, who was the chief god in Egypt's idol worship.

Regarding such a pair of plagues, a strike at the social elite and the heavenly elite, the prophet Yeshayahu writes:

And it shall come to pass in that day that **the Lord will punish the host of the high heaven on high and the kings of the earth upon the earth.** (*Yeshayahu* 24:21)

Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign in mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before His elders shall be Glory. (*Yeshayahu* 24:23)

Together with the plagues of darkness and the firstborn, which are clear ideological plagues with a message for the next generation, there was also the plague of locusts – a plague that connects the first seven plagues to the last plagues. It points to the fact that all of the plagues have a common source.

What is unique about the plague of locusts is that it had two objectives, rather than a single objective like all the other plagues:

“Behold, tomorrow will I bring locusts into your border. And they shall cover the face of the earth, **that one shall not be able 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.” (*Shemot* 10:4-5)

For they covered the face of the whole earth, **so that the land was darkened;** and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees **which the hail had left;** and there remained not any green thing, either tree or herb of the field, through all the land of Egypt. (*Shemot* 10:15)

The two objectives were to continue the plague of hail, by destroying the produce that had survived the hail, and to precede the plague of darkness, with locusts that cover the entire earth.

1. Elsewhere, we have discussed the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There may be another allusion to the word *bekhor* in the phrase"chosen chariots" (*rekhev bachur*) (*Shemot* 14:7). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)