YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

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Dedicated in memory of Miriam Heller z"l
whose yahrzeit falls on the seventh of Shvat,
by her niece, Vivian Singer.

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In memory of Irit bat Yitele z”l
whose yahrtzeit is 6 Shevat
By Family Rueff

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**PARASHAT BO**

**The Ten Plagues**

**Introduction – What was the Purpose of the Plagues?**

On the face of it, the purpose of the ten plagues, which come to an end in our *parasha*, was to take the people of Israel out of Egypt. It is clear, however, that they did not just have a practical purpose, but were an attempt to convey a deeper message. This is already implied from the first time we are told about the exile in Egypt and the deliverance from it, at the *brit bein ha-betarim* (covenant between the pieces):

And also that nation, whom they shall serve, I will judge. (*Bereishit* 15:14)

This verse from the *brit bein ha-betarim* implies that the purpose of the plagues was to take revenge against Egypt for their heinous treatment of Israel. In this *shiur*,we will explore two other approaches, each of which sees the ten plagues as conveying a more direct spiritual message than mere punishment or revenge on Egypt.

**I. "And Egypt will know that I am the Lord" – The Plagues as a Message to the Egyptians**

In preparation for the plagues that appear in our *parasha*, God explains to Moshe the purpose of the coming plagues:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Come to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, **in order to show these My signs in their midst**. (*Shemot* 10:1)

God prepares Moshe for Pharaoh's hard-heartedness and also explains its purpose: to display miracles in Egypt. The simple understanding of this verse implies that Egypt is the addressee of these signs.

This also emerges from what was stated earlier, in *Parashat Va’era*,when God gave Moshe a sort of introduction to the ten plagues as a whole:

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt… **And Egypt will know** that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth My hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them. (*Shemot* 7:3-6)

The purpose of the plagues, according to this understanding, is the revelation of the *Shekhina* to the Egyptians. There are several reasons the Egyptians would need a "reminder" that God is King over the entire earth and that He governs the world. In *Parashat Shemot*,Pharaoh states explicitly that he does not know the God of Israel:

And Pharaoh said: Who is the Lord, that I should hearken to His voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go. (*Shemot* 5:2)

As the plagues progress, the Torah testifies several times that indeed, the plagues cause the Egyptians to recognize the power and greatness of God. Thus, in the plague of the frogs (as well as in many other plagues), Pharaoh turns to Moshe as God's messenger with a request to remove the plague:

Then Pharaoh called for Moshe and Aharon, and said: Entreat the Lord, that He take away the frogs from me, and from my people. (*Shemot* 8:4)

Appealing to God presumes recognition of His power, greatness, and rule over the world. This is clearly stated by the Egyptian magicians at the time of the plague of lice:

Then the magicians said to Pharaoh: This is the finger of God. (*Shemot* 8:15)

Before the plague of hail, Moshe is also commanded to say explicitly to Pharaoh:

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

And at the end, in the midst of the splitting of the Sea of Suf, the Egyptians cry out:

And the Egyptians said: Let us flee from the face of Israel; for the Lord fights for them against Egypt. (*Shemot* 14:25)

This concept also appears in the words of the prophet Yechezkel, along with a portrayal Pharaoh’s view of himself as his own creator and as creator of the world:

Speak and say: Thus says the Lord God: behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the in the midst of his rivers, that has said: My river is my own, and I have made it for myself. And I will put hooks in your jaws, and I will cause the fish of your rivers to stick to your scales… And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord, because they have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel. (*Yechezkel* 29:3-7)

The same idea is highlighted in various *midrashim*:

“And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord.” Instead of what he said: “Who is the Lord?” they will know that I am the Lord. (*Pesikta Zutarta* 7, 5)

And from where do we know that God only brought calamity and the ten plagues upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt in order to sanctify the great name of God in the world? For from the beginning of the story, he said: “Who is the Lord that I should listen to His voice?” (*Shemot* 5:20). And at the end of the story, he said: “The Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked” (*Shemot* 9:27). (*Sifrei*, *Devarim* 306)

According to this understanding, which emerges from a plain reading of the Biblical text, the purpose of the ten plagues was to reveal the *Shekhina* to the Egyptians, especially Pharaoh.

**II. Egypt’s Lessons in Faith**

Some took this understanding, that the ten plagues are essentially lessons in faith for Pharaoh, further. Thus the *Keli Yakar* writes, citing the Abravanel, and explains the changes in wording among the plagues regarding which this purpose is stated:

“Thus says the Lord: **With this you shall know** that I am the Lord” (*Shemot* 7:17) – this wording is found in the first plague of the *detzach* [*dam-tzefarde’a-kinim* = blood, frogs, lice] series.

And similarly in the first plague of the *adash* [*arov-dever-shechin* = wild animals-plague-boils]series, it is stated: “**So that you will know** that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth” (*Shemot* 8:18).

And similarly in the first plague of the *be’achav* [*barad-arbeh-choshekh*-*bekhorot* = hail-locusts-darkness-smiting of the firstborns)series, it is stated: “**In order that you will know** that there is none like Me in all the earth" (*Shemot* 9:14).

The Abravanel also noted this point, and he explained that Pharaoh disputed three things:

First, the existence of God, for he denied God and said that He does not exist and “I know not the Lord” (*Shemot* 5:2). Therefore, it is stated regarding the first plague, “With this you shall know that *I am the Lord*.”

The second, that he disputed, saying that even if you say there is a God, nevertheless, He does not watch over the beings of the lower world. Therefore, it is stated: “That I am the Lord *in the midst of the earth*.”

The third, that he disputed God’s ability, saying that He cannot change nature at all. Therefore, it is stated: “That *there is none like Me* in all the earth.” That is to say, that He can do as He pleases. (*Keli Yakar*, *Shemot* 7:17)

The Abravanel here presents three principles of faith that are learned from the plagues: the existence of God, God’s providence, and His power to change nature. The *Keli Yakar* adds to the words of the Abravanel and explains how each series of plagues corresponds to the lesson of faith that it comes to convey:

And I say to add an explanation to his words, to put each set of three plagues under one category…

For the first three plagues come to verify God’s *existence*…

And in the *adash* series there is an allusion that He *watches* over the lower world regarding all the details of individuals…

Regarding the *be’achav* series, the Abravanel explained that they came to verify God’s *ability*. In my opinion, Pharaoh claimed that there are two domains. Therefore, it is stated regarding the first plague in the *be’achav* series: “That there is none like Me in all the earth,” that is to say, there is no other domain beside Him – implying that Pharaoh had claimed there was another God. (Ibid.)

**III. “A Sign Between You and Me” – The Plagues as a Message to Israel**

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, on the other hand, understands the ten plagues as directed specifically towards the people of Israel. The introduction to the plagues in our *parasha* continues:

**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)

In contrast to the previous verse (cited above), which directs the lessons of the ten plagues toward Egypt, here the signs are intended to have a spiritual effect on the people of Israel. The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains:

This can be understood based on what *Chazal* said (*Shemot Rabba* 12) that the plagues in Egypt attest to the fact that God is the Ruler and the Master. Because the Master desired to bring Israel closer to serve Him and to cleave to Him, He wanted to teach them that it was foolish to put one's trust in anyone but Him…

The meaning of the verse is that God declared that the purpose of bringing the signs “in their [Egypt’s] midst” was not to take revenge on **Pharaoh**, but rather to strengthen the signs, which are the main source of faith, in the hearts of **Israel**, so that they would leave an unforgettable impression forever, for when they are [performed] in the midst of Pharaoh [and Egypt], they will be remembered by the people of Israel for all time. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 10:2)

The understanding that the plagues were intended for Israel can shed light on two fundamental points that were raised by leading authorities.

1. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart

The Rambam in *Shemoneh Perakim* (chapter 8; and so too in *Hilkhot Teshuva*, chapter 6) asks the famous question: Why was Pharaoh punished, when the Torah states explicitly that it was God who hardened his heart? This question was discussed already in the following *midrash*:

Another interpretation: "As I have hardened his heart" – Rabbi Yochanan said: From here there is an opening for the heretics to say that he had no [opportunity] to repent, as it is stated: "As I have hardened his heart." Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said to him: Let the mouths of the heretics be sealed; rather, "to the scorners He scorns" (*Mishlei* 3:34). The Holy One, blessed be He, forewarns a person the first time, the second, and the third, and if he does not relent, He locks his heart from repentance in order to exact retribution for his sins. (*Shemot Rabba* 13:3)

Rabbi Yochanan, unlike Reish Lakish, understood there to be a real problem here, providing an opening for heretics. Many suggestions have been offered to answer this question, but following the perspective and reading of the verses offered here by the *Or Ha-Chaim*, we can put forward another answer: *God hardened Pharaoh's heart because Pharaoh here was merely part of a Divine process intended for the people of Israel*. The plagues are not a punishment for Pharaoh for hardening his heart, but a way to teach the principles of faith that the people of Israel need as they become the people of God:

For this reason, when God encountered this evil Pharaoh, He hardened his heart "in order to show these My signs," performing signs and wonders which would make him taste the cup of retribution for his wickedness. Had it not been for these various considerations, God would not have orchestrated all these major changes in nature. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 10:10)

2. Why did we go down to Egypt?

Another question relates to the *brit bein ha-betarim*, mentioned above. Already at the beginning of God's revelation to Avraham, the first Jew, He informs him about the exile to Egypt as part of his descendants' path toward becoming the people of God:

And He said to Avram: Know well that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them for four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, I will judge. (*Bereishit* 15:13-14)

What is the importance of this process? Why was it necessary as part of the formation of God's people that they should experience the terrible exile in Egypt? Among *Chazal*, some saw this as a punishment for Avraham. Thus, the Gemara in *Nedarim* gives several reasons for which Avraham might have received this punishment:

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: Why was our father Avraham punished and his children doomed to Egyptian servitude for two hundred and ten years? Because he pressed scholars into his service, as it is written: "He led forth his trained men, born in his own house" (*Bereishit* 14:14).

Shmuel said: Because he went too far in testing the attributes [i.e., the promises] of the Lord, as it is written: "[And he said: Lord God,] how shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (*Bereishit* 15:8).

Rabbi Yochanan said: Because he separated people from [the prospect of] entering under the wings of the *Shekhina*, as it is stated: "[And the king of Sodom said to Avraham:] Give me the persons, and take the goods to yourself" (*Bereishit* 14:21). (*Nedarim* 32a)[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, however, here too, the reason was not to punish a sin; rather, the Egyptian exile was part of the process of building and creating the nation. These words are reinforced by references to Egypt as an "iron furnace" (see *Devarim* 4:20; 1 *Melakhim* 8:52; *Yirmeyahu* 11:4), whose role is to forge and build the iron. The Abravanel, in his commentary on *Bereishit*, cites two *Rishonim* who understood the Egyptian exile in this manner:

And the most recent of the sages brought a fifth opinion on this matter, that of the Ran and of his disciple Rabbi Chasdai [Crescas] in his book *Or Hashem.*

The Ran writes that the exile in Egypt was not at all because of a sin, but rather to subdue the hearts of Israel, so that they would be worthy of receiving the Torah, and that this was considered an affliction of love.

And Rabbi Chasdai writes that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought them to Egypt in order to perform there many wonders, in such a way that God's abilities would become clear to them and there would be no doubt in their hearts, for the land of Egypt was full of sorcerers, and it became clear that the actions of God were not performed through sorcery but by the power of God. As it is written: "And that you may tell," and it stated: "And that you shall know that I am the Lord."

The common denominator of these two Rabbis is that the Egyptian exile was an act of kindness and benefaction to Israel, and not a punishment for any sin at all. (Abravanel, *Bereishit* 15)

According to the Ran, the essence of the Egyptian exile was affliction – but afflictions of love, whose purpose was to forge and build. In contrast, Rabbi Chasdai touches precisely on the point noted by the *Or Ha-Chaim –* that the essence of the exile lay in building the faith of the people of Israel through the miracles of redemption.

**IV. Why specifically "*these* My signs"?**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* is precise in his reading of the verse, noting that there is great importance specifically in “these signs” – that is, in the plagues that appear in our *parasha*:

It seems that the main reason Pharaoh hardened his heart was because of these signs, from which it seems that it was necessary to show these signs and not others. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 10:1)

What is special about these three specific plagues that could not be seen or learned from the previous plagues? The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains:

1. Locusts – "Who makes winds Your messengers" (*Tehillim* 104:4)

There was also no denial of the mistaken notion that He who creates the wind is not He who creates the dust… It was necessary for God to show them through the plague of the locusts, that He made the winds His messengers to bring them and to take them away, and also to remove the dead locusts so the Egyptians would not benefit from them. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The theological innovation of the plague of locusts, according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, is God's ability to bring and take away His agents. At first glance, this is puzzling: If he means the bringing and removal of the locusts themselves, it seems that there is no great novelty here, for He had already brought and taken away the wild animals! If he means to show that God has the power to rule over the heavenly bodies, this already found expression in the plague of hail! But perhaps the new point here, that the *Or Ha-Chaim* is pointing out, relates to the centrality of wind in the plague of locusts.

We see this in the bringing of the locusts:

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)

And so too in the removal of the locusts:

And the Lord turned an exceeding strong west wind, which took upon the locusts, and drove them into the Sea of Suf; there remained not one locust in all the border of Egypt. (*Shemot* 10:19)

Until the plague of locusts, God "ruled" with the plagues only over physical things that can be sensed and felt. Here, there is indeed a great innovation – control of the wind, which is much less physical and closer to the spiritual.

2. Darkness – the sun and the moon

The seven plagues which had occurred so far did not offer an answer to people who wanted to worship the sun or the moon… The plague of darkness would demonstrate that God created the luminaries, and exercises control over them, and that He creates darkness and decrees that it should serve as a thick cloud for the Egyptians. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 10:2)

Since time immemorial, the heavenly bodies were a source of idol worship. The fact that they exist on high, and are difficult to comprehend, caused many ancient nations to worship the sun and the moon and to attribute supreme powers to them. With the plague of darkness, God showed to all that He is the sole ruler of the heavenly bodies and made a decisive statement against this type of idolatry.

Here too, there is a step up from the previous plague: God controls not only the wind, but also light and darkness. The hand of God rules over things that are even less physical!

3. The smiting of the firstborns – He who creates and detects

Even if God controls the earth, how is it known that He who created the wind creates man and creates forms? … With the smiting of the firstborns, it became known that He creates the form within the form and discerns the first drop of semen that becomes the firstborn. (Ibid.)

The smiting of the firstborns introduced the idea that God is aware of the details of this world, even those that are not visible to humans. The *Or Ha-Chaim* references a Gemara thatillustrates this point:

Rava said: Why does the Torah mention the exodus from Egypt in connection with interest, with *tzitzit*, and with weights? The Holy One, blessed be He, declared: "It is I who distinguished in Egypt between the drop that became a firstborn and the drop that was not a firstborn; it is I who will exact vengeance from one who ascribes his money to a gentile and lends it to a Jew on interest, or who steeps his weights in salt, or who [attaches to his garment threads dyed with] vegetable blue and maintains that it is [real] blue." (*Bava Metzia* 61b)

We learn from the smiting of the firstborns that God sees the heart – God knows how to determine the truth even when there is no external indication of who is a firstborn and who is not. This idea is reinforced by Rashi:

Another explanation: The Egyptian women were unfaithful to their husbands and bore children from young men, unmarried, and thus they [the Egyptian men] had many firstborn sons; sometimes there were five to one woman, each being the firstborn to his own father. (Rashi, *Shemot* 12:30)

Here, God's control is shown to be absolute – over the thoughts and intricacies of the human soul, which are not at all subject to physical control.

We can take the spiritual foundation of the smiting of the firstborns and apply it in our lives. In our times, we no longer contend with worship of the sun and the moon, but the feeling that God is familiar with all the details of life and sees what is hidden in the heart of man can certainly be reinforced in us.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Some saw the Egyptian exile as a result of other sins. For instance, see Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)