**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #14:**

**Signs:**

**Snakes, Leprosy, and Blood**

And Moses answered and said, “But, they will not believe me, and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’” (Shemot 4:1)

In response to Moses’ third demurral, God instructs Moses to perform three signs:

1. He is to throw his staff to the ground, where it transforms into a snake.
2. He is to place his hand in his bosom, where it turns leprous. He then returns his hand to his bosom and the leprosy disappears.
3. He is to take water from the Nile and pour it on the dry land, where it will turn to blood.

**Who is the intended audience of the signs?**

Each of these signs transforms an object (staff, hand, water) in a significant manner, but their meaning is unclear; God instructs Moses what he is to do, without explanation. We will examine the possible meanings for each of these signs shortly, but first we must ask a different question: To whom are these signs directed?

Ostensibly, these signs are for Israel, designed to persuade the nation to trust Moses and his message from God. God gives Moses these signs in response to his stated fears that the nation will not believe him, presumably as a tool to combat that possibility. Upon arrival in Egypt, Moses does in fact perform these signs for Israel, although the text does not elaborate. Instead of a dramatic scene illustrating Moses’ performance, Moses’ acts appear in a laconic four-word (in Hebrew) summary: “And Moses did the signs in the eyes of the nation” (*Shemot* 4:30).

It may be unnecessary to detail Moses’ performance because we have already experienced the drama of two of these transformative signs when Moses conjures them in Midian, standing alone before God. (The third cannot be performed because it uses the waters of the Nile, inaccessible from Midian.) God does not inform Moses what is about to happen; He simply instructs Moses to cast his staff to the ground. Immediately, it transforms into a snake, a menacing creature indeed. Alarmed, Moses flees from it, a visceral response to a startling event. God will then instruct Moses to take hold of the snake’s tail and experience its restoration to staff in his hand. Following this, God instructs Moses to place his hand into his bosom, where it turns leprous, and then to place it again in his bosom, where it becomes healthy again.

Why does Moses have to experience these signs in Midian, before he encounters the people? God may require Moses, as prophet-in-training, to practice first, perhaps to inure him from paralyzing fear when he stands before the nation to enact these fearsome signs. Still, the fact that Moses endures the signs long before he performs them before Israel suggests that they contain a lesson for Moses himself.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moses actually has no reason to think that the signs are for Israel at all until God informs of this *after* he executes each one (4:5, 8-9).

There also appears to be a third addressee for these signs. Looking ahead, one cannot fail to notice that Moses will brandish two of these signs (the snake that transforms into a staff and the Nile waters that turn to blood) before Pharaoh, as part of the campaign to persuade Pharaoh to obey God’s command.

In a dexterous display of complex messaging, God offers Moses multi-purpose signs, which bear distinctive messages for three different parties: first for Moses, then for Israel, and finally, for Pharaoh.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Lessons for Moses**

To what end does God send *Moses* these signs? What is the message for Moses, and why are they are part of the elaborate dialogue where God commissions Moses?

*Punishment and Rebuke*

Whatever the message is, it seems ominous; Moses encounters dread signs that hint to death and danger, involving snakes, leprosy, and blood. Perhaps then, these signs are punitive and censorious, a reproach to Moses for his continued resistance to God’s call. These signs follow God’s second – lengthy and persuasive – bid to commission Moses to go to Pharaoh (3:15-22). Despite that compelling divine presentation, Moses again expresses reluctance, circling back to focus upon the anticipated difficulty in convincing Israel of the divine mission: “And they will not believe me, and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘God did not appear to you!’” (4:1).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Moses’ skeptical language regarding Israel (“and they will not listen to my voice,” 4:1) audaciously clashes with God’s previous words that guaranteed their obedience (“and they will listen to your voice,” 3:18).[[4]](#footnote-4) Moses’ lack of faith in the people implies lack of faith in God, provoking these frightening signs as a rebuke for both.

*Midrashim* often interpret the signs as punishment for Moses. The following *midrash* focuses on the first sign, explaining both the staff and the snake as symbols of Moses’ misdemeanor and deserved punishment:

“And God said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’ And he said, ‘A staff.’” As if to say: With that which is in your hand, you deserve to be struck, for you have defamed My children, and they are believers, the children of believers… Moses adopted the way of the snake, who spoke ill of his creator…[[5]](#footnote-5) Because he committed acts such as those of the snake, therefore [God] showed him the snake… (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:12)

The following *midrash* offers a similar explanation of the symbolism of the second sign, while also evoking the snake from the first sign:

“And God said to him further, ‘Bring your hand into your bosom.’” He said to [Moses], “Just as I struck the snake, who defamed [others], with leprosy… so you are deserving of being struck with leprosy.” And why did he place [his hand] in his bosom? Because the way of slanderers is to say it in secret… [Moses] received his due because of his slander. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:13)[[6]](#footnote-6)

Leprosy is deemed just punishment for a slanderer.[[7]](#footnote-7) After all, one who defames others fractures society, often alienating people from each other; leprosy forces the slanderer into isolation, distancing them from their deleterious influence on society.

The third sign (the Nile water that turns to blood) is also presented as punitive:

“And you shall take from the waters of the river […and it will become blood on the dry land]” (4:9). [God] hinted to him that because of a word that he shall speak to Israel, the water will turn to blood in the future, and he will be punished because of them, as it says, “Listen you rebels” (*Bamidbar* 20:10), and then he struck the rock… He struck the rock twice because at first it brought forth blood, and only afterward water. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:13)

Perhaps it is because Moses does not discharge this command until he returns to Egypt that this third sign is understood as hinting to a punitive measure that will take place far in the future – one that will ultimately augur Moses’ tragic end, precluding him from entering the land of Israel.

*Education Toward Leadership: Moses and God*

God does not outwardly display anger at Moses as He gives him the signs. Quite the opposite. God agrees with Moses’ assessment, expressing the possibility that indeed, Israel may not acquire sufficient faith even after Moses performs the first two signs (4:8). Possibly, then, the signs are not reproachful but educational for Moses. Intended to guide Moses toward fulfillment of his role, the signs show God adroitly coaching Moses, steering him toward readiness and a deeper understanding of what lies ahead.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Consider, for example God’s opening gambit, in which he queries: “What is that in your hand?” One’s hand signifies human power, and God may be asking Moses rhetorically what he plans to do with his talents, with his leadership abilities. Moses’ hand will feature prominently in his leadership, particularly in confronting the Egyptians, but also during Israel’s war with Amalek. It turns out that even at this preliminary stage in his career, Moses’ hand is not empty. He clutches a staff, indicating that Moses already has tools to lead, ostensibly acquired from his experience as shepherd. A shepherd’s staff is a symbol of his position at the helm of the flocks; his staff is used to discipline and guide.[[9]](#footnote-9) A staff is also a symbol of leadership; it indicates one’s high position and rank.[[10]](#footnote-10) This staff will accompany Moses throughout his career; he will use it to bring plagues upon the Egyptians and to part the waters of the sea (*Shemot* 14:16).[[11]](#footnote-11) In the desert, Moses will employ his staff to strike the rock, bringing forth water for a recalcitrant nation (*Shemot* 17:5-6). Thus, on the simplest level, God seems to be informing Moses that he has power in his hand, that his shepherding has prepared Moses to function as a capable and effective leader.

Yet, that is not the end of the sign of the staff. God instructs Moses to cast his staff upon the ground, whereupon it turns into a snake. Moses flees from the perilous snake, but God tells Moses to use his hand to grab its tail, at which point it turns back into a staff in his hand. Here, Moses learns that wielding power is a dangerous prospect. A benign staff can transfigure into a snake, becoming a menace and a hazard. It is no wonder that Moses runs from the snake; any leader who does **not** wish to avoid power is suspect. In this reading, Moses’ reluctance to assume power becomes reasonable, even proper. However, Moses should not be afraid of power; after all, God can turn a treacherous snake back into a beneficial staff in Moses’ own hand.

Recognition of God’s control precludes corruption and can foster successful leadership. A shepherd’s staff is only a lifeless object until God gives it potency; similarly, it is God who imbues Moses with the vigor to use his abilities to lead. Moses learns that power stems from God, and he is empowered to perform miracles at God’s behest. Moses does not function autonomously, nor is he given much of a choice; his hand (namely, his power) is positioned to act as an extension, or concrete representation, of God’s hand.

The signs compel Moses, who has just encountered God for the first time, to witness His absolute power. God is in control of the staff and the snake. All of these signs indicate that God controls life and death, animating inanimate objects and rendering them inanimate at will.[[12]](#footnote-12) Each sign demonstrates a different configuration of God’s power over life and death:

Sign 1: Staff-Snake-Staff (Dead-Alive-Dead)

Sign 2: Healthy Hand-Leprosy-Healthy Hand (Alive-Dead-Alive)

Sign 3: Water-Blood (Life-Death)

*Education Toward Leadership: Moses and Pharaoh*

Instead of running from the snake – from danger, from Egypt – God tells Moses to confront it directly. Moses has no reason to be afraid, because God supports him.[[13]](#footnote-13) To show his trust in God, Moses must be willing to grab the tail of the snake, an unwise and perilous action that would generally result in the snake twisting around and biting the person holding its tail. This act conveys to Moses that if he meticulously obeys God’s instructions, even if it means putting himself in grave danger, no harm will come to him.

For Moses, the snake may be an obvious symbol of Pharaoh, whose crown featured an uraeus – a cobra rearing its head – a formidable symbol of the Pharaoh’s power.[[14]](#footnote-14)

R. Eliezer said, “Therefore the staff turned into a snake, as a symbol of Pharaoh… because he would bite Israel. God said to [Moses]: ‘Do you see Pharaoh, who is like a snake? Later, you will strike him with a staff, and in the end, he will turn into a stick [that can do no harm]. Just as a staff does not bite, so too he will no longer bite.’” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:12)

God controls the treacherous Pharaoh; God gave him life and God can immobilize the deified king, reducing him to an inanimate and innocuous staff.[[15]](#footnote-15) Moses should not fear the “snake”; when God tells him to admonish Pharaoh, he must do so, even if it seems unwise and perilous.

*Education Toward Leadership: Moses and Israel*

The second sign may contain a specific educational message for Moses. Moses’ hand turns leprous and then healthy, suggesting that what is now impure was once pure and, more significantly, can be made pure again if God wills it. This may allude to Israel, whose behavior – according to Moses – appears to render them unworthy of redemption.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Moses’ bosom (c*heik*) appears five times in rapid succession in the second sign, hinting to a maternal quality necessary in leadership. Moses will later refer to his bosom when he feels overwhelmed with his responsibilities:

Did I conceive this nation? Did I birth him? For you say to me, “Carry him in your **bosom** (*cheikekha*) as a nursemaid carries a suckling!” (*Bamidbar* 11:12)

Placing his hand in his bosom was designed to train Moses for leadership, for the need to carry this nation – the impure and the pure – as a maternal figure carries a child. Later, when Moses seems inclined to surrender this role, he refers back to that apt metaphor for leadership. The removal of his hand from his bosom also seems significant, evoking a linguistic parallel to *Tehillim* 74, where the psalmist rhetorically asks God why He does not take action to help His nation, imploring Him to act:

Why would You withdraw your hand and right arm? Cease [keeping it] within Your bosom! (*Tehillim* 74:11)

Keeping one’s hand inside one’s bosom suggests inaction, while removing it suggests the beginning of action.[[17]](#footnote-17) During this second sign, Moses removes his hand from his bosom twice; the sign seems designed to prod Moses to launch his mission and use his hand – namely, his power – to help his brethren.

**Lessons for Israel**

Even if the signs contain lessons for Moses, their simplest purpose (as noted above) is to persuade Israel to have faith in Moses and in the divine message that he bears. God tells this to Moses after the first sign (4:5), and He confirms it before offering Moses the third sign:

And it will be that if they do not believe you and they do not heed the first sign, then they will believe the latter sign. And if they also do not believe these two signs and they do not heed your voice, then you should take from the waters of the Nile and spill them on dry land, and the water that you have taken from the Nile will become blood on the dry land. (*Shemot* 4:8-9)

It appears that the nation is so deeply steeped in its misery that it will likely take several signs to convince them to have faith in redemption.

Are these signs random supernatural acts designed to establish Moses’ credentials, or is there meaning for Israel in the specific signs (in the same way that I suggested symbolic meanings for Moses)?

The signs offer Israel a glimpse of God’s power, as revealed by Moses, God’s faithful representative. According to Abravanel (*Shemot* 4:1), the three signs address three areas of Israel’s skepticism: fear of Pharaoh’s might, fear that they are unworthy of redemption, and fear of the Egyptian nation.[[18]](#footnote-18) The specific messages for Israel overlap with ideas already delineated above. Certainly, Israel understands that the snake represents Pharaoh, and the fact that he will be controlled and neutralized by God. Moreover, they will undoubtedly be impressed by Moses’ courage and his willingness to grab a snake by the tail. The fact that he is not harmed confirms that God backs Moses in his mission. Moses’ hand moves rapidly between purity and impurity, offering Israel hope that they, too, can obtain purity once again. The bloody Nile – a symbol of Egypt’s success – strikes at Israel’s perception of Egyptian strength and invincibility.[[19]](#footnote-19) As Moses turns the life-giving waters to blood, he brandishes before Israel a promise of Egypt’s impending doom. Unlike with the other signs, there is no reversal with the third sign. God does not order Moses to return the Nile waters to their former state; they remain bloody, a sign of the permanent damage God intends to wreak upon Egyptian glory.

**Lessons for Egypt**

Following Moses’ initial query (“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” in 3:11), he does not express much concern about approaching the Egyptian king; he does not return to this line of argument, and it does not appear to trouble him particularly. Moses seems unfazed by Pharaoh’s tremendous power and by the prospect of becoming an emissary to the royal court. Let us not forget that Moses grew up under the patronage of Pharaoh’s daughter; he likely had ample acquaintance with regal power.

Still, it seems that the signs God gives Moses are meant to be directed to the Egyptians as well; one only has to glance ahead at the story to recognize this intention. Moses and Aaron will perform elements of the first sign before Pharaoh in *Shemot* 7:9-12, as evidence of God’s power. The third sign (of the Nile water that turns to blood) makes an appearance as the first plague brought against Egypt. As for Moses’ leprous hand, while this second sign is never explicitly brought to bear against the Egyptians, it may hint to the fifth plague, i.e., boils; *Vayikra* 13:20 describes a type of leprosy (*tzara’at*) that grows as a boil(*shechin*).

Striking at the heart of some of Egypt’s most reliable sources of strength, the signs show that God controls Egypt’s ruler (the staff and the snake) and her Nile. The second sign may suggest that God exercises dominion over the sun (and the Egyptian god, Ra, considered supremely powerful in the Egyptian pantheon), whose effect on the skin may have been thought to cause leprosy. In the final analysis, these signs are designed to affect the Egyptians as well. As a result of these signs, the Egyptian people should fear God’s power and tremble at His plans to shatter Egypt’s power, leaving her venerable institutions and unshakeable convictions in disarray.

**Conclusion**

The three signs that God gives Moses contain messages for the three main players in the drama of the Exodus. More than just a display of divine might, each of the signs holds particular relevance for each of the parties. Moses is rebuked, punished, and steered toward effective leadership, Israel is educated and consoled, and Egypt receives both a lesson in divine power and a threat of impending doom. A wonderfully adroit display of literary artistry, these brief signs convey an abundance of distinctive and diverse messages.

1. See Nachmanides *Shemot* 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Shemot* *Rabba* 3:13 assumes that the signs operate simultaneously on two frequencies: they contain a message for Moses and a sign for the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Previously, Moses had skirted the issue of Israel’s meager faith, preferring instead to focus upon how to identify God to the questioning nation: “And they will say to me, ‘What is His name?’ – what shall I say to them?” (3:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Shemot* *Rabba* 3:12, also cited below, notes this and concludes that in this case, Moses spoke inappropriately. Both Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides defend Moses’ words in a bid to show that Moses did not contradict God. Ibn Ezra suggests that God was only promising that the elders will listen, not the whole nation. He further suggests that their belief will be external but will not penetrate internally. Nachmanides explains that God did not offer a *promise* of obedience, but rather a command, an observation that the nation *should* obey Moses. Nachmanides further explains that Moses may accept that the nation will initially listen to him, but he expresses concern that their faith may not continue once Pharaoh refuses to let them go. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a reference to the snake of Eden in *Bereishit* 3:1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Shabbat* 97a, which regards the second sign as a punishment for Moses’ suspecting the innocent nation as having little faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g., *Sifrei* *Devarim* 275a; *Vayikra* *Rabba* 16:2; *Arakhin* 15b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nachmanides (*Shemot* 4:3) explains that God uses these signs to show Moses that the upcoming redemption – its miracles, signs, and wonders – will be accomplished through him. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Tehillim* 23:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Malbim, *Shemot* 4:2, who posits that this is the specific connotation of the word *mateh* (as opposed to its synonymous words, *makel* or *mish’enet*). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The verses that describe Moses parting the sea at God’s behest blur between his usage of his hand and staff, implying that they are one entity for the purposes of the narrative (see *Shemot* 14:16, 21, 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Rabbeinu Bechaye on *Shemot* 4:3, and Seforno on Shemot. 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This sign is an elaboration of God’s previous promise to Moses, “For I will be with you” (*Shemot* 3:12). The difference is that a verbal message remains abstract, while performing a sign concretizes the promise. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also *Yirmeyahu* 46:22, where the snake is a symbol of Egypt. This symbolism becomes even more significant when Moses and Aaron perform this sign before Pharaoh and his magicians. See also *Shemot* *Rabba* 9:3, which explains that the snake signifies Egypt in its wiliness and danger. Thus, later, when Israel longs for Egypt, God sends snakes to bite them and remind them of Egypt’s treachery (*Bemidbar* 21:5-6). For another correlation between the snake and Pharaoh see *Sekhel Tov*, *Shemot* 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In Biblical passages, the staff is also a symbol of regal authority and power (e.g., *Bereishit* 49:10; *Yeshayahu* 10:5; *Yirmeyahu* 48:17; *Tehillim* 110:2). Kings of Egypt are often depicted in pictures with a staff in their hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This idea appears in *Shemot* *Rabba* 3:13, which assumes that the message is directed primarily toward Israel, rather than Moses. *Meshekh Chokhma* (*Shemot* 4:3) posits a similar idea regarding the first sign: idolatrous Israel is a corrupt snake at present, but if Moses seizes it properly, they will transform again into a holy nation (symbolized by the staff). See also Abravanel, *Shemot* 4:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *Shemot* 4:7, who notes the parallel with the psalm but offers a different understanding of its significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In a nimble feat of exegesis, Abravanel also offers another – fully developed – explanation for the three signs. He explains that each of these signs backs up one of the messages that God instructs Moses to convey to the elders in *Shemot* 3:16. According to the Abravanel, the first sign functions as proof that God appeared to Moses; the second indicates that God intends to remember Israel and rescue them now; and the third sign (the bloody Nile) constitutes evidence that God will avenge them for what was done to them in Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A *midrash* (*Sekhel Tov*, *Shemot* 4:9) explains that this is a blow against Egyptian gods, as Pharaoh worships the Nile. Archeological evidence shows that indeed, the Egyptians worshipped a god of the Nile called Hapi. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)