YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat VAERA**

### Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan

**Miracles and Nature in the Plagues of Egypt**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. Introduction**

The first four *parashot* in the book of *Shemot* deal extensively with miracles that transcend the laws of nature – from the signs given to Moshe at the burning bush to extracting water from a rock when Israel camped at Refidim, including the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Sea of Suf. Commentaries disagree about the significance of these miracles with respect to our belief in God and the fundamentals of our faith. The Rambam, for instance, limits the significance of signs and miracles in relation to other articles of faith:

The Jews did not believe in Moshe, our teacher, because of the wonders that he performed… All the wonders performed by Moshe in the desert were performed for a purpose, not to serve as proof [of the legitimacy] of his prophecy.It was necessary to drown the Egyptians, so he split the sea and sank them in it. We needed food, so he brought manna down for us. We were thirsty, so he split the rock [providing us with water]. Korach's band mutinied against him, so the earth swallowed them up. The same applies to the other wonders.

What *is* the source of their belief in him? The [revelation] at Mount Sinai – for our eyes saw, and not a stranger's; our ears heard, and not another's, the fire, thunder, and lightning. He entered the thick clouds and the Voice spoke to him and we heard: "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them the following."…

From where [do we know] that the revelation at Mount Sinai alone is proof of the truth of Moshe's prophecy that leaves no shortcoming? As it is stated: "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear Me speaking to you, [so that] they will also believe in you forever" (*Shemot* 19:9). This implies that before this happened, they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever, but rather with a faith that allowed for suspicions and doubts. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 8:1)

The Ramban, on the other hand, sees miracles as an important foundation:

Through the great open miracles, one comes to acknowledge the hidden miracles, which constitute the foundation of the whole Torah, for no one can have a part in the Torah of Moshe our teacher unless he believes that all our words and our events are miraculous in scope, there being no natural or customary way of the world in them. (Ramban, *Shemot* 13:16)

The Ramban maintains that belief in miracles that govern the world is one of the foundations of faith. Even within this view, however, there is room for two approaches to explaining miracles, as long as one maintains that the miracle reveals God’s hand breaking the laws of nature for the sake of redeeming His people. One approach removes the miracle from everything we relate to in natural life. It speaks essentially of a reality different from ours, a reality more sacred and exalted than ours because it is Divine. A second approach, and one which I myself prefer to follow, sees the miracle as taking place within the realm of reality rather than in a parallel dimension. This approach tries to bring the miracle as close as possible to our intellectual, emotional, and sensory comprehension, and to minimize the gap between the miracle and nature as we know it. Its purpose is not, heaven forbid, to question the unlimited capabilities of God, but to enable us, human beings living under the rule of the laws of nature, to connect to the miracle and everything that comes with it – especially on a psychological level – and to enter as much as possible into the shoes of those who experienced the miracle, to join them in that experience.

I will try to explain what I am saying. There is a striking painting by Yossi Rosenstein that interprets Israel's crossing of the Sea of Suf as a reality different from nature. This reality does not affect the real situation of the sea. In nature, the sea remains as it was. When Israel passed through it, they did so in a different and parallel reality, which at that time did not intersect with nature at all.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On the other hand, the splitting of the sea can instead be described in a manner that is seemingly closer to us, more comprehensible, and more in keeping with our sensibilities. For the sake of illustration, let us take a nearly flat plate and fill it with water to a depth of one centimeter. Now, when we blow with force in the center of the plate, we will observe that the water is driven to the sides, and in the center of the plate a dry path is created by the air current. It would seem that the splitting of the sea somewhat resembled the displacement of the small amount of water in the dish, for the Torah attests: "And with the blast of Your nostrils, the waters were piled up… You blew with Your wind; the sea covered them" (*Shemot* 15:8,10). And even before the parting of the sea, the Torah states: "And the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night" (*Shemot* 14:21). God split the sea in a natural way, via a strong east wind.

Despite the similarity between the parting of the waters in the dish and the parting of the Sea of Suf, the quantitative differences are striking – in breadth, depth, and duration: 1) What we are able to do in a 15 cm.-diameter dish, God did in a sea whose breadth is measured in kilometers. 2) What we are able to do in water one centimeter deep, God did in water hundreds of meters deep. 3) We made a path a few millimeters wide, whereas God created a path for six hundred thousand men and their families. 4) While we did this for a few seconds, God did it for many hours. These are but a few of the differences. God's absolute dominion over the world manifested itself in the splitting of the sea through the blowing of a mighty wind.

God does not appear in the Song of the Sea as a God who is outside His world, but rather as a King – "The Lord shall *reign* forever and ever" (*Shemot* 15:18) – who is within His world, who deals with a flesh-and-blood king and shows His people the superiority of His power in relation to that of the king of Egypt. The powers of the two kings are measured against each other in the same terms. In other words: God acted in a miraculous manner, using instruments familiar to us but with a force that proclaims "For there is none like Me in all the earth" (*Shemot* 9:14).

**II. The Plague of Blood**

Let us try to examine this principle with regard to the plagues as well, starting with the blood. Aharon strikes with his staff, and the waters of the Nile turn to blood. The initial understanding is that indeed, the chemical composition of the water changed, and it is possible that God wanted to teach us about His ability to control the molecular structure of water. But it is not clear how Aharon’s smiting the Nile with his staff (*Shemot* 7:20) would relate to the molecular restructuring of the water.

Following my approach, we can explain the plague of blood in a way that will answer this difficulty. It is possible that the water did not in fact turn into blood, but rather, a great amount of blood was mixed into the water so that it was impossible to drink.

What was the source of this blood, and how did it become mixed with the water of the Nile? Aharon struck the Nile with his staff. A light tap on the water creates a gentle wave. A stronger blow creates a stronger wave. A mighty blow, seemingly infinite in power and at the right angle, may create powerful shock waves of immense power. These waves, if indeed they were formed, could have split the sturdy bodies of the many crocodiles in the river, whose blood would then have mingled with the water to create a bloody, undrinkable mixture. The Egyptians, according to Scripture, were forced to dig for water round about the river, and according to the plain sense of the verses (not like the *midrash* cited by Rashi), they did indeed find water there; Pharaoh was able to return to his home "and did not pay mind even to this" (*Shemot* 7:23), for his servants supplied him with water from their diggings around the Nile.

This explanation has several advantages:

a. First, it clarifies the connection between Aharon’s strike and the blood. The striking of the staff led to the mighty movements of water that broke the crocodiles of the Nile. Clearly, it was not Aharon's hand by itself that effected this mighty blow; rather, the blow was caused by the strong hand and outstretched arm of God. God's power does not manifest itself in the alteration of the laws of nature. His power is manifest *within* nature – a power immeasurably greater than that of the kings of flesh and blood and all their heroes.

b. The crocodile in Pharaonic Egypt was a god. The description I have presented accords with *Chazal*’s statement that God did not punish the Egyptians until He first punished their gods,[[2]](#footnote-2) for in the first plague, the crocodiles they worshipped were split asunder by the force of the shock waves generated by God, via the staff of Aaron.

c. During the days of subjugation, Pharaoh decreed that all male children born to the Hebrews should be cast into the Nile. The Ramban (*Shemot* 1:10) notes that it would not have been simple for a king to deliver such cruel edicts and entrust their execution to the common people of the land. Perhaps Pharaoh was backed by the priests of the crocodile, who demanded the children of the Jews as a sacrifice to their god – not to be burned on the altar, like the human sacrifices offered to Molekh, but to be thrown into the water as food for the crocodile gods. The first plague, then, exacted revenge from the crocodiles and their priests for the Jewish children who had been sacrificed to them.

**III. Frogs and Lice**

If we accept the principle advanced thus far, we can explain the plague of frogs in a similar manner. We could perhaps explain that the frogs fled from the Nile to the houses of the Egyptians because of all the blood that had fouled the river. However, it seems that this explanation is insufficient, for the Torah describes the beginning of the plague of frogs as involving a further use of Aharon's staff (*Shemot* 8:2).

It may be that the power God gave to Aharon’s blow, different in angle and force from that of the plague of blood, produced shock waves in the water that drove the frogs from the Nile, which had already become putrid because of the blood, into the houses of Egypt. But this was only after Aharon's second blow, and only after seven days had passed from the plague of blood.

So too, the plague of lice can be explained in a natural manner, based on the verse that immediately precedes it. This verse, which sums up the plague of the frogs, seems superfluous at first glance:

And the Lord did according to the word of Moshe, and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the courts, and out of the fields. And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. (*Shemot* 8:9-10)

Why does the Torah detail how the Egyptians dealt with the dead frogs? And why does it emphasize that the land stank because of them?

It seems that the filth and putrefaction that permeated the land due to the many dead frogs also allowed for the proliferation of tiny insects ("lice"), which multiplied and spread throughout Egypt. Their emergence from the piles of dead frogs, their rapid multiplication, and their penetration into every corner of Egypt resulted from the blow that Aharon had struck (*Shemot* 12-13). It is not entirely clear how Aharon's strike led to the swarming of the insects from the heaps of dead frogs in all directions, but perhaps the strong blow to the soil of Egypt aroused them to emerge from where they were.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**IV. *Adash* – Wild Beasts [*Arov*], Pestilence [*Dever*], and Boils [*Shechin*]**

The word *arov* is obscure, as is the manner in which it struck Egypt; the Torah does not spell this out for *arov* or for the plague that followed it (*dever*), and there is also no mention of a staff being used. Rabbinic sources yield six or seven opinions as to the content of the plague of *arov*, ranging from wasps and flies to a barbarian people that overran Egypt, or a preliminary darkness preceding the great darkness, and so on. The conventional view – that the *arov* involved packs of lions, leopards, and bears that ravaged the cities of Egypt – I find difficult to accept, for such a blow would have been more devastating than the plague of the firstborns that eventually overcame the Egyptians. It seems that the plague of the firstborns was the only one that actually killed people; the preceding plagues were annoying and damaging to the economic infrastructure, but did not take human lives. (Some of the Egyptian slaves were probably killed in the plague of hail, but their deaths were regarded by the Egyptians as merely an economic loss.)

It is possible, however, that *arov* was a plague of rats. The filth, the putrefaction, and the stench of the heaps of dead frogs and lice could have invited a plague of rats next. However, these did not come of their own accord, but only at Moshe's "invitation," following his warning to Pharaoh about them.

The plague of rats, and again, only by way of Moshe's "invitation," could have led in turn to the plague of pestilence, *dever*. This is how Europe was stricken by the Black Death in the fourteenth century; the plague was caused by the invasion of Europe by swarms of rats and mice, swarms which probably came from the Far East by ship. It would seem that this pair of plagues, rats and pestilence, also afflicted the Pelishtim who took the Ark of the Lord in the battle of Even ha-Ezer in the days of Shmuel. The Pelishtim brought golden mice as a gift to God to atone for their sin (I *Shmuel* 6:4), and it stands to reason that there is a connection between their gift and the manner in which God had struck them – though it is apparent that the heavy blow that threatened them was not of little mice, but of rats. We also find that the expression "the hand of the Lord," which appears in our *parasha* in connection with the plague of pestilence, is mentioned there by the Pelishtim many times, and they too were apparently stricken with pestilence (I *Shmuel* 5:6,7,9,11 and 6:3,5,11) in the wake of the rats.

It would seem that the rats that plagued the Pelishtim were also the cause of the hemorrhoids they contracted – when they encountered the rats while defecating.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this way, the connection between the plague of the filth-loving rats and the plague of boils can also be understood, for a place infested with filth is likewise prone to boils and other ailments.

***Be'achav* – Hail [*barad*], Locusts [*Arbeh*], Darkness [*Choshekh*], and the Plague of the Firstborns [*Makat Bekhorot*]**

I cannot find any connection between the plague of boils and the hail, locusts, and darkness that followed it. The Torah’s introduction to the plague of hail also indicates that God began a new campaign with these plagues, different from the previous one:

For this time, I will 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. For 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 for this cause have I allowed you to stand: to show you My power, and so that My name may be declared throughout all the earth. Still, you exalt yourself against My people, that you will not let them go! (*Shemot* 9:14-17)

These plagues lead us in their fashion to the parting of the Sea of Suf and the giving of the Torah, which we shall discuss in due course. There seems to be a shift here to a wholly different kind of miracle. Even if one would insist on interpreting the hail, locusts, and darkness as expressions of God's power within the laws of nature, one would have to concede that the plague of the firstborns, which was wrought by God without intermediaries, is a plague that cannot be explained at all in terms of natural law, and is associated with a reality that is utterly different from anything we would recognize.

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. The Maharal voices a similar opinion in his second introduction to *Gevurot Hashem*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Pesikta Zutrata* (*Lekach Tov*), *Masa'ei* 141b, s.v. *u-Mitzrayim mekaberim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am also unable to offer a natural explanation for the death of the frogs in the wake of Moshe's prayer. But this does not prevent us from giving natural explanations where we can. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See I *Shmuel*, chapters 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)