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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #26: Messengers vs. Magicians**

And God said to Moses and to Aaron, saying: “When Pharaoh will speak to you, saying ‘Give me a sign (*mofet*),’ you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it before Pharaoh, and it will be a *tannin*.’[[1]](#footnote-1) And Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh, and they did as God had commanded: Aaron cast his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a *tannin*. And Pharaoh called for his sages and his sorcerers.[[2]](#footnote-2) And they too – the Egyptian magicians[[3]](#footnote-3) – did the same with their spells. And each man cast down his staff and they became *tanninim*, but the staff of Aaron swallowed their staffs. But Pharaoh hardened his heart, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken. (*Shemot* 7:8-14)

A striking episode, this scene introduces key figures who will reappear throughout the plague narratives. While God and Pharaoh dominate the backdrop, their respective proxies – Aaron and Moses on God’s behalf, and Pharaoh’s magicians on his – engage in a contest of wonders, each attempting to outmaneuver the other.[[4]](#footnote-4) Pharaoh’s servants stand by in silence (“before Pharaoh and before his servants”), passive witnesses of an authoritarian regime.[[5]](#footnote-5) At the center of the drama, a staff is cast down by God’s representative, transforming into a *tannin* – a miraculous act soon replicated by Pharaoh’s magicians. The story ends with a stoic Pharaoh, unmoved even as Aaron’s staff devours those of Pharaoh’s magicians, demonstrating superiority over the magicians’ apparently similar abilities.

What is the nature of this scenario? What message is God sending to an obstinate king and his silent followers? Is this the first of the plagues, as some scholars maintain,[[6]](#footnote-6) or merely a prelude to the plague narrative?

Despite certain similarities to the plagues – such as God’s command to Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh, the use of the staff, miraculous acts, Pharaoh’s hardened heart, and the presence of his servants and magicians – this episode differs from them in key ways. No one’s life is at risk, nor does anyone suffer bodily harm. Aaron’s wonders come with no demands and no stated purpose. Rather than a plague, this scene seems intended as a demonstration of God’s power, an educational event rather than a punitive one.

This incident echoes the first sign God gave Moses at the burning bush (4:1-4). There, in response to Moses’ fear that the Israelites would not believe him, God instructed him to cast down his staff, which transformed into a snake – an *ot* (sign) meant to strengthen Israel’s faith in God and Moses. Here, a similar *mofet* (wonder) is performed, but this time the demonstration is intended to instill recognition of God and His chosen messengers in Pharaoh and the Egyptians, rather than the Israelites.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Another purpose of this episode may be hinted at in God’s instructions to Moses on his way to Egypt. There, God commands Moses to perform *mofetim* (wonders) before Pharaoh (4:21) but does not specify what they should be. Whichever acts He is referring to they are surprisingly not intended to inspire faith in God or prompt Pharaoh to heed Moses’s mission. Instead, God declares that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart following the wonders, and he will **not** release the Israelites. Moses will then deliver God’s final blow – the pronouncement of death upon Pharaoh’s firstborn (ibid. 23). That scenario appears designed to put Pharaoh’s recalcitrance on full display, demonstrating why he is deserving of punishment, and perhaps the same is true here.

According to *Shemot* 7:9, God anticipates that Pharaoh, in his royal arrogance, will be the one to initiate this confrontation, demanding that Moses and Aaron perform a wonder. While medieval exegetes debate Pharaoh’s intent – Seforno suggests he seeks proof of God’s existence, while Abravanel sees it as a test of Moses and Aaron’s legitimacy – the text notably omits any explicit explanation of his motives. This omission is telling: Pharaoh’s reasoning is irrelevant to the biblical narrative. His demands, whatever their purpose, are secondary to the larger divine plan unfolding in the story.

Alongside the text’s indifference to Pharaoh’s thoughts, God's supremacy takes center stage. The fleeting success of Pharaoh’s magicians offers only a brief illusion of victory; the human king’s momentary triumph quickly crumbles before the overwhelming power of the divine King.

**Snake\Serpent\Sea Monster and Staff**

Wonders are performed to affirm God’s presence, power, and the legitimacy of His chosen messengers. But how should we understand the Egyptian sorcerers’ ability to perform magic? And what significance lies in the specifics of this wonder; why does Aaron’s staff transform into a *tannin* before Pharaoh?[[8]](#footnote-8)

Magic, spells, and secret arts undoubtedly played a significant role in ancient Egyptian culture and religion.[[9]](#footnote-9) But how does the Tanakh view the efficacy of these practices?[[10]](#footnote-10) Exegetes are divided on whether the Egyptian sorcerers truly perform supernatural acts, seemingly independent of God, or if their feats are mere trickery. Some commentators suggest that the magicians relied on sleight of hand and deception.[[11]](#footnote-11) The transformation of a snake into a staff, for instance, may be linked to the techniques of snake-charmers,[[12]](#footnote-12) who could induce a cataleptic state in cobras by applying pressure to their neck muscles, making them appear rigid like a staff.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, some Rabbinic sources assume that Egyptian magic had real power.[[14]](#footnote-14) Regardless of whether their abilities stemmed from illusion or actual supernatural forces, the text does not dwell on the mechanics of their magic. The essential message remains clear: Egypt’s power, whether real or fabricated, is overcome the moment God wills it.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Why does God decide to transform the staff into a *tannin*? To begin answering this question, we must first identify this elusive creature. Some commentators argue that *tannin* is simply another term for a snake, meaning that Aaron (and Moses) here replicate the same sign Moses was instructed to perform before the Israelites (*Shemot* 4:2-4).[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, several biblical passages associate the *tannin* with the *nachash* or *peten*, which are both terms for snakes (*Devarim* 32:33; *Yeshayahu* 27:1; *Tehillim* 91:13).[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, in *Shemot* 7:15, God tells Moses to take “the staff that transformed into a *nachash*” when warning Pharaoh of the plague of blood. While this could refer to the earlier sign at the burning bush (4:2-4),[[18]](#footnote-18) its proximity to the episode of the staff turning into a *tannin* invites the reader to connect the two events and infer that the *tannin* is indeed a snake. If so, God may be deliberately using a symbol of Pharaoh’s own power to assert divine supremacy. The Egyptian king’s crown prominently featured the *uraeus* – a cobra rearing its head – representing his authority and divine protection. By transforming the staff into a snake, God may be subverting this emblem, demonstrating that Pharaoh's might is no match for His own.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Translations naturally prefer to maintain a distinction between *nachash* and *tannin*.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Greek *Septuagint*, for example, renders *tannin* as *drakōn*, suggesting a mythical creature of immense, fearsome proportions.[[21]](#footnote-21) This choice is likely influenced by later biblical depictions of the *tannin* as a primordial sea monster associated with creation and chaos.[[22]](#footnote-22) In various other biblical passages, God is depicted as both the creator and the ultimate master of the *tannin*, asserting His dominion over even the most formidable forces.[[23]](#footnote-23) By employing a *tannin* in this initial confrontation with Pharaoh, God sends a clear message: no creature, no matter how powerful, sits beyond His control.

Cassuto identifies the *tannin* as a crocodile, aligning with the word’s modern Hebrew usage. He may be influenced by *Yechezkel* 29:3, where Pharaoh is described as a *great tannim* (a similar but not identical word), swimming in the Nile and boastfully claiming ownership over it.[[24]](#footnote-24) The Nile crocodile, a massive and powerful creature with the strongest bite in the animal kingdom, has no natural predators. As such, it serves as a fitting symbol for Egypt’s dominance during the New Kingdom, evoking its unrivaled strength and (self-perceived) invincibility.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Whatever its precise identity – snake, mythical creature, or crocodile – the *tannin* (which I have intentionally left untranslated) serves as a fitting symbol of a formidable king whose immense strength breeds arrogance and a sense of invulnerability. This imagery extends beyond Pharaoh, as the *tannin* also represents other rulers driven by insatiable ambition. For example, when Jeremiah foretells Babylon’s downfall, he depicts Nebuchadnezzar as a *tannin* with a full belly, having devoured Zion; this illustrates his unchecked power and voracious imperial aspirations.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The fierce *tannin* stands as an adversary of God –an apt representation of empires that defy Him, convinced of their own absolute power. It is no wonder that later biblical passages portray God effortlessly vanquishing the *tannin*, a manifestation of unchecked arrogance, relentless expansion, and royal dominance.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In our next *shiur*, we will continue our examination of this episode and explore how the transformation of Aaron’s staff into a *tannin* – and its subsequent swallowing of the Egyptian staffs – symbolizes the inevitable triumph of divine authority over Pharaoh’s power.

1. I have intentionally left this untranslated, as the creature's identity is a matter of debate among exegetes and translators. We will explore this further later in the *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word *mekhashfim* (which I have translated as sorcerers) is related to the noun *kheshafim*, meaning sorcery (see, e.g., II *Melakhim* 9:22; *Yeshayahu* 47:9; *Micha* 5:12; *Nahum* 3:4) and the verbal form, *khishef* (e.g., II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 33:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The word *chartumim* (which I have translated as magicians) may be related to the word *charat*, the art of metal inscription (*Shemot* 32:5; *Yeshayahu* 8:1), reflecting the link between Egyptian magic and the divine power of writing and symbols. Scholars who search for the Egyptian origin of the word *chartumim* offer different opinions. Thomas O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loanwords in the Old Testament,” JAOS 73 (1953), pp. 150-151, suggests that the word designates an important priestly official. D. B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*, VTsup 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 203-204, connects this word to the Egyptian title *hry-hb* or *hry-tp*, denoting a magician-priest. Pharaoh calls on *chartumim* along with sages for advice both in *Bereishit* 41:8 and here, although in our story, the *chartumim* are called to do acts of magic.

   It is challenging to determine precisely how – or whether – to distinguish between the different groups (*sages, mekhashfim,* and *chartumim*). Ibn Ezra (*Peirush Ha-arokh*, *Shemot* 7:11) suggests that the sages practice astrology, the *mekhashfim* appear to manipulate nature, and the *chartumim* possess knowledge of nature’s secrets. However, due to the lack of concrete evidence, this distinction remains uncertain. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Notably, following the genealogy that highlights Aaron in *Shemot* 6, he now takes on a more active role in the narrative, emerging as the central figure in this episode. He may even be seen as a counterpart to the Egyptian magicians, directly engaging in the confrontation on behalf of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pharaoh’s servants play a significant yet subdued role throughout the narrative, appearing alongside him more than twenty times in the plague account. Their only independent speech occurs during the plague of locusts, when, in a rare act of insubordination, they urgently plead with Pharaoh to release the Hebrews, warning, *“*Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?!” (10:7). This unexpected breach of protocol – boldly addressing Pharaoh with such desperation – goes unpunished, a leniency that surely reflects the seriousness of Egypt’s predicament at that stage. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note, for example, Propp’s source analysis in *Exodus*, pp. 310-317, or Garrett, *Exodus*, pp. 269-276, who describes the narrative sequence as “twelve miraculous events” rather than ten plagues. The idea that there are ten plagues does not actually appear explicitly in the Bible, which recounts the plagues without numbering them. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Many have attempted to distinguish between the terms *ot* (sign) and *mofet* (wonder), which frequently appear together in the plague narrative (e.g., *Shemot* 7:3; *Devarim* 34:11). Ramban (*Devarim* 13:2) suggests that an *ot* signifies a future event, while a *mofet* is a miracle intended as proof. Rashi (*Devarim* 4:32) defines an *ot* as a sign and a *mofet* as a miracle. This interpretation suggests that the terms are closely related and may sometimes overlap, allowing for their interchangeability, as Rashi suggests in *Shemot* 7:9. While other explanations exist, the precise distinction between these terms remains unclear. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The plain meaning of the text suggests that the staff belongs to Aaron. To explain why this wonder is performed with Aaron’s staff rather than Moses’ well-known staff, Abravanel argues that it would be undignified for Moses to use his distinguished staff in a contest against lower-level magicians. Abravanel generally regards the magicians as below Moses, observing that Aaron is consistently pitted against the magicians rather than Moses. However, some exegetes challenge this reading, suggesting that Aaron is actually using **Moses’** staff in this episode. Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 7:9) supports this view, citing *Shemot* 7:19-20 and 17:5 as evidence. This interpretation also finds some support in the earlier episode (4:2-4) where Moses' staff transforms into a snake, establishing a precedent for such a sign being performed specifically with that object. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While the modern world often views such practices as primitive, in ancient Egypt they were the product of a highly sophisticated society, aimed at granting humans some control over their environment and fate. In this context, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks draws a striking comparison, likening magic in an era of myth to technology in an age of science (*Covenant & Conversation: Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020, p. 54). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. One thing seems clear: any culture that believes it can fully control its environment – whether by myth or by science – is mistaken. Moreover, this attitude produces arrogance, bluster, and even oppression. Rabbi Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 54, posits that “a civilization that believes that it can manipulate the gods, believes likewise that it can exercise coercion over human beings. In such a culture, the concept of freedom is unknown.” For Rabbi Sacks, the essential difference between myth and biblical monotheism may be found in this attitude: Does one see the gods as “mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated,” or does one adopt the approach of biblical monotheism, where “ethics (justice, compassion, human dignity) constitute the meeting-point of God and mankind” (ibid, p. 73). One approach is founded in the quest for control and dominion, while the other adopts a posture of humility and obligation. One leads to tyranny, the other to virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Abravanel (*Shemot* 7) speculates that Maimonides would interpret the supposed powers of the Egyptian magicians as mere illusion, aligning with his broader view that witchcraft has no real substance (e.g., *Moreh Nevukhim* III:37; *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 11:16). See also Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 7:11 for a related perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A papyrus from the 30th dynasty contains a manual for snake charming. See Patrick Houlihan, “Spellbound: Charming the Snake & the Scorpion,” *Ancient* *Egypt* 3, 6 (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Kenneth Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, e.g., *Sanhedrin* 67b; Ramban *Shemot* 7:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. These events resonate with Egyptian literature. In the *Tale of Pharaoh Cheop’s Court* (ca. 1600 BCE), a chief priest transforms a wax crocodile into a real one and back again. Additionally, Egyptian tombs depict priestly processions honoring the deity Heka, with priests carrying serpent staffs in each hand, suggesting a symbolic link between rods and serpents in rituals of power. The Tanakh may be referencing Egyptian folklore intentionally, to emphasize a different message – demonstrating God's supreme authority over all perceived magical forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rashi, Seforno, and Yefet ben Ali (quoted by Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 4:3) all maintain the view that the *tannin* is a snake. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Several Aramaic *Targumim* (Neofiti, Yerushalmi) use the same Aramaic word to translate *tannin* that they used to translate *nachash*, thereby blurring between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibn Ezra (*Peirush* *Sheni*) and Malbim on *Shemot* 7:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ancient Egyptians both feared and admired snakes. They employed magical means to ward off snakes both in this world and in the underworld, where the snake plays an ominous role. Yet, several deities had snake forms, including Renenutet, a cobra-goddess who was the guardian of Pharaoh. For more on this topic, see Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Exodus: Reality or Illusion* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2002), pp. 68-79; D.A. Garrett, *Exodus*, p. 275. See also *shiur* #14, where we discussed the signs given to Moses at the burning bush. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Onkelos sidesteps the issue entirely, rendering *tannin* in Aramaic as *tannina*, without clarifying its precise meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The Greek translation deviates from its customary “dragon” only in *Bereishit* 1:21, where it translates *tanninim* as *kētos*, meaning whale. The Latin Vulgate follows the Greek, using *draco* (dragon) in most of its translations of the word *tannin* while using the Latin *cetus* (for whale) in *Bereishit* 1:21. Intriguingly, in our passage, the Vulgate distinguishes between Aaron’s staff, which transforms into a *coluber* (snake), and the Egyptians’ staffs, which turn into *dracones* (dragons) – suggesting a distinction in the nature of their respective wonders. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, for example, *Yeshayahu* 27:1; 51:9-10 and *Tehillim* 74:13, where God triumphs over chaotic primordial creatures; these verses specifically mention the *tannin*, which appears to be a water-associated being (see also *Iyov* 7:12 and the context of *Tehillim* 148:7). The *tannin* also features in Ugaritic literature alongside the sea deities Yam and Nahar, further reinforcing its connection to water and chaos. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In addition to the sources cited in the previous footnote, it is noteworthy that the *tanninim* are among the few creatures whose creation by God is explicitly described with the term *bara* in the creation narrative (*Bereishit* 1:21), emphasizing their significance within the biblical account of creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 94. In addition to *Yechezkel* 29:3, see also 32:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Augustus's memorial coins show a crocodile as the symbol of Egypt (see Y.Z Mowshowitz, *Da'at Mikra*, *Yechezkel* 29, note 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See *Yirmiyahu* 51:33-51, especially verse 34, which uses the same word *bala* (swallow) that appears in our episode. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See *Yeshayahu* 27:1; 51:9, *Tehillim* 74:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)