**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #31: The First Plague: Nile, Waters, and Blood (1)**

To initiate the plague narrative, God highlights Pharaoh’s unyielding stance, setting the stage for what is to come:

And God said to Moses: “Pharaoh’s heart is heavy; he refuses to release the nation.” (*Shemot* 7:14)

Pharaoh’s heavy heart weighs him down, reinforcing his obstinate stance. His intransigence stems from a mix of arrogance, overconfidence, and a healthy dose of conservatism, as well as a pragmatic need for slave labor.

Pharaoh’s heavy (*kaved*) heart is a new, important theme. Previously, references to Pharaoh’s intransigence described his heart as *chazak* (stalwart)[[1]](#footnote-1) or *kasheh* (hardened).[[2]](#footnote-2) *Kaved* will prove to be a key word in the Exodus narrative. Its use varies: earlier in the narrative, it twice described Moses’s speech difficulty (his “heavy” mouth and “heavy” tongue, 4:10) and once the heaviness of the labor that Pharaoh imposed upon the Hebrew slaves (5:9). It will later portray Israel exiting Egypt laden very *heavily* with cattle (12:37).[[3]](#footnote-3) Altogether, Pharaoh’s heart is said to be heavy six times,[[4]](#footnote-4) and God’s “heavy” punishment of the Egyptians appears a corresponding six times.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In an unexpected twist, as the narrative builds toward its climactic conclusion, the root *k.v.d.* appears three times in an entirely new context. No longer describing human experience, it now highlights one of the central aims of the Exodus story – that the world might witness God’s *kavod* (His glory) and come to honor Him: “And I will obtain glory (lit. heaviness”) through Pharaoh and all of his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am God!”[[6]](#footnote-6) The miracles of the Exodus and the retribution against evildoers accomplish more than simply liberating Israel. These events display God’s greatness, spreading knowledge of God with the aim of fostering reverence for Him throughout the world.

**The Nile**

God’s opening gambit targets the heart of Egypt: the Nile. The word *ye’or* (literally meaning “river” but commonly used in the Bible to refer to the Nile) appears a key fourteen times in the twelve-verse episode, underlining its centrality.[[7]](#footnote-7) The first plague (as well as the second) strikes at the very symbol of Egyptian power and prosperity, the source of its fertility and success.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The [first] two plagues struck the Nile, for the essence of habitation of the land of Egypt was [dependent upon] the Nile that rose and inundated their land. (*Pesiktra* *Zutrata* *Shemot* 7:28)

The *midrash* goes on to spotlight Pharaoh himself, for whom the Nile was a source of personal power and pride.

When Pharaoh went out to the water, to instruct his servants and his nations about matters relating to the Nile, Moses immediately stood erect to greet him. First, he informed him of the plague upon the Nile. He said to him: “You rely upon the Nile to irrigate your fields and vineyards, but it will turn to blood!” (Ibid.)

Many years later, Ezekiel sketches a vivid portrait of the Egyptian Pharaoh swimming languidly in his Nile as he declares: “This is my Nile, for I have created it!” (*Yechezkel* 29:3). Pharaoh is wise to assume credit for the Nile, whose bounty offered economic, political, military, and social advantages to Egyptian society. The Nile’s success reflects Pharaoh’s success. Conversely, a strike upon the Nile is a strike upon Pharaoh. When God turns the Nile waters foul, He undermines Pharaoh’s glory and his carefully cultivated image.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Striking the Nile also constitutes the first blow against the Egyptian pantheon. God wields His plagues not only as retribution against Pharaoh and the Egyptian taskmasters, but also to topple the perception of powerful Egyptian gods.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rabbinic sources explain that the Egyptians worshipped the Nile as a god:

Why was the water struck first with blood? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile. God said to Moses, “Strike their god first before them and then strike them.” (*Tanchuma* *Vaera* 13:1)

R. Yochanan said: There were many idols in Egypt. The Nile was their god, one of their pantheon of gods with whom God did great judgments… Therefore, the Nile was struck first, along with the trees and the stones.[[11]](#footnote-11) (*Zohar* II (*Shemot*) p. 18 a-b)

In fact, several gods were associated with the waters of the Nile in ancient Egypt. Hapi in particular was thought to control the Nile’s inundation and thus Egypt’s fertility (the root of Hapi, hep, may be an ancient name for the Nile). A hymn to the Nile, believed to have been written by the nomarch Khety in 2100 BCE, expresses the reverence accorded to the Nile (whether as a god or as a servant of a god):

O inundation of the Nile, offerings are made unto you, men are immolated to you, great festivals are instituted for you.
Birds are sacrificed to you, gazelles are taken for you in the mountain, pure flames are prepared for you.
Sacrifice is made to every god as it is made to the Nile.
The Nile has made its retreats in Southern Egypt; its name is not known beyond the Tuau.
The god manifests not his forms; he baffles all conception.

Men exalt him like the cycle of the gods…

Come (and) prosper!
O Nile, come (and) prosper!

(Hymn to the Nile, Stanzas Thirteen and Fourteen)

**Waters and Blood**

Although the story focuses primarily on the Nile turning to blood, one verse indicates a more sweeping plague, one that affects all the water sources in Egypt:

And God said to Moses: Say to Aaron: “Take your staff and spread out your hand over **the waters of Egypt, over their rivers and their Nile canals, their ponds and all of their gathered waters**, and let them become blood. And there will be blood in all of Egypt, and on the trees and on the stones. (*Shemot* 7:19)[[12]](#footnote-12)

This is corroborated by a verse in *Tehillim* that describes the plague:

He turned their Nile canals into blood; **all of their flowing waters** they could not drink. (*Tehillim* 78:44)

In this depiction, prospects are grim; the first plague turns out to be far worse than a symbolic strike against Egypt’s national pride. Without drinkable water, people will surely suffer and die. It is no wonder that a later verse portrays the panic of the Egyptians, digging desperately in the ground to find potable water (7:24). The subsequent death of the fish (7:21), a staple of the Egyptian diet,[[13]](#footnote-13) compounds the situation, threatening the longer-term food supply.

Water is the symbol of life and growth, while blood hints to the opposite: death and rot. This initial plague points to the impending demise of Egypt. It also conjures an image of a country steeped in revulsion and disgrace. Egypt is awash with odious blood, which leaves its stains all over the land (“on the trees and on the stones”).[[14]](#footnote-14) A plague laden with symbolism, the image of a bloodstained Egypt hints to her abiding failures. Egypt could have used its prosperity and power – its flowing, life-giving waters – to contribute positively to the world. Instead, it has spread immorality, violence, and impurity, symbolized by the blood that flows through Egypt.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Justice and Retribution: Measure for Measure (*Mida Keneged Mida*)**

Rabbinic sources generally see each specific plague as due recompense for a particular atrocity committed by the Egyptians.[[16]](#footnote-16) Thus, commentators search for a meaningful connection between the plague of blood and the demands of the Egyptian taskmasters. Some *midrashim* suggest, in this vein, that the Egyptians tasked their Hebrew slaves with fetching their water, and therefore God struck their water, turning it to blood.[[17]](#footnote-17) In this reading, God both hints to the Egyptians of the nature of their crime, while at the same time providing relief for the exhausted slaves. Surely no Egyptian will send their slaves to fetch foul, blood-filled waters.

Interpreters are sensitive not simply to the crimes committed by the Egyptian, but also to the motivations that generate their antipathy toward Israel. It is when Israel begins to proliferate, which Pharaoh regards as a threat, that their successful integration in Egypt wanes. Several *midrashim* regard the plague of blood within this context, positing that the Egyptians did not allow the Israelite women to purify themselves in water after their menstruation, in order to prevent their fertility.[[18]](#footnote-18) This approach explains not simply the imposition of a plague that spoils the waters, but also the reason they turn to blood.[[19]](#footnote-19) By preventing access to the waters, the Egyptians leave the Hebrew women in their blood-stained state of impurity; fittingly, God turns the waters of Egypt into blood. A powerful symbol, the first plague drenches Egypt in blood, calling attention to her moral and religious impurities.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This plague also seems to correspond best to one of the most heinous crimes committed by the Egyptians: Pharaoh’s order to his people to cast the male Hebrew infants into the Nile.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is a crime that will not be concealed; the Nile waters fill with blood, both as consequence and punishment, revealing the murky evil that lies not far beneath the surface of Egyptian society.

1. See *Shemot* 4:21; 7:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Shemot* 7:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This description recalls Abram’s exit from Egypt, “laden very heavily with cattle” (*Bereishit* 13:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Shemot* 7:14; 8:11, 28; 9:7, 34; 10:1. The heaviness of Pharaoh’s heart should also be understood within the Egyptian cultural\religious context. Egyptians believed that to obtain entrance to the afterlife, one had to prove that he had lived a life of good deeds. To determine this, after a person died, his heart was weighed on a scale against a feather. If his heart was heavy – heavier than the feather – he was denied entrance to the afterlife and instead consumed by the crocodile-headed goddess, Ammut. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word *kaved* appears five times in the context of the plagues – *arov* (8:19), pestilence (9:3), hail (9:18, 24), and locusts (10:14) – and once in the context of the Egyptian chariots, whose wheels sink into the mud and therefore turn sluggishly, or “heavily” (14:25). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shemot* 14:4. See also 14:17, 18. Rabbinic sources recognize that these different uses of the root *k.v.d*. (to describe both Pharaoh’s intransigence and God’s glory) should be connected. See, for example, *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 12:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As noted in previous *shiurim*,key words tend to appear in multiples of seven in biblical texts. See Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 74, 91 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Prophets also recognize the importance of the Nile for Egypt. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 19:1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Shemot* *Rabba* 10:2: God said to [Pharaoh], “You said, ‘This is my Nile’ (*Yechezkel* 29:3), – but I will show you if it is Mine or yours, for the plagues will come from it; when I issue a decree… [the Nile] will spew frogs, just as I first decreed upon the waters in the beginning, when I said, ‘Let the waters swarm’ (*Bereishit* 1:20), and they did my bidding, so too the Nile will fulfill My decree.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See *Shemot* 12:12 and *Bamidbar* 33:4: “And with the gods of Egypt, I will do great judgments!” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This *midrash* appears to base its understanding of the plague as a blow against idolatry on the hendiadys *eitzim va-avanim* (7:19) – a phrase that frequently appears in the context of idolatry, referring to idols fashioned from wood and stone (e.g., *Devarim* 4:28; 28:36; II *Melakhim* 19:18; *Yirmiyahu* 2:27; 3:9; *Yechezkel* 20:32). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Many have endeavored to apply scientific explanations to the series of plagues, which, once set in motion, produce a chain reaction that leads inexorably from one plague to the next. According to this approach, the Nile did not literally turn to blood, but appeared blood-red due to natural phenomena such as flagellates in the water, an excess of red soil, volcanic ash, or specific types of algae. Such a transformation could have terrified and repulsed the Egyptians, as they watched their cherished Nile seemingly turn to blood. While these theories cannot be definitively confirmed or disproven, the very effort to find a rational explanation risks missing the central point of the narrative: to awe the Egyptians, the Israelites, and the biblical reader with God's unmatched power. Perhaps God enacted His will through natural means. Perhaps not. But for the purpose of understanding the biblical story on its own terms, that distinction is ultimately beside the point. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Bamidbar* 11:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to a *midrash* (*Shemot* *Rabba* 9:9), the blood was so ubiquitous that no one could sit anywhere in Egypt without staining their clothes. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Egypt is not simply impure; she is contagious, liable to spread her impurity to others. *Tanchuma* *Shemot* 23 notes this in its discussion about the symbolism of Moshe’s hand being struck with leprosy in *Shemot* 4:6: “Just as leprosy is impure, so Egypt is impure *and renders Israel impure*.” *Yeshayahu* 52:11 similarly describes Babylon (during Israel’s exile there) as a place that threatens to pollute Israel with its impurities. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Midrashim* and biblical interpreters offer lists that often open with the stated premise: “The ten plagues are all measure for measure (*mida keneged mida*).” Following that opening, or heading, the ten plagues are listed with accompanying explanations. See, e.g., *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Tanchuma* *Bo* 4; *Yalkut* *Shimoni* *Shemot* 7:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Tanchuma* *Vaera* 14:3; *Shemot* *Rabba* 9:10; *Yalkut* *Shimoni Shemot* 7:15. Rabbeinu Bechaye (*Shemot* 7:25) adds that the reason the plague lasts seven days is to correspond to the seven days that a menstruating woman remains impure. See also *Pesikta* *Zutrata* (*Lekach* *Tov*) *Shemot* 7:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Moreover, the blood causes the death of the fish – a known symbol of fertility – perhaps also as punishment for their bid to curb the fertility of the Israelites. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Interestingly, Ezekiel (16:4-6) describes Israel’s “birth” (presumably in Egypt; see, e.g., Rashi on *Yechezkel* 16:4), as a moment when God saw her steeped in blood (*mitboseset* *be-damayikh*). Because God declares twice, “In your blood you shall live (*be-damayikh* *chayi*),” traditional commentaries (e.g., Targum Jonathan and *Yalkut* *Shimoni* on *Yechezkel* 16:6) often interpret this image positively, as alluding to Israel’s observance of blood-related commandments, namely, circumcision and the Paschal sacrifice. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Oddly, I found few references to this in the common Rabbinic literature. I did find this approach in *Midrash Ha-gadol* *Shemot* 7:17, *Mishnat* *Rabbi* *Eliezer* 19, and in the apocryphal book, *Chokhmat Shlomo* 11:7. Many sources (see, e.g., Jubilees 48:19; *Mekhilta* *Beshalach* 4) instead regard the drowning of the Egyptian army as recompense for this crime. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)