**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT SHEMOT**

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Dedicated in memory of my grandmother, Szore bat Simen Leib (Weinberger) z”l, whose *yahrzeit* is on the 18th of Tevet.   
May her soul be among the Righteous in Gan Eden.

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**The Signs**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

And Moshe answered and said: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say: The Lord has not appeared unto you.” (*Shemot* 4:1)

What brought Moshe to put forward such an argument after God already promised him: "Certainly I will be with you" (*Shemot* 3:12), and after He presented him with the plan for the struggle against Pharaoh until the exodus? Why did Moshe not doubt God's ability to persuade and defeat Pharaoh, but only His ability to bring the people of Israel to believe in the redemption process?

### I. Justifying Moshe's argument

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The commentators offer different approaches to these questions. We will cite what appear to us to be the two main opinions, and then expand upon them:

And what appears correct to me is that "and they shall hearken to your voice" (*Shemot* 3:18) means that they will go with you to the king and say to him: "The God of the Hebrews has met with us" (*Shemot* 5:3), for what could they lose. Now God informed him that the king of Egypt will not allow them to go, and therefore Moshe said: "But, behold, they will not believe me," after they see that Pharaoh will not allow them to go, and they will not listen to me again at all, "for they will say: The Lord has not appeared unto you," for were you sent by God, Pharaoh would not disobey. (Ramban, *Shemot* 4:1)

The Ramban justifies Moshe's worldly understanding. The people will indeed believe him when he comes in the name of God with the tidings of the light of redemption. However, as soon as the shadows appear, when Pharaoh denies them permission to go and the conflict begins, doubts about Moshe's mission will begin to surface, and all of the reasons why not to be redeemed and why not to follow Moshe will emerge. Indeed, several times in the various stages of redemption, once a difficulty arises, the doubts begin.

Let us try to continue in the direction of the Ramban's line of thinking. Moshe is right! Even at his first meeting with the people, it is stated that they believe him only after he performed the signs for them, and at later stages, there are situations in which even signs do not help.

According to this, let us try to understand the content of the signs. God gives Moshe two signs: his rod turns into a serpent and his hand becomes afflicted with leprosy.[[1]](#footnote-1) These two signs are given again when the people of Israel are on their way from Mount Sinai to the land of Canaan:

And Miryam and Aharon spoke against Moshe because of the Kushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Kushite woman. And they said: “Has the Lord indeed spoken only with Moshe? has He not spoken also with us?...”

And when the cloud was removed from over the Tent, behold, Miryam was leprous, as white as snow; and Aharon looked upon Miryam; and, behold, she was leprous. And Aharon said to Moshe: “Oh my lord, lay not, I pray you, sin upon us, for that we have done foolishly, and for that we have sinned…”

And Moshe cried unto the Lord, saying: “Heal her now, O God, I beseech You.” (*Bamidbar* 12:1-13)

And the soul of the people became impatient because of the way. And the people spoke against God, and against Moshe: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, and there is no water; and our soul loathes this light bread.” And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. And the people came to Moshe, and said: “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord, and against you; pray unto the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us.” And Moshe prayed for the people. (*Bamidbar* 21:3-7)

The style in both cases is similar. Aharon and Miryam in the first case and the people in the second case speak against Moshe, and when they are punished, they ask Moshe to intercede on their behalf. Indeed, Moshe prays to God and finds cures for their problems. In the first case, Miryam becomes afflicted with leprosy, and in the second case fiery serpents are sent against the people. In both cases, the sinners are forced into believing in Moshe, and into asking him to pray on their behalf.

These are the two signs that Moshe receives at the Burning Bush. According to our suggestion, we are dealing not with a proof by way of a special miracle that Moshe has been sent by God, but with a kind of threat. The meaning of the signs is that he who does not believe in Moshe — as Moshe fears — will receive his punishment by way of a serpent and by way of leprosy. Through these signs, God strengthens Moshe to carry out his mission.

### II. The possibility that Moshe's argument Is a sin

*Chazal,* and Rashi in their footsteps, take a different approach and see Moshe's argument as a sin, after God had promised to be with him:

At that time Moshe spoke improperly. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Him: "And they shall hearken to your voice," and he said: "But, behold, they shall not believe me…”

“And the Lord said to him: ‘What is that (*ma-zeh*) in your hand?’ And he said: ‘A rod’" (*Shemot* 4:6). That is to say, from that which (*mi-zeh*) is in your hand you will be smitten, for you slander My children. They are believers the descendants of believers — believers, as it is stated: "And the people believed" (*Shemot* 4:31); the descendants of believers, as it is stated: "And he [Avraham] believed in the Lord" (*Bereishit* 15:6). Moshe copied the action of the serpent who spoke slander about his Creator.

"And the Lord said furthermore to him: Put now your hand into your bosom" (*Shemot* 4:6). He said to him: Just like the serpent, when he spoke slander I smote him with leprosy… so too you deserve to be smitten with leprosy. "And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow" (*Shemot* 4:6). He received what he deserved for having spoken slander. (*Shemot Rabba* 3, 12-13)

He said to him: They are believers, the descendants of believers, whereas you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written: "And the people believed"; the descendants of believers: "And he believed in the Lord." (*Shabbat* 97a)

As stated above, there is a slight difficulty with the Midrash, as it bases its criticism of Moshe on the verse that states: "And the people believed." After all, the people believe only after they see the signs, and there is no proof from the text that they would have believed even without the signs. Nevertheless, it seems that the Gemara draws a connection between the fact that Moshe asks here for a sign and he is given the opportunity to perform a miracle with his rod and the sin at Mei Meriva, where God also tells him to speak and he performs a miracle with his rod. *Chazal* see this as a sin, a matter that we will expand upon in a different forum. The possibility of a critical tone in the biblical text — which brings *Chazal* here to criticize Moshe — is evident in our opinion in the difference between the first two signs (the rod and the leprosy) and the third wonder (the water turning into blood):

And the Lord said unto him: “What is that in your hand?”

And he said: “A rod.”

And He said: “Cast it on the ground.” And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moshe fled from before it. 

And the Lord said to Moshe: “Put forth your hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and laid hold of it, and it became a rod in his hand. “Thus they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov, has appeared to you.”

And the Lord said furthermore unto him: “Put now your hand into your bosom.” And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. And He said: “Put your hand back into your bosom.” And he put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh. “And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe you, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign.

“And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe even these two signs, neither hearken unto your voice, that you shall take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land; and the water which you take out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.” (*Shemot* 4:2-9)

While the third wonder is to be performed only if the people of Israel do not believe, God commands Moshe to perform the first two signs immediately, while he is standing before God.

It is possible that *Chazal* sense that it is not the people of Israel who need the signs, but rather Moshe himself, who refuses to believe in his power to redeem Israel on the mission of God. The signs are given first and foremost for him. Therefore, they level the accusation at him: "You will ultimately disbelieve.” If what we have said is correct, *Chazal's* approach teaches us an important lesson about leadership. If a leader fears that his followers will not believe him, he must examine the extent to which he himself believes in his mission, for if he does not believe in it, how will his followers believe? On the other hand, if he himself wholeheartedly believes in his mission and in his ability to succeed in it, his followers will follow suit.

### III. The difference between signs and wonders

In the two preceding subsections, we presented two different explanations of the contents of the signs: the first, as a punishment for those who do not believe in Moshe; and the second, as a criticism of Moshe himself. As we noted, the Ramban and the Midrash disagree as to whether criticism of Moshe's behavior in this passage is in order. In this section, we will discuss what else might be learned from the signs.

In the verses cited above, the miracles of the rod’s turning into a rod and of the hand’s becoming leprous are referred to as "signs” (*otot*), but this designation is not applied to the miracle of the water’s turning into blood. Below, all three miracles are described as "wonders” (*mofetim*), rather than as "signs":

And the Lord said to Moshe: “When you go back into Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your hand; but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go.” (*Shemot* 4:21)

The difference between "signs" and "wonders" appears to be that signs are given for Israel, whereas wonders are given for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. As for the signs, they are given here "that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov, has appeared unto you.” Below, the blood will be placed as a sign on the houses to save the people of Israel from the plague of the firstborns: "And the blood shall be to you for a sign upon the houses where you are" (*Shemot* 12:13).” *Tefillin* will be given as a sign and remembrance for future generations of the exodus from Egypt: "And it shall be for a sign to you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes… for with a strong hand has the Lord brought you out of Egypt" (*Shemot* 13:9), and similarly Shabbat will be given as "a sign between Me and you throughout your generations" (*Shemot* 31:12). To these we may add circumcision: "And it shall be a sign of a covenant between Me and you" (*Bereishit* 17:11).[[2]](#footnote-2)

As stated above, Egypt is given only wonders. We see this in the verse cited earlier, and this is evident from other verses as well:

When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying: “Show a wonder for you; then you shall say to Aharon: ‘Take your rod, and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it become a serpent.’” (*Shemot* 7:9)

And the Lord said unto Moses: “Pharaoh will not hearken unto you; that My wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.” And Moshe and Aharon did all these wonders before Pharaoh. (*Shemot* 11:9-10)

The signs serve as a token for certain content, whereas the wonders constitute a demonstration of power, primarily for punishment.

Let us return to our question: Are the miracles involving the serpent and the leprosy signs or wonders? Since each of them is divided into two miracles (turning the rod into a serpent and returning it to a rod, and similarly with regard to the leprosy), it may be argued that one of the miracles is a sign while the other is a wonder. Let us explain: The rod’s turning into a serpent is a wonder, and as it later finds expression before Pharaoh, it is a punishment. Aharon's rod swallows up the rods of Pharaoh's magicians. So too the leprous hand is a punishment, as it finds expression in the plague of boils, and therefore it too is a wonder. Similarly, the water turning to blood is a punishment, as it finds expression in the plague of blood. This wonder is to be given to the people of Israel if they do not believe the first signs. It is to be given not as a reason to believe, but as a punishment for failure to believe. These three wonders are demonstrations of God's power with the objective of threatening those who need to be threatened. If so, at the Burning Bush there are three wonders and two signs.

Let us examine the meaning of the signs, the serpent’s returning to a rod and the leprous hand’s returning to health. The rod which comes into being in a miraculous manner (from the serpent) and the hand which miraculously heals are expressions of the strong hand and outstretched arm (which operate by way of a rod) which will in the future redeem Israel from the hand of Egypt with great power and force. Even though Moshe's hand and Moshe's rod operate on Egypt and on the Sea, the signs will show the people of Israel that both of them — the hand and the rod — operate by the power of God, the performer of the miracles, and not by the power of mortal Moshe. The content of the signs is critical for belief concerning the exodus from Egypt, regardless of the question of whether Moshe speaks properly or improperly.

### IV. Conclusion

As noted earlier, many Midrashic sources criticize Moshe, who objects to his mission and refuses to accept it for such a long time:

Rav Shemuel bar Nachman said: For seven days the Holy One, blessed be He, tried to convince Moshe at the Burning Bush, as it is stated: "Come now therefore, and I will send you unto Pharaoh" (*Shemot* 3:10), and he answered Him: "Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither from yesterday, nor from the day before, nor from ever" (*Shemot* 4:10); yesterday, from yesterday, the day before, from the day before, ever, from ever — these are seven days. And he says to Him: "Send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send" (*Shemot* 4:13). (*Tanchuma*, *Toledot* 12)

According to some of the Midrashic sources, Moshe is punished for this and denied entry into *Eretz Yisrael*.

Let us for a moment consider the flipside of what *Chazal* present to us with their critique of Moshe. Moshe, who is estranged from his people for many years, and who on the second day of his reacquainting himself with his people is crudely rejected by the man who beat his fellow, "accidentally" encounters the Burning Bush. He had already established a family, connected himself to his father-in-law, found a livelihood, and loved his flocks. And suddenly, without any advance preparation or warning, he must confront the Burning Bush, the challenging mission, leaving his family, and coping daily with such a different and difficult reality. Three thousand years later, we all know how right he is to go on God's mission to Pharaoh and to Mount Sinai. At that time, facing his bleating sheep, his wife and children who need a husband and a father, no decision is self-evident.

We will conclude with a question: How many people pass the Burning Bush before Moshe and are charged by God to redeem their people, but they refuse because of their wives, their children, their livelihoods — not for seven days, but for eight days and more? God leaves them and waits. The people of Israel continue to be enslaved. Moshe, on the other hand, is different. After seven days, he is convinced, and so he leaves all that is dear to him and embarks on God's mission:

My servant Moshe is not so; he is trusted in all My house. (*Bamidbar* 12:7)

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. As we will explain below, the water turning into blood is not a sign, but rather a wonder, and therefore the word sign is not used for that part of the miracle. Below we will also explain the difference between a sign and a wonder. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the book of *Bereishit,* we find a sign that is given to Kayin so that nobody will smite him, and the sign of the rainbow so that there will not be another flood. So too, in the Book of *Bamibar,* two signs are given in the aftermath of the sin of Korach: the firepans of those who burned the incense are turned into beaten plates for a covering of the alter, and the rod of Aharon buds. However, these are not relevant to the matter at hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)