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בס"ד

Parashat Bo Part I

1. Center Stage

Moses' warning to Pharaoh regarding the eighth plague, locusts (Exod. 10:1-20), is narrated in a significantly different manner from the warnings for the earlier visitations. Previously, the text did not include Moses' words to Pharaoh that informed him of what was in store should he not comply. Rather, the reader learns the details of the impending plague from G-d's communication to Moses concerning what he should say to Pharaoh. In each case the reader's knowledge that Moses actually transmitted G-d's message to the king is gleaned from the context and from subsequent events. Remarkably, as concerns those plagues, the text does not even contain a standard formula such as "and Moses did as G-d commanded him to." (See the verses following G-d's announcements of plagues 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7: vv. 7:18; 7:29; 8:19; 9:5; and 9:18; plagues 3 and 6 were visited without warning.) The only explicit notification to the reader that Moses transmitted those messages was an introductory statement before the plagues narrative began that "Moses and Aaron did as Hashem commanded them" (7:6) and a summary statement near the end of the account (11:10).

With the locusts, however, the text for the first time narrates the words of Moses' announcement to Pharaoh. This feature appears once more in conjunction with the tenth plague (11:4).

The import appears to be as follows. The plagues, manifestations of G-d's power, teach the lessons of His might and incomparability. It is a critical point of biblical teaching that it be recognized that He and only He possesses the wherewithal to perform the wonders. Accordingly, the narrative highlights His extraordinary intervention in Egypt by focusing on His announcements of what He is planning to do. As prominent a role as Moses necessarily plays in facilitating the enterprise, it must be a subdued one, so

that it may be recognized by all that he is merely a faithful servant of G-d, a human being with no superhuman powers of his own. This point is highlighted with the subtle literary device of excluding from the text – as much as is consistent with the narrative's requirements – Moses' declarations of G-d's warnings concerning forthcoming plagues, declarations that he obviously made.

This reflects Moses' extreme care in how he conveyed G-d's message to Pharaoh. Personal egotism played no role. He dispensed his responsibility in such a manner as to ensure that he would not be mistakenly taken as the author of the plagues, or be thought to be a partner with G-d in bringing them about, or in any way lessen recognition of G-d's singular status.

This was a particularly relevant fear in ancient Egypt where religion and culture were steeped in magic, wonder-working and in the belief in the divinity of certain human beings. The monumental revolution being wrought by G-d required that no human being be accorded the slightest characteristic that can be mistaken for the divine. (In our *Parashat Va'era Part II* study we point out several textual manifestations of this concern in Exodus 6–7.)

Some commentators understand Moses' sin at *Mei Meribah*, when he struck the rock in anger and frustration, as a failing in exactly this sphere of appropriate communication. Moses (with Aaron at his side) asked the provokers, ironically, *שָׁמְעוּ נָא הַמְרִים הַזֶּה*, "Listen now you rebels, shall we bring you forth water from this rock?" (Num. 20:7-11). This rhetorical question just before the miracle contained ambiguous language. It may have been misconstrued by the audience as indicating that Moses and Aaron were going to bring forth the water, or that Moses and G-d were partners in the miracle. G-d's complaint, according to this view, was that His

representatives who were delegated to perform wonders on His behalf should have been ever-vigilant to prevent any possible confusion as to the source of the miracle.

In the accounts of the eighth and tenth plagues, however, Moses' warning statements to Pharaoh are recorded, since in those cases there were narrative considerations that required them. With the warning for the locusts Pharaoh finally responded to the threat. Previously, his responses were only to the presence of a plague, entreating that it be ended. This time, the king's ministers, profoundly affected, influenced him to recall Moses and Aaron before the onset of the plague and the warning was followed with a discussion between Pharaoh and Moses concerning terms for the pilgrimage. Accordingly, Moses' announcement was provided.

2. Warning for the Tenth Plague

The account concerning the warning for the tenth plague is complex. After the ninth plague ended Pharaoh summoned Moses and made several concessions. When Moses insisted on the original request in all particulars – after all, he was following G-d's instructions – Pharaoh became threatening. He warned Moses to never again appear before him or he will be put to death. Moses retorted, “You have spoken correctly, I will not again [seek to] see your countenance” (Exod. 10:28-29).

At that point the Torah relates that G-d informed Moses that there was one final blow He would bring upon Pharaoh and Egypt after which Pharaoh would chase the Israelites out (11:1). He also instructs Moses to ask the Israelites to request silver and gold vessels from the Egyptians. A parenthetical verse informs the reader that the Israelites found favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and that Moses' stature was exceedingly great in the eyes of Pharaoh's ministers and the Egyptian people.

In the next verse, essentially attached to the end of the conversation Moses was having with Pharaoh following the ninth plague, Moses quotes Hashem to the king with details of the tenth plague (but not including the day it would occur). Many commentators (following *Exod. Rab.*) assume that Hashem transmitted this prophecy of the tenth plague

to Moses while he was still in front of Pharaoh at the end of their discussion after the ninth plague. The difficulty is obvious.

Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, does not view G-d's statement to Moses as a communication that took place at that time. Rather, he sees it as a repetition in different words of what Hashem had previously said to him. (G-d's prophecy is not limited to the words it is described in on a particular occasion. There may be additional facets to it that could be brought out at another time in a different context.) While Moses was traveling to Egypt at the start of his mission, Hashem had instructed him to convey a warning to Pharaoh regarding the smiting of the first-born, of course to be delivered in its right time (Exod. 4:22-23). Since there was not to be another opportunity to warn Pharaoh of it, Moses knew that the present moment had to be the occasion for transmitting that message and accordingly it was attached to the discussion that took place following the ninth plague. Thus, for the tenth plague the Torah cited Moses' words quoting Hashem.

(According to Ibn Ezra, the verse that follows G-d's statement concerning the tenth plague in which He tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to request silver and gold vessels from the Egyptians (11:2), is also not a new prophecy; it is stating in different words what Hashem had told Moses at the burning bush [3:21-22]).

Moreover, it was important for the Torah to report Moses' actual delivery of the warning concerning the tenth plague as he attached a personal statement to it. Pharaoh's arrogant remark to Moses that he should never see him again upon penalty of death, in a way denying that Moses was the faithful agent of G-d, was offensive to Moses and greatly upset this most dedicated of men. After announcing the imminent final blow, his concluding words to Pharaoh reflected his anger and included a touch of self-importance. He said: “Then all these courtiers of yours (a statement that seems to have been accompanied by a broad side-to-side sweep of his hand) shall come to me, bow low to me, and say, ‘Get out, you and all the people who follow you!’ After that, I will leave” (11:8). Having responded to Pharaoh's insulting remark to him, Moses departed from Pharaoh's presence *בְּאַף וּבְחֵרָה* (“in burning anger”).*

Moses “was very humble, more so than any man on earth” (Num. 12:3). Nevertheless, when Pharaoh had sufficiently irritated him, literally in the moment before he was to exit Pharaoh’s presence, he yields to the expression of human feelings. After having impeccably concluded this major phase of his assignment, it becomes apparent that even Moses is susceptible to making an assertion that could possibly be misunderstood. His words could be seen as implying that he played a more independent role than merely being a faithful servant of G-d. The extraordinary care he exhibited in transmitting G-d’s warnings to Pharaoh concerning the plagues was fully justified.

3. Preparing for the Tenth Plague

Between Moses’ announcement of the impending tenth plague and its enactment, G-d provided the Israelites a series of instructions mostly associated with the Passover sacrifice which had to be carried out prior to His smiting the firstborn. In these first laws given to the Israelites as a nation, the opening command was to establish the national calendar such that the month of the Exodus was henceforth to be reckoned as the first month of the year (Exod. 12:2 ff.).** Thus, the calendar became an ongoing reflection of G-d’s redemption of the nation. Counting yearly commemorations from that month would continually focus attention on that great event and be a source of homage to it.

Months are lunar. The Exodus month, however, is termed *the abib month* (Exod. 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Deut. 16:1), a reference to the budding barley and by extension an expression for “spring,” a solar phenomenon. Accordingly, a harmonizing feature was added to the calendar (periodically adding months to the year) so that it would be luni-solar. This ensured that commemorations, all observed by monthly dates, would nevertheless always be in the season of the event they mark. Hence, the first item of legislation permanently linked the celebration of G-d’s transformation of a crushed and subjugated people into an independent nation with the spring and its universally recognized symbol, the rejuvenation of a dormant nature. In addition, the spring celebration substituted worship connected with G-d’s activity in history for the nature-centered religious rituals that

were performed in the spring throughout the ancient Near East.

To fully appreciate the significance of the Passover sacrifice and the necessary preparation for it, we must recall the basic meaning of the final plague. The smiting of the firstborn is G-d’s decisive judgment against the polytheistic beliefs of Egypt. The linkage is implied in the text: “And I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt from man to beast and upon all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments, *Ani Hashem*” (12:12). Also, at the beginning of the itinerary summary recorded at the end of the forty years in the wilderness, we read: “The Egyptians were burying those whom Hashem had struck down among them, every firstborn, whereby did Hashem execute judgment against their gods” (Num. 33:4). The firstborn [males] were those within each family especially dedicated to the service of their gods; they were the representatives of those gods. Firstborn animals were also, in some way, dedicated to their gods. Thus, death of the firstborns was a degrading of the national religious beliefs.

Before the final plague occurred, the Israelites were to become disconnected from any residual attachment to those polytheistic Egyptian beliefs and express their singular dedication to Hashem. The Passover sacrifice appears designed to further those purposes. ***

4. The Passover Sacrifice

The rituals and symbolism associated with the Passover sacrifice were many and elaborate. We will discuss several of them.

Each family/clan had to take a male lamb or goat on the tenth of the month (some assume a connection with Yom Kippur, the tenth of the seventh, or autumn, month) and protect it from blemish until the afternoon of the fourteenth of the month. At that time the animal was to be slaughtered to Hashem and some blood daubed on the doorposts and lintel of the entranceway of the house where it was to be eaten. The four-day interval served as a period of profound spiritual growth for the Israelites. The Egyptians, who considered slaughter of these animals sacrilegious, would witness the widespread preparations for sacrifices. It should be recalled that when Pharaoh had agreed to allow the Israelites to sacrifice but not

depart the metropolitan area (after the fourth plague), Moses responded, “If we sacrifice the abomination of Egypt before their eyes, will they not stone us?” (Exod. 8:22). The reader may imagine the Israelites’ trepidation to sacrifice these animals before the Egyptians as well as the change in the Israelite outlook toward idolatry that was taking place during those days. Preparation for G-d’s redemption involved defiance of the prevalent pagan beliefs and those who believe in them. The Egyptian fear to object – understandable after nine plagues – is also manifest.

A unique feature of this sacrifice was the requirement that there be careful planning for eating its meat. It was necessary to ensure that each individual of the household had a portion from the slaughtered lamb or goat, yet no meat was to be left over until morning. Each household group was to be large enough to consume their sacrifice. A group too small for the purpose was required to join with a neighboring group in selection of the animal נִפְשָׁה בְּמִקְסָה. Onqelos, followed by Rashi, Rashbam and others, translates the latter phrase “according to numbers.” Ibn Ezra translates מִקְסָה as “portion,” as in Numbers 31:41 where מִקְסָה translates as “levy.” (Unbeknownst to him, this word appears related to the Akkadian *miksum*, a word that referred to the “portion” reserved for the king.) Thus, each individual in the nation was to be accounted for with a portion specifically designated for him or her and the festive meal was to be celebrated in relatively large family/neighborhood units. This combination created a spirit of dignity for each individual along with communal unity and amity, foundation stones for the nation being formed.

The sacrifice was to be roasted whole in fire – “its head with its legs with its entrails” – and no bone was to be broken. It was to be eaten that night, together with matzoh (unleavened bread) and *maror* (bitter herbs). Since the tenth plague was to occur that night and the Exodus would begin, it was necessary to be ready to leave upon a moment’s notice. Accordingly, “Thus shall you eat it [the sacrifice]: your loins girded, your shoes on your feet and your staffs in your hands; you shall eat it hastily” (Exod. 12:11). The unleavened bread is part of the emphasis on haste (Exod. 12:34; Deut. 16:3). In addition, matzoh is termed “bread of affliction” (Deut. 16:3), a detail that recalls the slavery. The bitter herbs are seen as a remembrance of what was earlier described as נִמְרָרוּ

אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעֵבֶדָה קָשָׁה (“they embittered their lives with hard work” [Exod.1:14]; see *m. Pesah*. 10:5). The insistence on roasting in fire may be because it is the quickest manner of preparing the meat. Some have suggested that keeping the animal whole and roasting it would ensure that the procedure becomes a public event, more definitely defying the Egyptian belief.

In the ancient Near East shepherds celebrated the onset of spring with the sacrifice of a lamb or goat and at about the same time farmers celebrated the beginning of the harvest (of barley) with a sacrifice. The Torah’s prescriptions for the Passover sacrifice provided such rituals but purged them of idolatrous associations and transformed them into a commemoration of the great event of the Exodus.

A seven-day festival attached to the Passover sacrifice with an emphasis on not partaking of *hametz* (leavened bread or products containing fermented grain ingredients) was established for future generations and some of its regulations were incorporated in our chapter.

5. Meaning of the Verb *Pasah*

In Exodus 12, the פ-ס-ח (p-s-h) root occurs six times, three times as a noun (פָּסַח, v. 11; פָּסַח, v. 21; פָּסַח, v. 27) and three times as a verb (פָּסַחְתִּי, v. 13; פָּסַח, v. 23; פָּסַח, v. 27). *Targum Onqelos* renders all three of the verbal usages as meaning Hashem will have “compassion.” *Targum Jonathan* translates the verse 11 noun usage and the verses 13 and 27 verbal usages also as “compassion” while rendering the verse 23 verb as “shield.” The Tosefta (*t. Soṭah* 4:1) renders the פָּסַח root as מְגִין, “shield” or “protect.” It conceptually links it with Abraham’s “standing over” his guests (Gen. 18:8), which it views as containing the idea of “watching over them.” Several early sources and some *Rishonim* translate פָּסַח as “pass over” or “skip over.” Perhaps this meaning is related to פֶּסַח, a lame person, since some lame individuals walk with a “skipping over” stride. The “pass over” interpretation may be related to the description said of the false prophets וַיִּפְסְחוּ עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ (“they jumped about upon the altar” [1 Kings 18:26]).

Although we cannot be sure, the “shield” translation appears most likely to be peshat. In Isaiah 31:5, in the first part of the verse, it states: “As birds flying about,

כִּן יִגְן...עַל הַרוֹשְׁלָם thus will the Lord of Hosts protect Jerusalem.” (The “birds flying about” hither and thither always keep a watchful eye on their nests.) The verse concludes with what is obviously a parallel statement: גָּנוֹן וְהַצִּיל פְּסוּחַ וְהַמְלִיט “guarding and saving, shielding and rescuing.” Since *pasah* corresponds to *ganon*, the other suggested translations do not fit the context.

A close reading of our Exodus passage’s three פ-ס-ה verbal clauses appears to lend support to the “shield” translation. (In testing and searching for various possible meanings of an ambiguous root in a context, noun formulations are generally not as helpful as verbal constructions. Nouns are static, whereas verbs often demonstrate usage through the action described.)

The verse 13 usage, “When I see the blood וַפְּסוּחֵי וְעַלְיֶכֶם, so that there shall not be within you a plague to destroy when I strike in Egypt” appears compatible with all three views. Verse 23, however, states that upon seeing the blood on the lintel and doorposts, Hashem will *pasah* over the door and not allow the destroyer to enter the home to smite. If He “passed over” the door, why should the verse continue with a follow-up clause, “and not allow the destroyer to enter your homes” – He already passed over and the “destroyer” can only enter when Hashem is fixed upon a home! Not allowing the destroyer entry is consistent with the “compassion” translation but compassion does not much suit a door, especially considering that the passage’s two other verbal usages of this stem specifically link *pasah* with the people or with their homes. “Shield” does fit very well, as G-d could be viewed as protecting the doorway, home or occupants.

In verse 27, fathers are bidden to explain to their children that Hashem had “*pasah* over the Israelite homes when smiting Egypt and saved our homes.” If *pasah* means “passed over,” the idea of “saved our homes” is already stated at the beginning of the verse and the presence of the latter phrase as a separate clause at the end appears redundant. It is possible to interpret “had compassion” as introductory to “saved,” but since “saved” in this context means “not destroying,” and since “had compassion” contains within it the implication of “not destroying,” here also the end of the verse would appear to be redundant.

However, if *pasah* means “shielded” from the destroyer, it follows that “saved our homes” is the natural and necessary conclusion to the clause.

6. Regarding the Word *Mashhith* (מַשְׁחִית)

In G-d’s instructions, someone from each Passover sacrifice group was to daub blood from the sacrifice onto the two doorposts and lintel of the entranceway to the house where they were going to eat it (Exod. 12:7). G-d will protect (or have compassion upon or pass over) those homes that have the sign, “and there shall not be among you a blow (מַשְׁחִית) to destroy (לְמַשְׁחִית) when I strike in the land of Egypt” (v. 13). In His own words G-d attributes the destructive activity to Himself. The word מַשְׁחִית simply means “to destroy,” or perhaps “for a destruction” or “a destructive blow.”

When Moses transmits the instructions (v. 23), he transforms the word מַשְׁחִית (*mashhith*), giving it the meaning of the personification of Hashem’s destructive force. Thus, he states that when Hashem will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, “He will not allow the Destroyer (הַמַּשְׁחִית) to come to your homes to smite (לְהַגִּיד).” Moses speaks as if G-d were going to travel through Egypt with a destroyer by His side, a type of angel or possibly “a band of angels,” doing His service. Of course it is understood that “the Destroyer” is imagery depicting an aspect of G-d’s activity, not a separate existence. This is an example of the prophet choosing language he considers more appropriate for his audience. In referring to the destruction that was to be meted out to the Egyptians (as well as to the homes of non-compliant Israelites), Moses chooses not to attribute the actual destructive activity to G-d Himself.

Endnotes

* One may wonder whether Moses’ mention of “all these courtiers of yours” is a reference to Pharaoh himself, employing the convention of indirect allusion when speaking of a matter that might appear disrespectful to the king. After the tenth plague, Pharaoh himself does request from Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night, “Rise, and go out from among my people, you and the Israelites, and serve Hashem as you have requested...and bless me also” (12:31-32).

** The phraseology (speaking only of months) has been seen to leave room, when dealing with certain other calendrical rituals, to consider the new year to begin in the fall, as the tradition does in fact recognize.

*** This was a goal not so quickly and completely accomplished for the whole nation. Consider G-d's words to Ezekiel: "On the day that I chose Israel...I swore to them to take them out of the land of Egypt...I also said to them: Cast away, every one of you the detestable things...and do not defile

yourselves with the fetishes of Egypt...But they defied Me and refused to listen to Me. They did not cast away the detestable things...neither did they give up the fetishes of Egypt. Then I resolved to pour out My fury upon them, to vent all My anger upon them there, in the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of My name, that it might not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they were. For it was before their eyes that I had made Myself known to Israel to bring them out of the land of Egypt" (Ezek. 20:5-10, NJPS).

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